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Michel Laroche and L'Avenir

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One of the most pleasant wines I have drunk recently (note drunk, not tasted, the difference is in the pleasure over the course of a whole bottle) is the L'Avenir Chenin Blanc 2006.

L'Avenir's Chenin has always been a good wine, as has their Pinotage. When the estate underwent a change of ownership and Michel Laroche, of the French wine family with Chablis roots, bought it two years ago, there was a wait-and-see period. That ended with the release, now in the international Laroche bottle, of the new L'Avenir vintage.

Impish in demeanour, Laroche was on hand to direct proceedings, frequently interjecting Tinus Els' commentary with very confident statements, often relating to his aim of getting the fruit in a wine stand proud. "I believe there can never be too much fruit on a wine" was repeated more than once, and when it came to the wooded reds, he was all in favour of shorter maturation. "From now on, we just lose fruit," was his feeling about the relatively short 10 month wooding currently on the Grand Vin Pinotage 2006.

What a relief, to hear a producer celebrate fruit instead of wood. Winemakers claim to have this desire to produce wines that taste like they belong to their patch of land, after which they whack lashings of imported wood flavours into it, making a mockery of any site specificity. Your fruit has to be your primary personality, it needs to be elevated, not hidden.

Laroche has a powerful urge to keep freshness in his wines, freshness of fruit, as well as of the wine. It's the main reason that he is one of France's leading screw cap proponents, "the wines last twice as long, and here I am talking about the reds". All L'Avenir wines are moving to screw cap, and they mentioned that it was only our slow bottle suppliers that prevented all the new Cape releases to be so closed.

To prove this freshness, try a bottle of the 2006 Chardonnay alongside another Cape example. You'll find a vibrancy and an energy, a punchiness, often missing from our chards. This is also because they preserve as much of the primary acidities as possible. By avoiding all but a little malo-lactic fermentation (which takes the appley, bright acids and turns them into creamy, soft ones) the wine remains fresh. It should age wonderfully.

Of the reds, I was most impressed by the Pinotage 2006, and the Grand Vin Pinotage 2006. Laroche again: "I believe pinotage has the potential to be as good as top SA cabernet sauvignon." This clearly is a Frenchman who isn't mired in provincialism, and certainly a very welcome addition to our wine world.

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