

Why sacrifice discernment when fortune favours the frugal?



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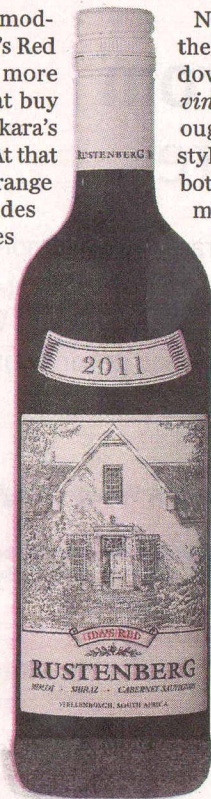
It's not just the top, pricy wine that is better than ever these days. For the cost, say, of two editions of a serious weekly newspaper you can get some good stuff. Not that I'm suggesting the swap, of course. Just saying.

This real plausibility of trading down without too much suffering, in times when money's tight even for many middle-class wine-lovers, must worry the fancier end of wine production. If we ever did, we now certainly don't need to spend heavily to drink reasonably well.

It probably helps to explain why so many grand producers have good "entry level" ranges, so that even if they can't as easily sell the expensive wines, they can at least tempt smaller spenders, too. Waterford's Pecan Stream range, for example, or

Rustenberg's fine pair of modestly priced bargains — Ida's Red and Ida's White. A little more expensive, but still a great buy at approaching R100, is Tokara's Cabernet Sauvignon 2011. At that level too, the Les Coteaux range from Mont du Toit provides some perennial favourites of mine — though I seldom see any on wine-shop shelves, unfortunately.

An irritating attitude sometimes intervenes, however (though not in the examples mentioned above), when it's somehow assumed that people with less money to spend on wine are novice or unsophisticated drinkers who invariably want easy-going sauvignon blanc or off-dry chenin for whites, and soft, sweetish, fruity reds (preferably merlot). Which is only sometimes the case.



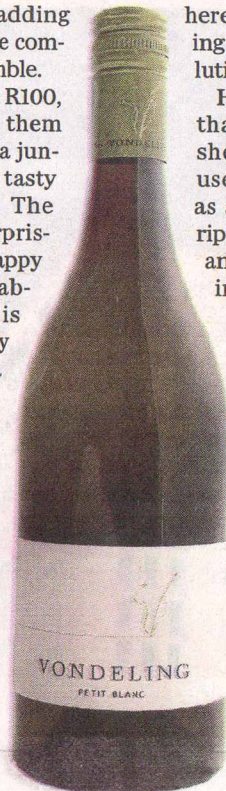
Nonetheless, in addition to these descending, dumbed-down versions of the *grands vins*, there are also many thoroughly respectable, seriously styled wines at around R50 a bottle (including the occasional merlot). Vondeling Petit Rouge, for example.

Vondeling is a sizeable winery in the Voor-Paardeberg region of Paarl. The area's strong points are shiraz and chenin blanc, and Vondeling's Erica Shiraz 2009 is pure-fruited and lively, more "linear" than "broad", if you'll allow that distinction to have some intuitive meaning. Best is the Babiana 2010, a fresh, lightly oaked white blend based on

chenin, with viognier adding its peachy perfume to the complex, well-textured ensemble.

But those two are over R100, so I shouldn't mention them here. The Petit Blanc is a junior version of Babiana, tasty and gently succulent. The Petit Rouge is, a bit surprisingly for these parts, a happy blend of merlot and cabernet. The 2012 (R45) is ready to drink now, pretty and friendly, but with a serious element, and the structure to mature a few years if you wanted to lay it down.

A good source of decently priced and interesting reds is the Goede Hoop estate on Stellenbosch's Botterly Hills. Winemaker Albert Ahrens came



here from the Swartland, bringing the fruits of the stylistic revolution of that region.

His goal is drinkability rather than obvious impressiveness: sheer power is reined in, oak used supportively rather than as a flavourant; the wines are ripe but not over-ripe — dry, balanced and elegant, with a feeling of lightness to them.

They are modest wines in the best sense: unassuming, unpretentious and honest. And rather delicious, too.

The cheapest is the Domaine Red at a silly R35, a sweet-fruited, juicy but not negligible cabernet-shiraz blend. The merlot, shiraz and pinotage in the Estate range are about double that (and the cabernet more), but reasonable value for such attractive wines — especially the pinotage, which is rather richer than the others, but sharing their charm.

Bargains in a bottle: Rustenberg Ida's Red and Vondeling Petit Blanc and Goede Hoop