

The Tim Smal Show - 18 January 2019 transcript

Jono Le Feuvre, a wine critic at Han Drinks Solo, talks about South African wine.

Tim Smal (host): Hi there and welcome to the show. My name is Tim and our guest today is Jono Le Feuvre from Han Drinks Solo dot com that's right, it's a pop-culture wine blog, very exciting. So Jono, how's it going today?

Jono Le Feuvre (guest): It's an honour to be here. Yeah, I'm hoping that I can share a little bit about what excites me about wine. The reason, I guess – actually I suppose, you don't know why you have a wine blog, right? It's kind of a weird thing to do, but hopefully by the end of it we figure out where the passion lies and what I think is so incredibly exciting about wine in South Africa.

Tim: Awesome. So why don't we kick things off – tell us a little bit about what Han Drinks Solo dot com is all about, how it started and what people can expect to see if they visit the website right now.

Jono: So I am – for ten years I have been... I founded and I run a specialty coffee roastery. If you're looking for somewhere to drink coffee we did just win 'Best Coffee Roastery' in South Africa. So that is Rosetta Roastery – but that's a story for another day. I have been in coffee for 10 years and it's very much a sensory, serious kind of thing – you're talking about Bergamo and citrus and acidity and balance and finish. And it's a super pretentious field. And my place in it has always been trying to shake off the pretention. But at the same time, being fascinated by really boring stuff. So like organic chemistry, acidity, sweetness, balance – like what happens when you cook a green, insoluble bean and you make it brown and then soluble and then you add hot water and then these amazing flavours come up. So that whole thing has always fascinated me. And then I had kids and started drinking heavily, so you know how goes, right? That really is how it went.

And I realised that from nonchalantly going “Well, coffee can be like wine” and really not knowing very much about wine... I remember one particular interview for a local magazine I said something about “How coffee is just like wine” and I made some bizarre comment about a Merlot. I think I said “A Merlot being, you know, something – a really, a really full body, tannic wine like a Merlot” because I thought that was the truth. And I was wrong. And I felt like such an idiot after that and I thought “I don't really wanna feel like an idiot - maybe I should start looking into this wine thing”, seeing as I was casually drinking it. And I just went like “Woah, these parallels go deeper than I could have possibly thought”. And actually there's – yeah, there's too much to talk about there. So it kind of sucked me down like Alice in Wonderland, down the rabbit hole. And I realised that there's this entire field with a far deeper sense of history than coffee has, but with all the same kind of sensory and organic chemistry attributes. And so I found myself, almost torn between these two and I'm still torn – I do coffee all day and I do wine all night. So I kind of got into it out of my love for coffee and sensory and organic chemistry and smell and taste. And then realised that there's a far bigger world in wine and that I wanted to explore that.

Tim: I was checking out the blog earlier today and one thing I found really interesting was that, even though there's a lot of great information about wine for newbies and seasoned wine drinkers, there's also a lot of really interesting humour and fun in your blog. So for example, I see pop culture references to films, to music and it's something really unique

and something really interesting, because I couldn't help laugh a lot of the references there. Tell us more about what that's about.

Jono: I was saying earlier how sometimes the pretension can turn people off. With coffee I got so excited about the product but realised that a lot of people were even too scared to set foot in our roastery. One old lady said "I'm never bringing my husband here, his jeans are not skinny enough". And I realise that happens with wine all the time, in that people almost – they don't want to say anything. I run wine tastings where I get people into my home and then I ask people "What do you taste?" People are terrified to talk. It's usually by about the fifth wine when everyone's just chilled out a little bit, then people start talking. But I was like, "Why are they so slow or scared to say something wrong?" And I really want to get rid of that as soon as possible – the sooner you realise you're wrong, the sooner you can learn.

So the whole tone of the blog is trying to say, "Hey look – none of us are geniuses here" and the more I can make fun of myself or my references, the more comfortable I think readers will be to go "Okay, this is a place that's not – first of all, it's not pretentious, and second of all, it's not snobby." People say, "I'm a wine snob or I'm a coffee snob" – why would you want to claim that for yourself? A 'snob' looks down on other people instead of sharing joy with other people. So that's kind of... the pop culture thing is: everyone loves movies, everyone loves music – if I can reference that, if I can tap into your love for Mickey Mouse while sipping on a wooded Sauvignon Blanc then heck, you almost forget that you were supposed to be serious and you can have fun with it. So for me that's partially just a natural passion and partially something that – everyone's watched Mary Poppins right, but not everyone has drunk a 20 year-old Bordeaux. So if you can reference one to the other maybe there's a way that people can feel more comfortable talking about it.

