

## TRANSCRIPTION OF THE OLD MUTUAL TROPHY WINE SHOW: 6 MAY 2016

**MF** Welcome to the feedback session of the Old Mutual Trophy Wine Show. It's a lovely full room which I'm very pleased to see. There was a time when the industry didn't think it was all that useful to hear the feedback from the judges, the locals and the internationals, but that's changed and I think it does really play a significant role in how the industry transforms itself stylistically. The debates and the discussions which we've had here – not just the famous debates and discussions around closures, which will be kept to a bare minimum this year in the interests of discussing other, more important stuff. Certainly those discussions have played a key role in the way the industry approaches everything from cellar taint to fruit ripeness.

I really want to start, so they can carry on working, with asking the team that has run the back room of this show – not just from Monday afternoon through to today – but, in the case of many of them, for weeks and months before. The chief steward, Alex Mason-Gordon, Michael Crossley, who's not just in this case my doppelganger in most things, but the one that maintains the right sense of discipline at the right time, Monlee Jordaan who has managed the audit process for Grant Thornton, in a way that means that Grant Thornton will never be able to use her for anything else, because we want her booked for next year. Then people, many of them familiar faces to you – Ashley, Wani, Mika, Job, Hazel, Lizette, Joseph and his team. They really have been fantastic. They have kept it going and if you ask any of the judges the efficiency of the stewarding process, the speed with which second samples are called and delivered and are here, it is amazing. I judge all over the world and there is nothing to match the efficiency and the purity of delivery that comes from this team. They work really long hours, because we started judging every morning at 08.00. To get a wine ready, poured, chilled, everything on the table at 08.00, they are working here from 06.00 or 06.30 and the first day even earlier, because there's fizz to be poured. They work unbelievable hours, they are unbelievably meticulous, they have been great and so has the Grand Roche. So to all of you thank you very much indeed. Without you, truly this could not have been done. Thank you.

For those of you who have attended this session before, be alerted to a new format. The new format is firstly, as we have had in the past, the opportunity to interrogate the judges and to hear their comments. I've decided this year to address specific questions to each of the judges, merely to get the conversation going, but then of course you can pick up on that and take up any question you like – either directed to the panel, or to a specific judge. That's really where the new format kicks in.

You will see that we have tables set in the amphitheatre space and once the formal part of the session is over, you are all invited, media, winemakers, guests, to make your way into that space where a finger luncheon will be served. Apparently the fingers come from animals that weren't hurt in the process of making the luncheon. In other words there will be a canapé luncheon outside and you can gravitate towards whichever of the judges or panellists you want to have a discussion with and move around, so that instead of having a question and answer session that only happens in this room, you really do have the opportunity of going to more in-depth questioning round the various subjects.

So that is the format. Once we've finished with the formalities here and before the weather turns, which is looks like it's doing with some enthusiasm, we're going to use the amphitheatre space to make the most of the opportunity of interacting with the judges.

I did say that we're going to avoid long discussions about closure. I do have a few stats which I will throw out at some stage when it looks like the conversation is lagging, but that's really all and I'm hoping that we don't turn it into a controversy – I'm very happy, as you know, to be as controversial as possible – but I think we need to move forward and there are much more important discussion to have over all sorts of issues from fruit ripeness, maturity, cellar hygiene, all those issues and just changes. This is the first time in many years where all three

of our international judges have judged here before, some from as far back as Simon Tam. Even though you don't think he looks that old, he was here in 2010 and he'd been to South Africa once before. Simon is the Head of the Wine Department of Christie's in Hong Kong, so he has seen everything from the best of the Domaine de la Romanee Conti, to the wines which went through his international wine centre in Hong Kong before then. He has seen and been around, so you will have his view.

Michel Bettane, who's been here twice before and Eric Goettelmann who has been here in 2013. So we really have got people who can take a snapshot perspective of how things have changed. I thought on this basis that we need to kick off and I will actually address the questions to the panellists. They've not had a heads-up on this. I agonised long and hard, but I think the stuff that comes straight and fresh usually has the most value, so I didn't want them to be over-prepared. I'm going to ask Michel, since he's on my right, to talk first and the two subjects that I have for you, Monsieur Bettane, pinotage and sweet wines. That's both because he's very positive about it, but at his very first judging, he was the international judge who, when people were very uncomfortable as panellists doing pinotage, lectured the local judges on embracing the virtues of our own variety. On this particular trip he has seen an extraordinary array of sweet wine. So Michel, those are your two subjects to kick off with.

**MB** I will add Swartland wines, but not many of them were in the tasting. It's a pity because it's a very great place for good wines. For pinotage: it's the name which is funny and it's unique and proper to South Africa. The first South African wines we drank in Europe were pinotage. I was immediately interested in this variety and I was surprised to see that many of my South African colleagues and judges did not love this variety. There was a great evolution of style. Many of them were not very well made twenty years ago, with very strong (inaudible) elements, but it was the same as many wines in Europe. We learnt about more, clean wine-making and to fight against the *brettanomyces* and things like that. It is still raw, but we know how to fight against that.

