

FOOD

Edited by Susan Jung
susan.jung@scmp.com

Suppose the wine label said: this fruity red blend is full-bodied with tastes of sweet mulberry, spicy mocha... and burnt rubber. The aroma lingers like a gumboot left out in the sun.

South Africa is the world's ninth largest producer of wine and the winner of many accolades in international competitions. Why have some of its wines been linked to the bouquet of charred rubber?

Most of the answer lies in the prose of British wine critic Jane MacQuitty of *The Times* of London. In late 2007, she tasted a run of South Africa's flagship reds and said half were tainted by a "peculiar, savage, burnt rubber" odour. Later she described a selection of the country's best-rated reds "a cruddy, stomach-heaving and palate-crippling disappointment".

In the glorious wine lands of the Western Cape, where the grape vines grow against a backdrop of stunning mountains, her comments were infuriating and perplexing, and even derided as loony. No reds had been singled out by MacQuitty. Exactly which wines carried the scent of smoking steel-belted radials?

"All of us were slandered by a very general statement," says Andre van Rensburg, celebrated winemaker at the Vergelegen Wine Estate.

Gregory De'eb, former South African consul-general to Hong Kong and one of the founders of Crown Wine Cellars in Shouson Hill, says he had never heard South African wines described this way until contacted for this article.

"I've never heard it from any other major wine journalist, not Jancis Robinson or any South African journalist. It would be crucial to hear which wines she tasted. I could do a tasting of wines from Australia, France or Chile, select some challenged wines and write an article and say similar things. It would do nothing for the reader except to expose my own ignorance, if you generalise like this it exposes yourself rather than the wine industry."

Wine aficionados began taking sides: yes, there is definitely a telltale rubbery pong, and no, it is all in your imagination. South Africans who dismissed the criticism were demeaned as burnt rubber deniers.

Worse, they were accused of "cellar palate," being so accustomed to tainted wine that their taste buds now welcomed it.

Exporters were particularly troubled. About 28 per cent of the 300 million litres of South African wine sent abroad in 2008 went to Britain. Many consumers do not care where a bottle originates so



South Africa is the world's ninth-largest producer of wine



South African vineyards such as those in Stellenbosch (left) have won many accolades. But British wine critic Jane MacQuitty has caused an uproar in the country's wine community with her damning reviews. Photos: NYT

After a British wine critic likened the taste of South African reds to charred rubber, a debate has raged over the fairness of her description, reports **Barry Bearak**

Burnt offerings

exporters. "But whatever you call it, it has not been scientifically proven that the flavour even exists. We have committed our best people to find out."

Indeed, for the past year vine-and-wine detectives from the department of viticulture and oenology at Stellenbosch University have been working the case. The "burnt rubber team" includes sensory scientists and analytical chemists. They taste, they sniff, they scratch their heads.

They are looking for the golden thread that ties together a single taste that was born in multiple locations. Is the problem with the root stock, the soils, the storage, the bottling, the techniques of fermentation? Gas chromatography is being used to separate wines into their chemical compounds, searching for a culprit among the molecular units.

From the start, the work has been confounding and frustrating. "As a scientist, you would never approach a problem from this angle," says Professor Florian Bauer, the molecular biologist who heads the team. "We were not even sure

We prefer that people use the term acrid rather than burnt rubber. But whatever you call it, it has not been scientifically proven that the flavour even exists

Andre Morgenthal, Wines of South Africa

what smell we were looking for. This research is a response to an ill-defined description in a newspaper." Bauer says each person's perception of taste is different. One man's burnt rubber may be another's sun-dried tomatoes. "People's descriptions are imprecise," he says.

The research team's first task was to find out what aroma was being likened to burnt rubber. A tasting of 60 wines was organised last year in London and included wine critics who had sided with MacQuitty.

They fingered nine reds as burnt-rubber impaired. These wines were returned to Stellenbosch, where the lineup of suspects was handed over to a second panel of experienced tasters. They agreed that all nine had an "off" character but that only two carried the pungency of what some might identify as rubber.

The two wines were considered a good start, however. Tasters could be trained to recognise that flavour, and as other wines were sampled under controlled circumstances, two became 10, and 10 became 20, enough wine with the same maligned taste to weed out some obvious possibilities.

No link was found to either the variety or the vintage of the reds. Nor were the wines common to any region in the Cape. In fact, the professor says, the stigmatised scent was found in wines from other countries as well.

These conclusions square with the theories of some of South Africa's leading winemakers. Pure and simple, they blame bad winemaking for the burnt rubber taste. Specifically, they cite the occasional inattention to certain

sulphide compounds that can form during fermentation. "This is not typically a South African problem, and it annoys me when people say it," says Van Rensburg of Vergelegen. "But you don't find an easier dog to beat up on than South Africa. Because of the past, because of apartheid, people are always willing to believe the worst."

And do not listen to wine critics, he adds: "At tastings, they talk each other into a frenzy. If one of them picks up the taste of apple, the other guy says, 'Yes, yes, and I taste cinnamon too'."

MacQuitty, one of those critics, considers such comments ostrichlike: "Unless the South Africans track down this burnt rubber taste, they will never be a real New World player in wine."

De'eb would advise MacQuitty to taste some of South Africa's top estates to see what they are achieving internationally. "Kanonkop Paul Sauer—a top Bordeaux blend—just won the award for best blended red wine at the 2008 International Wine & Spirit Competition in London—they've won this award for three of the past

10 years. Vergelegen, another top-end Bordeaux-style wine, has won the award two years out of the past 10—so five of the past 10 years the award has gone to a South African wine."

De'eb adds he's never detected the burnt rubber aroma in any of the South African wines he's tasted.

"In fairness, I only traditionally drink the top 20 South African wines. I come across a cheap one every now and again but even the humble wines I select very carefully."

Grangehurst, it's a Bordeaux blend that sells here for about HK\$200 with eight years of ageing. It's really superb—it's a humble product but it's exceptionally good."

If it's any comfort to South African fans, that country's wines are not the only ones MacQuitty has detected with grievous faults.

A few months ago, she tasted "a whole slew of supposedly top-notch" Marlborough sauvignons from New Zealand. These wines, she wrote, were not only "watery" and "grassy", they were "evil".

The New York Times; additional reporting by Susan Jung