Tim: Well I guess that's the interesting thing about the wine industry, right? If I think of the film "Somm 2: Into the Bottle", you can watch the film for an hour and a half and they tell you about a whole bunch of aspects of the wine industry and the history and how it's made and you can experience everybody's passion throughout the film and so forth... And everybody has their opinion and it's always interesting hearing different opinions. For example, in the film they'll say – one of the guys will say, "Well, you know, Chardonnay is such a flavoursome wine it should be consumed on its own, it shouldn't be paired with food". And then the next person will say "Well, Chardonnay is such a beautiful wine with so many flavours, it's a perfect food pairing [wine]." So there's all these different opinions and I like what they say at the end of the film, if I remember correctly, that "Ultimately we talking about fermented grape juice here" – at the end of the day it's about pleasure, it's about joy it's about being with people and enjoying the wine for what it is. So I think that's what's coming through in your blog and it's great to see that. And I guess everybody should go and check it out right now.

But let's talk a little bit about the wines that we're drinking today. At the moment we are tasting a really lovely Sauvignon Blanc / Semillon blend. Tell us a little bit about that.

Jono: So we're drinking the Strandveld Adamastor 2016 wooded Sauvignon Blanc / Semillon blend. So I first discovered this wine at WineMag – they released their top ten 'Sauv/Sem' blend wines of the year and I was attending the tasting. And it was just one that stood out to me as being particularly representative of it's terroir. Okay, so now that's probably one of the most pretentious things we've heard all week. But what I mean by all that, is that it just – it was so different. It wasn't necessarily better [than others] – in fact, I think there were other wines that were better. But it was so distinctive – I mean the saline,

the savoury notes, the crazy elderflower, which I've talked about... This kind of, elderflower reference in Sauvignon Blanc which I've always associated only with the 'Old World' – this mystical, you know, these herbal Sauvignon Blancs that we'll never grow 'cos our climate is too warm. And to have your mind blown and go: South Africa has got some crazy cool climate regions that are producing these insane Old World-style wines right on our doorstep. And it's like, South Africa at 350 years of winemaking – we are the oldest of the 'New World' and it kind of puts us in pole position for being the most interesting wine region in the world. Because we've got the tradition of the Old World, we've got the kind of 'go-get-it' attitude where we can break the rules and do what we want because we're technically 'New World'. And then we produce a wine like Strandveld's Adamastor which has just got waves of fruit and clever use of oak and it's just got everything in there.

One thing I will say about it, is it's not at all easy drinking – you're not gonna casually sip this in the jacuzzi because there's so much going on. It's got this gorgeously elegant acidity – oak is not invisible, it's very deliberate (the use of oak), even though it's only had 10 months. So for me, what am I enjoying? I think I just enjoy that it feels like an education in a bottle. You sip on it and you go “What on earth am I tasting?” And you have to ask questions about how the wine is made and how it's blended. And for me, what I do with the blog is: If a wine can educate me just by tasting it, that's fascinating. So I wanna ask questions, I wanna go “How long was it in oak? How did they do that? What was the bâtonnage? Were they stirring up the lease? What on earth were they doing?” And so that's why I chose this wine because there's just so much to talk about. So I was gonna say, you should ask me some question seeing as you're drinking it as well.

Tim: Well I'm glad we're drinking a white wine to start off today, so just to repeat the wine: It's a Strandveld Vineyards Adamastor. It's a Sauvignon Blanc / Semillon blend 2016. So it's made and bottled by Strandveld Vineyards in Elim, South Africa – is that correct? Which is close to Cape Agulhas. And what's really nice about this, is the blend is interesting – it's Sauvignon Blanc 54% and Semillon 46%. So a nice even balance. You often find that the [white Bordeaux] blends are either 75% Sauvignon Blanc, 25% Semillon or the other way around – so often, three quarters of one of them. But it's nice to see a... almost 50-50 split.

Interestingly enough, I've become quite fond, or grown quite fond of the white wines. I guess, typically I was a red [wine] fan, but living in the Constantia area and appreciating the cool climate and the white wines that are produced there, I've really, started to enjoy my white wines, I guess. So I'm really enjoying this. Did we talk about what was on the nose here?