I am very happy to see that the two different types of styles of pinotage are still there. The one which is more pinot – the first part of the name – with more floral, more red fruits aromas, great elegance and the other, which is more Mediterranean – earthy, warm, spicy elements – which are perhaps the *cinsaut* part of the pinotage. Both exist and both can make very good wine, even if my own taste is a preference for the one which is in the pinot noir category, with perhaps better balance than most pinot noir I have tasted here. I am very pleased there are still some very good pinotage. They deserve to be bought at the same price as some very good cabernets. I think they are even better.

As for the sweet wines, you have a long tradition with German winemakers, making late harvest, rieslings, etc. It's a surprise – there is no dry riesling late harvest – Oh one silver. The late harvest riesling can be wonderful. The port wine, the fortified wines are wonderful, but I will insist on one type of wine which I think has a great future here, is the non-fortified muscat. When it's very well made it is not so easy because you have to pick really wonderful grapes. It can be wonderful because it can express all the complexity of perfume of a great muscat. The fortified muscat is a simplification. When you add alcohol, you select one, two or three types of aromas and no more, but when you can make with very ripe muscat and [perhaps even noble rot if you can get it], you will make some of the greatest sweet wines in the world.

**MF** Thank you very much Michel. He did highlight the fact that we would like to have seen more entries and certainly more good entries in the weisser riesling class. We didn't see that. I'm going to move on to Heidi Duminy on my right. Heidi already knows what she's going to be asked to talk about. She's been an associate for a couple of years and has dealt specifically with the cap classique panel. She was on the cap classique panel as a senior judge this year. So I'd like you to talk about the evolution of fizz and particularly cap classique.

**HD** It's something I can talk about with great passion and with a heart full of hope on the very first panel. We were very fresh and really approached it with a lot of high hope. There were 57 bubbly which was fantastic. This Old Mutual panel has always been a little bit different in that there's quite a small class of entries. The class has definitely grown and we really worked through those like the family silver. We did them forward, backwards and from the middle out, very mindful of the fact that the temperature and bubble quality make a huge difference to how bubbly expresses itself in a panel. I'm very happy to taste in the Riedel glasses, which are bigger and which really give the benefit of doubt to some of the more delicate, restrained bubbly.

Try as we may, unfortunately we never got to gold and it made my heart heavy and sad. However, I do like Peter Ferreira's encouraging statement of: In search of the perfect bubble – long may we not find it! That certainly wasn't the approach. They were really very, very clean, which was awesome. In years before and also in various other competitions I've judged, we found that there was a lot of dirty yeast, a little bit of elderhedic characters and that has definitely now disappeared.

What is evident and became quite a theme is the difference between simplicity and purity, then using the bottle fermentation to embellish the bubbly. I had the privilege of judging with Michel on this class, which also showed me a different view, because I can tell that Michel is into transparency. He can look into the glass and taste it and see it down to its bones – how it was made and all its problems. Although there were some really great autolysis, I was still really seduced by some of that real red apple richness, where Michel was very quick to say: There's autolysis, but there's that tight style.

I think some of them had the disadvantage of not being able to express themselves because they were so tight. I think that's always going to be a problem with those styles of bubbly, which I love – they almost come across as reductive and if you go back to them, they start to open themselves out.

There is still that problem of using different methods to fill out a bubbly – dosage, oak. That became a common theme that despite the exchange rate, there's so much wood being used out there across the categories.

What I will say is I really think you're starting to see experience, but there's still a lot of bubbly that are just too young, they don't have that lees-y character – they're pure and gorgeous. We were standing outside drinking some of them and I was saying it's hard to stand in this situation and probably drink a gold medal bubbly, because of all the detail and nuance that it has. We did find a couple of silvers and I'm pretty sure we're going in a very positive direction with bubbly on the whole.

**MF** Thanks Heidi. The other thing we ought to bear in mind if you use as a benchmark the idea of world class, your superlative is that the top production from Champagne comes to the market with somewhere between 6 and 9 years between the vintage and the time it gets to the consumer. That elapse of time plays a crucial role.

Before I pass the microphone to Nkulu, because I'd like him to talk about Bordeaux blends, we had a successful kind of day. I have been asked to draw your attention, those of you who do social media, to the Twitter handle and hash tag @omtrophywines, the hash tag is #OMTWS2016. So those of you who want to Tweet, that's where you do it please.

**NM** Thank you Michael. Good day everyone. I had the great pleasure to taste 94 Bordeaux blends. It's a very big category in South Africa, but I found oak was one problem. Oak and also the problem of positive and negative pyrazine characters that showed in the wine. I thought generally a huge improvement in terms of examples that were very fresh and clean. So there was less bretty or dirty characters in the wines generally. Michel mentioned that the only way of striking a balance correctly is to use less new oak. We're finding a lot of producers

are investing in oak, irrespective of the exchange rate, whereas their investment should be in the vineyards. Producers should definitely go in the direction of using less new oak, possibly only a third so that the fruit can really showcase itself and shine through on the wines. The very few examples that were pulled out were very smart. They were very elegant, the restraint, and there were wines that will be really enjoyed by the consumers and they will last a few years. Thank you Michael.

