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Transformation and the delinquent South African wine connoisseur

By William G Moseley

South Africans are rightly proud of their well developed wine sector. With its traditions dating back to the 17th century, its current status as the eighth or nineth largest wine producer in the world, and its many award-winning wines, South Africa is a world leader in viticulture.

But this segment of the economy is not transforming as quickly as it should. While the government and the wine industry are partly to blame, the South African wine consumer, restaurateur and grocer are also at fault.

I have been studying government-led land redistribution in the Western Cape since 2005. This process, in which the historically disadvantaged may apply for grants to purchase farms, has had a nominal impact in the winelands of the Western Cape. As of 2006, less than one half of one 1% of the 2 372 farms in the Western Cape that produce 100 tons or more of grapes annually were owned or co-owned by black workers.

On these few worker-owned or co-owned farms, former farm workers are learning to take responsibility and share in the profits of their labour. Interestingly, the global market has been very supportive of these efforts in recent years.

Worker co-owned labels, such as Thandi and Bouwland, have been exporting to several European countries over the past three to four years and are now beginning to break into the US and Canadian markets. In fact, roughly 90% of wine sales for South Africa worker co-owned and fair trade labels are on the international market. This compares to the average South African winery that exports about 50% to 65% of its production.

Sadly, domestic support for worker co-owned wine labels has been anemic. My recent (unscientific) tour of restaurants and supermarkets in Cape Town revealed how difficult it was to find such wine.

While Cape Town has a booming tourism industry, and presumed bevy of visitors who would like to support transformation in the post-apartheid era, I couldn't find a single restaurant that carried a worker co-owned wine label.

To make matters worse, most restaurant wait staff don't even seem to know that such wine exists. While the record of supermarkets is not quite so dismal, I often had to look long and hard to find that dusty bottle of worker-produced wine on the bottom shelf.

Looking slightly better are the specialty wine shops, whose staff do seem to have some awareness that empowerment wine labels exist. Sadly again, however, there is a lack of understanding on the difference between those wine labels which are worker co-owned and those that are black owned.

While the investment of black capitalists in the wine sector should not be discouraged (leading to so called black labels), the involvement of farm workers as co-owners is more significant and deserving of support.

Lest you think these are lacklustre wines, they are not. Thandi's Chardonnay has won a gold medal at the International Wine Challenge in London, and Bouwland's winemaker, Byers Tuter, has been international wine maker of the year.

The end of apartheid has proven to be an economic boon for South African capitalists. The wine industry has been no exception. While times have been harder in recent years, it still remains a fact that wine production has quadrupled since 1994 and exports have grown nearly eight fold.

Shouldn't farm workers be reaping some of these gains? Shouldn't the South African consumer be showing the world that they support social justice and real transformation in the wine industry?

The irony, of course, is that many South African wine consumers, and certainly the higher end buyers, are incredibly brand conscious. They want to know where a wine was produced and under what conditions.

Sadly, many of these consumers have yet to take an interest in labour relations. It isn't right that I have an easier time finding South African fair trade wine in Saint Paul, US than in Cape Town. Isn't it time the consumer set about transforming "Proudly South African"?

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