Jono: I was talking earlier about that... about the elderflower on the nose, which for me – I mean, obviously there's not just the fruit, there's the secondary stuff as well, but just that reference to elderflower I think is incredible because it's not something that's super readily detected on South African Sauvignon Blancs. Often what we drink is a slightly warmer climate and we every reference pineapples and we reference, like at best, cut grass and gooseberries – if it's gonna be a Constantia Sauvignon Blanc, perhaps it's gonna be that more gooseberry, cut grass, herbal element. But as I was saying earlier, I've always associated that elderflower, kind of, herbal sweet element as being a totally Old World thing, so for me that's amazing. And then to add in the complexity of what is almost like a toasted, um... well, it's like a piece of bread, but... piece of toast. [laughs] It's almost like a toasted piece of bread. But the lovely oak inference that comes through fascinates me. People are always trying to hide oak in minimal intervention or that which is going down and we can talk about that with the red wine. I enjoy... If you gonna use oak, heck – use

oak, I wanna know about it. And I think that's what I love about this, is that it's not a wine trying to be on trend. It's a wine trying to express it's region and it's wine making practice – it's not trying to hide anything. And I think that's, kind of, what makes it's so elegant.

Tim: Obviously we looking at the Adamastor from Strandveld today. Or Strandveld, as the Americans would say... Strandveld. But while we are on whites, are there any other whites that are in heavy rotation at this point in time of noteworthy mention?

Jono: The Cape Point 'Isleigh' (or Islead, if you want to pronounce it like that). It is Isleigh, but it's spelt i-s-l-e-i-g-h – is a blend from Cape Point Vineyards. Also a wooded Bordeaux white blend, is probably the highlight of last year for me as far as wines in general go. And I think that's funny, you were saying earlier you drink mostly red wines but you've been getting into your whites – I would say the same thing. Probably 65% of what I drink is red and yet if I would to list the best ten wines I've had over the last five years, probably the top five would be white. When when South African white wines are good, I think they are some of the best in the world. So some of them that I've discovered recently I would say that Cape Point Isleigh is up there.

Highland Road from Elgin have produced a 'Sine Cera' which is another white Bordeaux blend with some oak in there. Sine cera is spelt (sine cera). And Elgin generally as a region is incredibly exciting. If you're shopping internationally and you're looking for white wines to explore – you must hunt down stuff from Elgin (e-l-g-i-n) and Elim. So the other white wines that are exciting me enormously are David Niewoudt's Sauvignon Blancs. He's got a 'Ghost Corner' Sauvignon Blanc and he's got a 'Wild Ferment' Sauvignon Blanc. I mean, he's just killing it. So he is the winemaker from Cedarberg. But he also has chosen to make a range of wines called 'Ghost Corner' which is exclusively from Elim. And I think he's one of the finest wine makers in South Africa at the moment. So if we were to just quickly list four to sum it up: Highland Road Sine Cera, the Cape Point Isleigh, and then two of David Niewoudt's the Ghost Corner Sauvignon Blanc and the Wild Ferment Sauvignon Blanc. And obviously this Adamastor from Strandveld would make a nice round five.

Tim: Alright, so it's time for us to move on to our red wine of the day and we are tasting the Arendsig Shiraz 'Block A12' red wine, so Jono has poured this for us and we've had a bit of a taste. Jono, tell us more about this wine.

Jono: I chose this wine specifically because the philosophy annoys me. And you to have to just give me a few minutes here, because otherwise you're going to tune out and think I'm saying bad things about Arendsig and I'm not. What I often object to in the new very trendy, minimalist intervention, only natural wines, no sulphites, only old oak, neutral vessels, neutral flavour, neutral everything... I'm like – “Can we just make some wine?” Like, there's so much tradition, why are we trying to rebel against it? And the minimal intervention school is rife with people rebelling against a past for no reason other than for the sake of rebelling. And to me that kind of angst, I'm like – “I don't need that in my wine, I don't want angst in my wine”. So Arendsig are actually – they are some of the leaders in South Africa for minimal interference [*rambling*]. And sometimes I find these wines, not Arendsig specifically, but wines can be like – “Wow it's so minimal, you almost forgot to make the wine”. It's like, “What have we got here, we've got some weird tasting fruit juice. There's no tannins, there's no alcohol, there's no... [*rambling*] Wow, it's so minimal it's not even [*wine*]...”

So as a school of thought, which is very 'cool' right now, so I'm aware that saying this

makes me sound super 'uncool' and I'm sure the 'fashion wine police' will be at my door, but it's a concept that I find problematic. But if you're gonna be a good journalist, if you're really gonna do your job in your field, you have to engage with the things that you don't necessarily like. So I bought this wine having never tasted it, in order to challenge my own preconceptions and as we were saying earlier, it's an incredible Shiraz.