**MF** Thank you Nkulu. Let me just say that further point about oak, that at the Wine Judging Academy which we did just over a month ago, Gary Jordan did the red wine session and at one stage he took the standard release wines from several producers, serve them blind to the group and then the very last session of the day, he served their so-called Reserve wines. The group had no idea that they were looking at the same producers, in most cases the same fruit source and the primary difference was that the R500 to R1000 bottles were very seriously heavily dosed in oak. The guys in the academy scored those wines, on average, significantly lower than the much cheaper wines. Gary made the point as an industry we keep talking about terroir, we keep talking about origin, and then when do our very best to mask the terroir and origin by enriching the coopers. It's a real fact and it's certainly being picked up on the judging panels. It's an important and significant message I think for the wine producers.

I'm going to ask Eric, who hails from Burgundy where he's been *Meuiller* Sommelier on two occasions and is the chief wine buyer for the Bernard Loiseau Group and he was here in 2013, to talk about the Burgundian varieties – chardonnay and pinot noir.

**EG** Thank you Michael. The last time I was here I said I have some diamonds here. We have these diamonds, but at this moment they are raw diamonds. You have a good level in Chardonnay now, but what are we looking for in chardonnay and pinot? In Burgundy we have two words. The first word is "finesse". Finesse is something very important for chardonnay and pinot noir. In all wines you have body, but body is not a substitute for elegance. Be careful. We have to talk about one wine which for me was very pure and it was difficult to understand for another judge. They don't say what the wine is afterwards. The pinot noir was the same, but the level is not very high at this moment for me.

The second thing: terroir is very important. The last time and today we have a different range of grapes. Maybe next time, if there is a next time, we could have another category: terroir. With this category and the finesse, you have for the world another brand. In France and not another part of the world, when we try a wine in a peak category, we just want a great wine, something good of course. They want a postcard about what South Africa is. It's your communication, it's your society and the wine gives that. It is the only product at any level in all parts of the world that gives a real identification of your society. It's very important. When we try, for you maybe it's a Meursault, or a Montrachet. It's a story and this is Burgundy and this is the only one – when you speak about chardonnay, it means chardonnay. Diamonds are from underground. Tomorrow you could be the A level of the greatest wines of the world, like Burgundy.

**MF** Eric, thank you very much. Eric and I had a long discussion last night about this at dinner – and it really is the great "new world", "old world" marketing debate – if you sell your wines with a varietal as the brand, you sell it as chardonnay, you sell it as sauvignon blanc, you are inviting another country, another producer, another area to compete with you using that same primary marketing point on the label – the pinot noir, the shiraz, whatever. When you buy great Burgundy, the varietal name does not appear on the label. You are buying the origin, you are buying the appellation.

The problem for us in South Africa, Eric, is that very few wines – even of the best wines – has a total percentage of those wines are from single origins. So if we want to take to heart Eric's advice, we need to do more to create a culture around those single origins.

I'm now going to pass the microphone to Trizanne, who naturally is going to talk about the white wine categories and perhaps, particularly, given that you also did the sauvignon blanc class, sauvignon blanc and white wines in general.

**TB** Thanks Michael. Not to harp on technicalities, but coming from a wine-making background I must commend the wine makers. The sauvignon blanc in general for me was technically very sound. We've moved away from reduction/oxidation problems. I can remember from last year there were quite a few pinking problems and there was nothing like that this year which was great to see.

I also find that in the sauvignon blanc we have definitely moved away from that really green pyrazine character, which is great to see. A few of them have popped up and they have really shown – like Michel said, when you get that asparagus character, it's short – really giving an idea that their grapes weren't perfectly ripe. There weren't a lot of them around. There was really balanced wines, technically sound.

We did find the wines were very pristine and almost lacked a little soul. I think with sauvignon blanc perhaps our next level should be to be a little more creative with the wines. I know for a lot of the wineries it's the cash cow so we need to get the wine out and ready and perfect, but sauvignon blanc does have soul and I think we can go in different styles.

The wooded sauvignon blancs were stunning. They weren't over-oaked. They were really well balanced and the older sauvignons – again, it goes to show that sauvignon can actually age really well. I think there were two museum golds.

On the white blends, I think a lot of work still needs to be done in white blends. I almost get the idea we're lacking focus. If you compare it to the sav-sem category, we're so focussed on sav-sem. We're getting it right, we're really expressing sav-sem to the best abilities. The white blends for me is almost like just putting stuff together, and not really focussing on what we're putting together. There's room for improvement on the white blends.

**MF** Thank you Trizanne. We'll pass the microphone to Francois Rautenbach. Francois, I thought given that you deal, probably more than anyone here, with the views of sympathetic to South African, foreign consumers. South African red wine styles and the view of the international market that you deal with – some kind of sense of whether you think we're going in the right direction, what you think they are looking for and to what extent you think the wines that you tasted – while still being honest to South Africa – express the expectations of the well-heeled international guests.

