

BOOK AND FILM REVIEWS

Paul Nugent: *Race, Taste and the Grape: South African Wine from a Global Perspective*

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There are few original, book-length histories of the South African wine industry, apart from Louis Leipoldt's *300 Years of Cape Wine*, first published more than 70 years ago (Leipoldt, 1952), Diko van Zyl's *Cape wine and brandy* (Van Zyl, 1975), which covers the period from 1795 to 1860, and his later *KWV: 75 Years* (Van Zyl 1993), a commissioned history of the Cooperative Winegrowers of South Africa (KWV) in the 20th century (the KWV was established in 1918), published in 1975. So, Paul Nugent's new book is the first in almost 50 years. It concentrates largely on the 20th century but reaches back to the 17th century origins of the industry. As its title suggests, he uses South Africa's idiosyncratic history of production, consumption, and structural change to locate the South African industry in an evolving global context. Through these lenses, the book explains how the industry has evolved.

The structure of the book is somewhat complicated for a lay reader. At the risk of over-simplification, the specific meanings of “race,” “taste,” and “the grape” are discussed in the South African context as they interact with two themes, namely the structural tensions between grape and wine farmers on the one hand and “the trade” (variously called brand owners, producer wholesalers, or Nugent's preferred merchant-manufacturers) on the other; and the politicization of the industry that arose from the perception that it needed to be regulated, and then how it came to be regulated. This architecture is made more complex by the inevitable overlapping and interlinking between these three “signifiers” of the industry, yet Nugent succeeds in leading the reader seamlessly into his discussion of the most important features of the industry over the past 150 years.

So, what is peculiar about the South African industry? We start, as does Nugent, with the concept of race. As in most of the rest of the world, wine was originally consumed largely by those who produced it, but the conditions in South Africa were very different. Nugent puts it thus (p. 2): “At the Cape, wine came to be particularly associated with social extremes: that is, with the material trappings of privilege and taste, on the one side, and the stark realities of human bondage, on the other.” Furthermore, “Here, there

was no virtuous peasantry enjoying ancestral ties to the land and revelling in the fruits of its own labour.”

This, he argues, still influences the industry today, with wine the alcohol of choice for White and “Coloured” people, while the new Black middle class prefer beer and spirits, a result of the Liquor Act of 1928, which allowed White and Coloured people to drink whatever they wanted but made illegal the sale of alcohol to Black people (a ban that was lifted only in 1962). Little wonder, then, that wine has still not made much headway among Black people, even as the middle class has expanded nearly tenfold in the three decades since the end of apartheid.

The scene is thus set for discussion of the second “signifier” in the title, namely taste, by which Nugent means the shifting patterns of consumption, over time and between the sexes, classes, and population groups. This discussion also includes a great deal of interesting detail about the influence of the temperance movement, which reached its apogee in the 1920s, but remains with us, most recently in the form of the prohibition on alcohol sales that accompanied the lockdowns of the COVID era in 2020–22.

South Africa is a white wine-producing country, with white grapes making up more than 85% of the tonnage crushed through the 1990s, when it started to decline as exports increased with the demise of the apartheid-era boycotts and sanctions. The white grape crush currently stands at two thirds of the total. This shift, however modest, is the result of the shift in consumption from sweet white wines in the German style in the middle decades of the 20th century to dry reds and whites after the 1970s.

Nugent explains this shift and enters the fantasy world of advertising, telling stories that would have been funny were it not for the ever-present realities of apartheid in South Africa (and its lingering after-effects, which he continuously keeps in his readers’ minds). The focus throughout is on marketing, innovations in distribution, and the resultant institutional changes that came with the inevitable consolidation of the major wine brand owners and the value chains that they created.

The third of Nugent’s three signifiers—the grape—addresses farming and wine making and the technological innovations that made this possible and that largely succeeded in maintaining the industry’s status as a competitive global participant. This part of the book opens the discussion to such aspects as the tensions between grape and wine farmers, between them and “the trade,” and between the wine, beer, and spirits industries. In the process, he goes into great detail on issues such as the KWV and the regulatory powers conferred on it in 1926 and reinforced considerably in 1940; the “cool fermentation” revolution that made the production of quality white wines possible in the harsh climate of the southwestern corner of Africa; and the story of the deregulation of the industry and its restructuring in the post-apartheid era.

As stated earlier, the structure of the central argument of the book, no matter how complicated, allows Nugent to shed new light on a number of important facets that helped shape the industry. I have already mentioned the temperance movement, the role of advertising, the tensions between the main actors in the industry, and how this resulted in the establishment and subsequent functioning of the KWV, and the cool fermentation revolution. To this list can be added (in no specific order):

- The emergence of wine science and especially the story of Prof Perold, first Professor of Viticulture and Oenology at Stellenbosch University with his

appointment in 1917, and father of the Pinotage grape, the result of a cloning of Pinot Noir and Hermitage grapes.

- The history of slavery and the dependence of the wine industry on slaves and their descendants. Nugent makes the interesting point that in 1701 there were 891 slaves in the colony, a number that increased to 6,045 in 1753. At the same time, there were 5,419 burghers (freehold farmers), making the total settler and slave population less than 15,000. Most of the slaves were brought in from Dutch colonial possessions in East and South-East Asia, creating what Nugent calls “a slave culture of a very specific kind” in the Cape, a culture that resonates in the industry to this day.
- The *dopstelsel* or “tot system” is also part of this legacy. The system refers to the practice of giving farm workers wine at regular intervals during the day, often as partial remuneration for their work. There is, understandably, a large literature on the social and health consequences of this iniquitous practice for the recipients and for the impact on the productivity of the workers.
- The story of the beer wars in South Africa is another example of South African exceptionalism, and one of the few really funny tales that do not overtly have a racial connotation—on the assumption that monopolies do not discriminate in who they disadvantage. The 1998 Competition Act was meant to encourage greater competition but succeeded in creating a dominant company (Distell) in the wine space and strengthening South African Breweries’ near-monopoly of the beer market, keeping intact the notion of “race” as manifested in consumption patterns that remain today.

The final chapter neatly brackets the particular slice of history between the phylloxera scare that first came ashore in South Africa in 1886 and the COVID-19 pandemic. As Nugent argues, the rebuilding of the industry after the former gave birth to a wine science that has stood the industry in good stead, as well as to necessary regulation, particularly to protect against wine diseases and enhance the quality of wine. Similarly, the pandemic resulted in regulation of consumption, purpose of which was to extoll the benefits of moderation.

Successful regulation requires careful balancing: regulations against diseases must be balanced against the access farmers have to the latest rootstocks and vine cultivars and clones, while regulation against surpluses of grapes and wine should actually result in smaller and eventually no surpluses. In South African, Nugent argues, regulation both stifled innovation on the farms and wine cellars, and resulted in ever-increasing surpluses, largely because of the politicization of technical issues. To this end, he summarizes the main arguments of the book by dividing this history into five periods of technical innovation, examining the regulatory successes and failures of each period.

The territory that is covered in this book is familiar to historians of South Africa, and to those who work in the South African wine industry, but Nugent’s book throws much new light on nearly all of the stories that make up this narrative, with his unique approach to the subject matter. These stories are probably what lay readers from elsewhere will enjoy most in this well-written, well-reasoned, and long-awaited history of the South African wine industry.

References

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