That's the ultimate win. And we were saying earlier, if you really want to get the best out of South Africa as a wine territory, you have to constantly challenge your own preconceptions. And partially because of what I was saying earlier, people come from Europe to South Africa thinking "Oh, the New World, the New World" – we've been making wines for 350 years. We've got plenty of Old World in us. [They] also think "Oh, South Africa, it's hot, it's dry" – we've got some amazing cool climate regions. And we are so varied, that honestly you have to be ready to be surprised.

In my blog writing, I would ten times out of ten, choose a wine I've never had before, over a wine that I know that I've have had and love, because it means the chance to experience something new. So this Arendsig Block A12 Shiraz is an insane example of a minimalist intervention wine that still delivers incredible concentration. For those of you who – I don't know, maybe you're not that familiar with minimal intervention: It's almost like some guys are too afraid to even look at the grapes in case they scare it into producing some tannins or something, so they treat them super gently and they only use free-run juice and they don't press anything and they – It's almost like they are... giving the grapes gentle massages prior to harvest, or whatever, to make sure that they don't get bruised. And the end result is often a very soft, very gentle, very light, very neutral wine. And Arendsig have shown me today, at least, that you can produce a concentrated, really imposing red wine that is also beautifully soft at the same time. So I guess it's, kind of, "Thanks for teaching me a sensory lesson" and I can't recommend this A12 enough.

Tim: Yeah, I like what you say about challenging your preconceptions and, I guess, if I think about a Pinotage wine, for example, Pinotage is unique to South Africa and many South Africans have consumed a lot of Pinotage over the years and often just view it as a cheap wine. And often they'll say "Ahh, you know, Pinotage... you know, whatever, Pinotage – give me something else". And often they don't realise actually how exquisite some Pinotages can be, and when they taste a really high-quality one, it changes their whole perception of Pinotage. And it's interesting seeing tourists coming to South Africa tasting high-quality Pinotages and really just being completely blown away. And so it just shows you that challenging your preconceptions is really an important part of exploring South African wines. If we look at this Shiraz that we're tasting now from Arendsig – it's quite different to say, the Groot Constantia Shiraz. I find that the Groot Constantia Shiraz, for example, to be quite full bodied, quite heavy – it's a very powerful wine. Whereas this [Arendsig] Shiraz is – it's actually very different, it's very different to that Groot Constantia one. So even for myself, my preconceptions have been challenged – even just exploring Shiraz. And we were chatting earlier about Syrah and Shiraz. Tell us a little bit more about how you see the difference between the two and your opinion on classifying Shiraz versus Syrah.

Jono: To be clear, I've formed – as a journalist, I've a formed my views based on what I see in South Africa. So in Australia, everything is Shiraz. In France, everything is Syrah. In South Africa, again because we're such a fascinating mixture of, you know, grabbing from wherever... The most prominent distinction I see, is that often a lower, more accessible, made to be drunk young, type wine will be called Shiraz. It's also a term that is very accessible – it's probably more familiar to the South African public than Syrah. And Syrah

is often reserved for more expensive, more premium, reserve style wines. So to be clear, genetically it is the exact same thing. It's not even identical twins – it's the same person. It's like, this is Brian from Benoni and he is Shiraz and Syrah at the same time. I suppose it's more like, you know what it is – it's Bruce Wayne and Batman. It's like asking who has the better haircut, right? It's the same guy. It's not even like, twin brothers – it's the same guy.

So Strandveld [Vineyards], who we we spoke about earlier, have a Syrah. And that Syrah is their flagship red [wine]. Where they also have a lower tiered 'First Sighting' Shiraz. Same grape, same exact clone, but one is a Shiraz, which is a supermarket range (which is insane value and you should find it) and the other is a far more expensive, and also far more sensory – it's like a sensory adventure, but that's their Strandveld Syrah. So for me the difference in South Africa – I think people are almost, it's almost as if no-one even argues about it anymore: If it's expensive and fancy, you call a Syrah; if it's cheap and accessible, you call Shiraz.