**FR** Let's just look at the overview of the reds this morning, when we were looking at the gold taste off. There's a group of reds, irrespective of what cultivars they were, or styles, really looked strong and that's very exciting. We did all the hard work the first three days. In that sense, our international guests are looking for smart wine. That is first and foremost and is part of the reason why they choose to come and visit Singita. Having said that, much like Trizanne says in terms of sauvignon blanc, they are also looking for character. Quality becomes secondary, because that's accepted. So now we have to have wines that really have something that speaks of where it comes from. Whether it be in the syrah or in Bordeaux, or in cabernet, etc. We see phenomenal enthusiasm to send wine home to their cellars and to their homes to enjoy. They want to know that those wines will develop with time. If they're going to brown and be over-oaked and tired after 5 or 6 years, it's not achieving anything. It is a tricky balance, trying to find wines that are enjoyable at an earlier stage. We understand the retail market doesn't have a lot of time to mature wine, but from our guests' perspective, they are looking for wines that they know can develop and we move a lot of them that way. When you get that combination of real character in the wine and an ageability, it works a treat.

**MF** Well you kept that short and I think it really was an important message. I'll now give the microphone to Jackie Chan, I mean Simon Tam. Simon you've seen enough of South Africa. You've seen enough of the Eastern market. I thought that would really be a question, because we are unresolved. When we go into Europe as an exporting country, the structures are pretty much in place. The UK market already has a pre-judged sense of South African wine, a pre-judged sense that in fact contains quite a lot of the damage of the first exports on the 1990's. We are relative newcomers into an opening market in the Far East and I thought you might have some observations to make about that.

**ST** I think the Far East is equally Far West and with that, western lifestyle in Asia is alive and well, way beyond Coca Cola and hamburgers. Wine has been embraced quite ferociously over the last five or six years and that is as long as the history we have with fine wines. With regard to the market, Asia is a very big place, but let me narrow it down to the Chinese market, which is not just Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China, but every other place in Asia where we have black, straight hair. We don't speak Korean or Japanese. So if you look at the Chinese market, it's actually very, very large and very diverse. There is one common point and that is wine in Asia is regarded really – you might regard it as a status symbol, and hey, if they choose your wine, that means you've made it. But, it's a luxury product, a luxury product you would spend money on because you've worked hard and you're rewarding yourself. That tells you immediately what we're looking for are premium products, not by South African standards, not by French standards, but by Asian standards. That means a very specific price point. Probably most of you will go: No I can't sell my wine for that much. Well, why not?

Over the last couple of weeks I've come to know your beautiful country even more and one thing I noticed is that things are extremely affordable. I can have five langoustines for less than a dead prawn I get in Hong Kong. So let's not let anybody, let alone the tourists like me, take advantage of you. Get your pricing correct, because without that you have little regard and/or your agent's making all the money on your behalf and you'll be good friends, but for a different reason.

I think where South Africa is at the moment in terms of image in the Asian market place, the really good thing – and for those of you who were at Warwick, I apologise for being a parrot about it, there really isn't a very strong image. That's a good thing. That gives you carte blanche to go out there and really wave the South African flag. Best foot forward. The right price for the market.

Through the judging it was absolutely phenomenal to see of all the cultivars, the single category with the most amount of gold medals were the chenins. No-one else has got chenins, somewhere between grape purity, pristineness with a mineral backbone. I'm not saying that's the only best foot forward, because we like to put many feet forward. I think what is important is, if you are already selling your cash cow production to Europe and you have the luxury and means to experiment and experience with premium products, the best that you can do with your land, your expertise, why don't you look at it critically and launch it in Asia, because you have a unique position. As long as you get the pricing and distribution correct. There is always a time and place. We don't just drink French wine, although we do drink a lot of French wine in Asia, but that's because we're only 5 or 6 years old as a wine market. When we get more knowledge, more security, more confidence, we'll be drinking wines from anywhere and everywhere. Still, unlike my dear friends in England, we don't have wine under a fiver, because that's not even a sandwich or noodles in Hong Kong. It's a luxury product with high regard. We're looking for something that satisfies us. We're looking for diversity and we're looking for you to be confident to put your best wine foot forward. You have to tell us that you believe in it. No-one else is going to do it for you.

**MF** Thank you Simon. I think that was a salutary message to remind ourselves that the falling Rand may facilitate exports, but they do it at the potential price of damage to image. Finally Christian who didn't think for a moment he was getting off the hook. You've got a long view

on the show. You've judged, if not all then almost all and you've certainly got a 15 edition overview. Would you like to look at the show and contextualise it in the context of the immediate and distant past.

**CE** Thank you Michael. Again, it's going to be tricky to do in a short space of time.

What are my thoughts in 2016, the show having started in 2002? I'm delighted to say that I think South African wine quality has just exploded in that period. In some small way I think the Trophy Wine Show has been instrumental in that, because every year we get to take the temperature of the industry as a whole. I got benched last year, I wasn't on the panel. What struck me this year is day-to-day I'm looking at the very top of the South African wine industry. This week allowed you to take a slightly broader, deeper view and what is incredibly pleasing is that, on the whole, quality is tracking up. That said, I think the gap between the quality of our whites and our reds remains. Our best reds are very good, but our middle and bottom reds, relative to whites, are not nearly as strong as they should be. There's a lot of clumsy oak as has been mentioned and I can't reiterate that more.

