

Paying honour to that food-wine partnership

THE realisation that food and wine are naturally complementary has played a significant role in how winemakers produce their wines, especially the iconic ones treated with kid gloves and hours of dedication.

It is an element restaurants have increasingly taken to heart, and while KwaZulu-Natal is not known for its wine-drinking culture (beers just work better in our climate), it is rewarding to note the growing number of places paying more attention to their wine lists.

Diners' Club has sponsored the annual Diners' Club Winelist of the Year for more than 20 years, and receiving the diamond honour in recognition of what their wine lists say about their consideration relating to food and wine pairing, has become an annual goal for many restaurants.

Judge JP Roussouw said this year's competition, of which the KwaZulu-Natal leg winners were

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announced this week, reflected the shift in South Africa's wine industry, with restaurants showing acceptance of niche farms and interesting wines rather than merely focusing on the wines represented by the larger distributors.

Platter's Guide to South African Wines has more than 900 producers in its tome-like current volume, and within individual wineries there is increasingly diversity in what consumers are offered.

Consequently, the 2016 competition looked critically for lists showing that evolution, and insisted restaurants display vintages, particularly when

advertising wine with star ratings. Ratings are meaningless without the specific vintage. Roussouw quipped that "wine speaks to vintage and is not a bulk commodity".

He accepts that wine by the glass is "a thorny issue", but believes that South Africans are demanding pairing experiences where buying a bottle does not allow different taste experiences with individual courses.

Consequently, there has to be reward for the depth of this category beyond the "red, white and semi-sweet from the box".

Equally, wine lists have to reflect the food offered, and there was little reason for an Indian restaurant not to offer a broad selection of wines with higher sugar contents (Gewurtztraminer, Viognier or wooded chenin blancs) that complement the spicy quality.

One surprise was the relatively poor reflection of chenins and pinotages on wine lists, given that they are the varietals for which South Africa is renowned.

This year the competition saw the judges facing 230 wine lists, and Roussouw said those that stood out spoke to the restaurants' personalities – they had personalised wine descriptions rather than

the cut-and-paste option, and had sommeliers or informed wine stewards going the extra mile.

"Wine lists must do the speaking to customers when the owner or sommelier is not there.

"Restaurants need to think of their lists from the consumers' viewpoint," he said.

This year's diamond winners were: Hartford House (which also won the best regional diamond award), 9th Avenue Bistro, Beverly Hills Hotel, Ghost Mountain Inn, Fordoun Hotel & Spa, Granny Mouse Country House & Spa and The Oyster Box.

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