Tim: Alright so, in terms of this Arendsig Shiraz... Can we describe just a little bit of what you're picking up on the nose, what you're picking up on the pallet. I'm quite interested to hear you talk about that

Jono: So the most common element you probably expect from a South African Shiraz specifically, is an element of pepper and an element of ripe black fruit. And really it's the kind of ratio of those two which will... Let me put it in simplest terms – will define what kind of Shiraz you're getting. And this particular one has got this amazing hint of clean, white pepper, but also some fairly ripe blackberry fruit. And I think it's that lovely contrast of ripe fruit with stark spice and there's an ever so subtle hint of non-fruit flavours – so what you would call 'secondary', which is the result of winemaking. Now I really don't wanna upset the guys at Arendsig and say that I smelt anything other than just pure fruit, because that's what the minimal intervention guys taste. But I think there's an ever so subtle hint of an 'oakiness' to it.

Yes, so and that – but sorry, just to go back on minimal intervention: That's kind of why I object to that school of thought because what it says is “Unless you're testing fresh fruit and fruit only, then you've done something wrong” and “oak is an additive and people are messing up wine with oak”. Whereas I feel like the history of oak and wine is so entrenched that it is part of what the wine experience is. So, to sum it up: Tiny bit of oak, lovely layers of concentrated black fruit on the nose – even some lavender, floral elements. And what makes a Shiraz a Shiraz – some white pepper spice. But the spice in no way overwhelms the fruit – the fruit is the main player here.

Tim: Great, will there we have it – Jono Le Feuvre from Han Drinks Solo trying out a white a red wine today. You can check out his blog at Han Drinks Solo dot com. And any last messages, any last... you know, anything you want to tell the folks out there?

Jono: We're talking about Pinotage early and I'm working on a feature called 'Wine as seen on TV' because I noticed – I was watching an episode of 'The Green Arrow' the other day (don't judge me), but I watched an episode of The Green Arrow and in this nightclub scene, in the background was Two Oceans Sauvignon Blanc up lining the shelves of this night club in this episode of The [Green] Arrow. And I'm also part of a number of international Vivino groups or WhatsApp groups or chat groups, and guys will often send me [messages] like, “Wow I just found this South African wine, it's amazing”, and you look at it and you're like “Oh, that's...”, Pinotage specifically, like “Oh, that's, wow that's really

entry-level". But they got it in Europe somewhere and paid four times the price and that is what Pinotage is to them. You know, it's like the chocolate Pinotage or the coffee Pinotage or the... where it's like, you don't even know what they did – or you do know, but you don't wanna talk about [it]. Really all they can say is like "I can taste coffee and chocolate", and you're like "but can you taste wine?"

A lot of the wines that get exported are... We have no idea how much wine gets – that we've never heard of, that gets exported – you know, out of Wellington and Robertson and those regions. And that is often what people experience of South African wine. So if people are listening internationally, you have to know that there is a huge spectrum of slightly more expensive South African wines that are amongst the best in the world. And that regularly, international wine writers are praising these wines as some of the most groundbreaking wines that are being produced – especially in the New World.

So if you are a wine lover internationally – go to a specialist store, don't buy the cheapest South African wine. Take a step up and realise that South Africa is a producer of fine wines. Our perception internationally, and this is a big problem, is that we are on a level with Chile and Peru for great, kind of 'bargain-bin' wines, like "Oh, great value." And what guys are not seeing is that you've got producers who are amongst the best in the world. You've got Groot Constantia, who produce Chardonnays that are finishing in the Chardonnay du Monde, like the best Chardonnay in the world. You've got people like Andrea Mullineux from Mullineux wines (M-u-l-l-i-n-e-u-x), who was last year's Wine Enthusiast's, or two years ago, Wine Enthusiast's International Winemaker of the Year. Samantha O'Keefe from Lismore Wines, who is producing a Shiraz 2014 – it was one of the top twenty reds in the world. You've got Kleine Zalze, their family Cabernet Sauvignon who's been listed by Decanter as one of the most exciting New World reds. You've got South African wines who are literally topping the charts around the world – not just in South Africa, not as a value proposition, but as an 'out-and-out quality solution'. And I think the perception of South African wines need to change from, in inverted commas, "great value" to "just great". And that's something that I'd love to see and I know a lot of South African journalists are pushing to see us progress beyond a value proposition into just pure merit.

Tim: Great. Well thanks for joining us today Jono Le Feuvre from Han Drinks Solo. And if any of the listeners would like to get in touch, what's the best email address for them to contact you on?

Jono: jono@jlf.co.za – but Instagram is also great. Especially you just – it's easy to interact. My handle is [updated] @han_drinks_solo You can find all the Han Drinks Solo images and links to the blog.

Tim: Thanks for listening and cheers – take care everyone.