I cannot believe in 2016 that our oaking is so misguided. As Heidi said, where are you guys getting all the new oak, given the exchange rate? As Michel said over dinner last night, perhaps it's not so much too much new oak as the wrong oak. That's something to think about. Does the quality of your grapes match up to cooper that you've chosen? That's something to ponder.

I'm afraid there is still rank, bad winemaking like VA and oxidation. That really shouldn't be happening any more. I don't want to harp too much on the negatives. Chenin blanc is looking fantastic and it's really wonderful how we've made that our own. The various exchanges of the international judges over the week, I think we should go away and think about our branding. On a number of occasions they've each said to me: the wines are very good, but they taste international – they taste like they could come from anywhere. Chenin is the exception. Chenin is definitely becoming – I don't want to use the word signature grape – but it's something that we've taken ownership of. Incidentally, Eric asked why we stopped calling it Steen, because we own Steen and nobody else can own Steen. I thought that was interesting. Calling it chenin we're immediately going head to head with Loire and then you have to ask do we do it as good as the Loire? That's a moot point. I think South African is now turning into something completely different to the Loire, but equally good.

We then had some quite ribald banter around wine of origin. Should De Morgenzon in fact be not Wine of Origin Stellenbosch, but Wine of Origin Kuils River? That's the closest human habitation. It's quite ridiculous that Vergelegen, Morgenster and Waterkloof are Wine of Origin Stellenbosch. They should be Wine of Origin Helderberg, or Wine of Origin Schaapenberg, or Wine of Origin Somerset West. It just makes much more sense. Stop selling cabernet and sell Schaapenberg. I think the Hemel en Aarde guys are on the right track, but surely it should be Wine of Origin Hermanus, because everybody know that's where the whales are. If you're sitting in London googling your next holiday, Hermanus is going to come up in the Google search long before Upper Hemel en Aarde.

The final point I would make is I learnt last night that a bunch of producers are lobbying the Wine and Spirits Board to get Wine of Origin Cape Town registered. Whoever is behind that – hats off!

**MF** Christian thank you very much. Obviously we do want to field questions. I did promise one comment about closure for the sake of it. The first is it's the first time in the history of the Show that a trophy contender – in other words a gold medal wine – has been kicked out at the trophy judging and that is because it was three times corked. We have a "two strikes and you're out" rule and because I had called the first bottle because it wasn't aromatically interesting, that was treated as maybe not cork. The second one was corked. The third one was corked. There's a responsibility to consumers, so even if that was really bad luck for the

producer, it's a wine that should have been there as a potential trophy winner, certainly as a gold medallist and it is now compromised by virtue of its closure. I therefore asked Monlee for an interesting stat for what it's worth, of the rate of entries per closure category and the rate of medals. There were 730 corked-closed out of nearly 1100 wines entered in the show, That means that they were 68% of total entries. Screw cap is now 30% of total entries and there's 2% of other, whatever that's supposed to mean!

When you look at where the medals came from, although cork closures were 68% of total entries, they finished with only 60% of the medals, whereas the 30% of screw cap performed at double their share of the total. There were 327 screw cap closed wines entered, but 214 picked up a medal of one sort or another. What that means, I'm not sure. It certainly means that possibly cork affected the chances of some of the wines. It may equally mean that many more winemakers, particularly the edgier winemakers are now more comfortable about using screw caps and so the showier wines had a better chance to show.

That's really the only point I wanted to make about closures. It will come up. Certainly except for that sadness at the trophy judging, it was not an issue at this show. The total number of re-pours, the total number of cork-closed, definitely cork-affected wines – I'll look up that figure for you, but it's insignificantly small compared to the position of a few years ago. It's still there, it's still an issue, but it's certainly not as bad as it was 4 or 5 years ago. I will check that figure, but in the meantime invite you to ask your questions. You can direct them either to the panel as a whole, or to an individual on the panel.

**Q** Just on the cork closures, the winery with the three problematic corks – do you actually contact that winery and tell them this was a problem.

**MF** I will. In previous shows where we've had wineries which have has big issues, lots of stuff with a whiff of TCA or dirt, you phone the winery, they're always grateful/ If give them a chance, pre-emptively, to see whether it's an entire batch affected, or whether it's something else. Let's face it TCA doesn't necessarily come only from the cork. So yes, that winery will be contacted and will know.

**Q** Do you also keep the cork just to see who the cork producer is?

**MF** The winery would know. It's not our job to start a war with cork producers, but if the winery is alerted they can have a word with their supplier.

**Q** It's just that sometimes if you bottle a wine you don't use only one cork supplier. You use two, three or four.

**MF** It would be useful. We may be able to ascertain that and if there's anything left over – if you've opened three plus one at the primary, possibly two at the primary panel, there's one sole bottle left to do the job. But that is a good point. Maybe we need to note that in future, where there are dramatic issues, we should keep the cork back for the producer. Thank you for that. Any other questions?

**Q** Was there any growth in the merlot category?

**MS** Not statistically, but certainly qualitatively.

**CE** There were just over 50 entries in the merlot category, which is not significantly up or down on previous years, but what was immensely encouraging and a pleasant surprise, is that quality has nudged up a level. Why I find that particularly gladdening is I sometimes wonder, the Trophy Wine Show convenes every year, we bang on our little drums and nothing happens. Clearly something is happening in the case of merlot. Typically what is happening is the wines were either weedy, or in an effort to avoid weediness, completely overdone. I

think we're a long way off great merlot, but it's now far more drinkable so well done to the guys working with merlot.

**MF** There was a gold medal merlot. Last year we battled for a silver. The year before I don't think we had a silver. It really is significant, the difference.

**CE** The point with merlot is, 10 or 15 years ago you'd drawn the short straw if you got the pinotage category. Until recently nobody wanted to judge perlot, but we sat down and kept an open mind and by the end of it, Eric, the international judge, said: This was far better than I expected. So something good is happening in the case of merlot.

By the same token, I think shiraz suffers from complacency. That was an unpleasant surprise. I was greatly looking forward to shiraz. I suspect it's a victim of its own success and there's a lot of new producers who have jumped into the category and they've got no idea what they're doing. That's the only way I can explain it.

**MF** Thank you Christian. Any more questions?

**Q** Further to the bad merlot story, is that improvement do you believe, because people are being more site specific and possibly also putting more merlot vineyards into cooler climates?

**CE** I'm sure it's some of that, but I just have a sense it's more careful viticulture across the board. The gauntlet has been laid down and the guys are working really hard to get properly ripe fruit.

**MF** They're being much more thoughtful I think is the short answer.

**Q** Just a questions more for the international judges. How much of the South African wine industry is perhaps being held back by our own mind-sets and belief in ourselves and our own abilities as opposed to the kind of quality we can actually produce.

**MF** That's a question for Simon Tam, given the platform he was on a few moments ago.

**ST** I'm not very good at being diplomatic. I had a lovely diving trip with Cape fur seals. I drove all the way to Simon's Town and then around False Bay. For the life of me, my first trip here, totally one whole month of my life, I can't help but to see just beauty. Beauty of the land, beauty of the people, freshness of food, great wines and this wonderful lifestyle. I was a little shocked that I might be the only one who can see that.

Talking to various people, waiters, supermarket checkout clerks, I think when it comes down to the wine industry there is just one unmistakable, uncompromisingly true sentence and that is: You guys are right up there with the best of the world. Believe it! It's right up there. The chardonnays that we saw today, the line-up in the trophy tasting, I came away and thought Wow! I even rang my Portuguese wife to tell her that I tasted Cape vintage and Cape tawny that tastes better than some of the stuff we have in Portugal. I'm thoroughly charged by this and I would love everybody to get on the happy bandwagon, stop watching the morning and evening news, because they are bloody depressing and focus on what you're doing, which is making a golden, bright sunset with these wonderful wines. That's the sort of stories export markets like Asia would love to hear about. We know what good wine tastes like. We know what good value wine tastes like. We also, at least in our part of the world, know what great scuba diving is, that great big rock you've got in the middle of Cape Town called Table Mountain – the mother of them all. Even before going to things like abalone and lobster and the Cape fur seals which are the cutest creatures on the planet. It's just a lovely, beautiful package. I grew up in Australia where we believe we have the lucky country. I think that has shifted to South Africa. You need to believe it, talk it and tell it because that's what it is.

## **APPLAUSE from the floor**

**MF** You certainly know how to make yourself popular Simon. So much for giving it to us the way it's supposed to be. Another question from the floor.

**Q** Having listened to that, it's lovely to look from the outside in. Is the problem not that back at home we don't have the same respect for what we're doing with wines? We're battling to sell in our local market the idea that we're making really great wines.

**MF** The person to answer that question is a local person trading locally. Heidi?

**HD** I think that really speaks to our split personality when it comes to approaching the market. I've certainly seen that first hand in the last two years that I've been at Meridian Wine Merchants.

There is such a split in how we approach the market and the emerging market and taking opportunities. It's that rather pulling up than pushing up. In other words I think it's exactly that. It's growing the awareness and the culture of wine is absolutely paramount to everything and that doesn't come with snobbiness. It's that voice that everyone's trying to find: the accessible expert, the friendly voice. Get rid of all the complexity of wine, stop intimidating, but still keep the nuance and the pride of it going. I think we definitely do have a problem with separating your retail, commercial market - which is very competitive and cutthroat, wheeling and dealing - with that whole, huge, beautiful middle portion which is the journey people go on, and yet you somehow miss, because you've got the booming very top end of wine that everyone respects and knows - and I'm sure that came across our tables this week. But there's a middle section that gets lost between the scrum of retail and the top end. I think our pride needs to grow through that.

**MF** Thank you Heidi. More questions from the floor.

**Q** There was a lot of talk about Bordeaux, whether it be white or red. If you look at the red blend category, where would one view our strengths? Christian mentioned shiraz. I know that shiraz, and a lot of other blends are entering the market. I just want to get your viewpoint as to where South Africa's strengths lie with regard to red blends.

**MF** That's probably a question for 2 or 3 panellists. I'm going to ask Michel. You did the Bordeaux blend class, which I'm afraid is giving a man who's just spent three weeks in Bordeaux looking at the 2015 *en primeurs* - a good vintage in Bordeaux - but then he comes to a class that's not our strongest red wine class, so I think his comments and criticism would in fact be really constructive.

**MB** This is a very complex question. First, I never, never believe in the 100% variety wine. That's not civilization. The "100% school" is not civilization. Civilization begins with blending for complimentary qualities, or blending because a small amount of something can help to give a better expression of the majority of the content. The human job is to be creative, to have a dream. You have not to extract, you have to express and to express you have to dream before. You have to dream your wine before making it, if you want to make a great wine from a great place.

I like the idea of blending. I like the blends. Very often, because nature can sometimes be very kind with people, we have already well known marriages. We have the marriage of the Bordeaux varieties, which were never born in Bordeaux, but their expression is in Bordeaux. Merlot, cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon - a variety you don't use here, but I think it's very well suited to your microclimate and to your soil, which is malbec, because malbec needs the very hot wind and it doesn't fear the hot days. Cabernet sauvignon is very complex and very difficult to have very high maturity when you have very hot days in summer.

Of course the Mediterranean blends which are two categories – the old Languedoc varieties which were lower in alcohol and the Spanish varieties which came into France, like grenache, cinsaut, carignan and perhaps syrah. Remember that syrah is coming from the mountains. The real syrah was born and comes from the mountains, in cool places. In very warm places syrah is a bad grenache and grenache is a far better syrah. Remember that. Cinsaut too. That's very important. Mourvèdre can be the cabernet sauvignon of the south. Mourvèdre is a wonderful variety when it's very well suited to the soil.

The blends are very good. To make a great blend in the art of blending. Of course I'm very happy – and it's the same for the white wine – it's very good to have some semillon with the sauvignon. Blending is better. Perhaps with blending you can come back to what we expected before – the expression of one place, or one winery. You need signatures. You need iconic wines to be better known outside. Of course it is export that makes the money and the reputation, but if you have not built iconic wines before in your own country, you will never get that. You have to believe that you are able to make great wines, to pay the money for the great wines, to have these great wines in your best restaurants and then the visitors will say it's good. It's Vega Sicilia in Spain. It was far more useful than hundreds of other brands. It's necessary. I think you will get it with your best blended wines.

**MF** I won't provoke Eric on the Nazism of single variety wines. He comes from Burgundy where 100% chardonnay, 100% pinot noir is something he might want to defend, but historically there was blending.

**EG** I respect Michel of course. I defend blend, I defend Burgundy, but I speak about terroir. It is normal to make a blend where we have awful grapes. This is not a problem. We've spoken before about the soils. What I mean and my proposition is this: when you have just one grape, chardonnay or pinot noir, you see that in Burgundy you have 2 500 differences in climate. This is very important but something very delicate. The difference is 1 metres. We need to have a terroir category. If you have a mix of blends, if you have lots of grapes, it's difficult to speak about the soils. If you have just one, this is the judge. You need to have two judges – pinot noir and chardonnay.

Thank you Michel

**MB** Pinot noir is not a variety, pinot noir is a cultivar. Pinot noir has hundreds of individualities and it's the blend of these individualities that make the greats. And there was always pinot noir with more colour than others – 5% blended – and they know very well and they select it year after year. It's the same with chardonnay where you had different selection, which is very important. In pinot noir you very often had 5% or 8% of white varieties added to pinot noir in many places. In the old vineyards you always find a small amount of other things planted and blended. That's very important. Very old varieties of pinot noir is a cultivar and the complexity is inside the pinot noir. The idea of one metre, one metre, one metre, I don't like too much because if I am beginning to speak about the history of great Cru in Burgundy, you will see that human factors were far more important than natural. Why this place was added to this place, to make Grand Cru. It's not God the Father who created it, it's the people after a long history and things like that.

**MF** Thank you Michel.

**TB** Just to answer your question on other red blends, I judge niche reds and other red blends – I'm not talking about Rhone here – and there's very strong niche red wines out there, which gives me the idea that we should be strong on red blends, but I'm not sure that the wine makers are focussing on making great red blends. I think they are taking lesser components in their cellars and putting stuff together. I always go back to sav-sem. With our sav-sem blends we take our best sauvignon and our best semillon and we make the best blend. I'm not sure that with our red blends that we're taking the best components and putting them together yet. I think that should be our focus, because there are great cinsauts and great

grenaches out there, but I'm not sure we're taking those great wines and making an even better wine as a blend.

**MF** I'll add to that and say that having seen as Chairman everything, the sudden increase in quality in what we would call the Rhone blend class. So shiraz blends but shiraz blends in which the other Rhone varieties were present, as opposed to shiraz blends with everything else, including the kitchen sink in them. That was for the first time, a distinctive enough blend category and it did produce distinctive enough results.

**Q** This is probably more directed to you and the international judges. If you look at other producing countries, you go through the new world and then obviously Europe, all their reputations have been built from a pinnacle downwards, be it that Sauvignon has put New Zealand on the map and Syrah Australia. That might not necessarily be their strongest wine, but that's what penetrated the world market somehow. From there onwards the world was exposed to it and it goes. It's great to hear South African wine in general, including Merlot, is upping its performance and we get these rave reviews and all the international judges and journalists are so ecstatic about our quality, but the question is: what are we taking to the general consumer in terms of a latching point of why would you choose a South African bottle, when faced with 5 000 wines in Hong Kong? It's South Africa. Have we got a category that's strong enough and big enough to distribute so widely that that could be the latching point? I don't know.

**MF** I'll throw that to everyone. I know Christian would say chenin blanc, but who would like to step into the breach.

**CE** If that question's been posed once, it's been posed a thousand times. Over the 15 years of the competition it always comes up. One international judge it's chenin or pinotage or both, then the next one will say: That's boring. You do everything so well, why pigeonhole yourselves. In my own head I think it's less an issue of having a signature grape, but more of communicating Brand South Africa effectively to the world and I don't think we're doing that at all well. That's less a reflection on the South African wine industry and more a reflection on South Africa in its entirety and you could then say why is the national government not getting its act together – I'm not sure we're going to resolve that today

To bring it back to wine, I think Simon's points are very salient and I think we need to be a lot more confident about how we portray ourselves to the world. A case in point for me is Ken Forrester's R950 chenin blanc. Ken being Ken, he has the courage to go out and put a wine on the market for R950. Then there's a whole lot of muttering amongst his colleagues about how he can be so brazen to charge so much money for a chenin blanc. Come on guys it's ridiculous. If we're going to carry on selling chenin blanc off 40 year old vines for R70 a bottle, it's game over. You don't need an MBA to do the maths.

**MF** I hope that answers it. Two more questions from the floor.

**Q** Given the climate change that we're experiencing, are you seeing any of the newer dry land varieties, the unusual grape varieties coming through into the competition?

**MF** I think that was answered by Trizanne. She said that that's where we were seeing the real interest.

**Q** But single varietals, rather than blends.

**MF** Yes, niche varieties.

**Q** Could you pick up the impact of unvirussed vines in the quality of your judging.

**MF** A lot of people want to take on that. Do you want to talk about it Francois?

**FB** I think the answer lies in the other way around and that is that the wines this morning were looking fantastic because they didn't show the virus. The wines that were easy to push out during the days, were the ones that clearly had virus all over them. So there is no question that those people who have good vineyard, or who are really nurturing their vineyards, the difference is there and obvious in the bottle. It's not something you're looking for. It's something you touch, feel and taste.

**MF** That touches on a much deeper economic question, which has obviously been the discussion in the room, which is that if you have to run virus-free vineyards, you're not going to do at R5-R7 000 for your fruit. You're never ever going to acquire enough money to afford to replant those vines. What happens in the industry is that the primary producer is pushed right down in price, so the thing we most need, which is clean, old vines, is the one thing we don't make possible in the pricing structure on which the industry operates. It's as simple as that. One last question.

Simon, you wanted to say something quite serious:

**ST** You guys have been making wine in this country for a long time. UK supermarkets had a good go, Europeans – your ancestral countries Netherlands, Holland and Germany – they have all been keen supporters of your products. That's great, this is heritage. America is very big – 50 odd markets in one country, it's difficult and expensive to navigate. The current renaissance - if you like - is really in the Far East, or the West, depending which way you fly. It's really in Asia. No preconceived ideas of how much things should be, but give us fair value. Insatiable thirsts to find the next tastes they've not had before. Inquisitive, knowledge, food, buying, wanting to know what an off-vintage in Bordeaux tastes like (cos there's no bad vintage in Burgundy – except hail – sorry), and it ticks all the boxes for everyone in this room. A wider, outer area to engage with Asia. Now it's a lovely flight, thank you very much Old Mutual and Singapore Airlines. You will be rewarded by something that is out of your comfort zone: the language, the culture, the scenery, the smells. But will you will be rewarded because you will find new ways of value-adding to your limited production, new market, new horizon – and you're going to get much better Asian food than any Food Court in the Waterfront! So I encourage all of you, please come, come and have a look. Do it in a time and place when you're not going to lose focus and distraction. In other words, I believe Vinexpo is probably not the best time for producers to come along: there's a pecking order where people go to; what they taste. Come when the calendar is clear, away from Chinese festivities and so on and come and have a look: look at the supermarkets; look at what people are buying; buy some wines and so some tastings compared to yours. Get a feel for it. Google – I mean where were we before Google? The world is so much easier now. It is so much easier to access and I think Asia would probably – given its economy – many powerful economies – smallish, accessible, will probably at least for the next decade or so, be the focus of the wine industry globally.

**MF** Thank you Simon.

(To the audience) Please make use of this opportunity, continuing to get the most out of this wonderful gathering of wine palates and wine minds. Thank you all for joining us

ENDS