

A TALE OF TWO TROPHIES

The story of the South African wine industry has a star-studded cast and begins when vines were for the first time planted in Cape soil more than 350 years ago. Two giants in South Africa's history have claimed a permanent place in the hearts and minds of all who love wine.

Various icons have through the centuries moulded this vibrant industry in various ways. It is appropriate that the highest accolades of one of the industry's most prominent wine competitions, the SA Young Wine Show, were named after two of these exceptional personalities: General Jan Smuts and Pietman Hugo.

General J C Smuts – a visionary South African

General Jan Christiaan Smuts - Boer guerrilla leader, two time South African premier, British Army general and commander, and one of the architects of both the League of Nations and United Nations – surely ranks as one of Africa's most gifted sons.

Although Smuts grew up as the son of a Riebeeck West farmer, his most significant contribution to the wine industry came in 1924 when he was Prime Minister of South Africa. During this time he personally interceded to get an Act controlling wine and spirits endorsed after serious presentations by Charles WH Kohler, founder of the KWV. In order to ensure the continued existence of the newly established KWV the government was asked to give the KWV sufficient powers through legislation to control the industry effectively. This event was widely viewed as the turning point towards the stabilisation of the wine industry at that time.

According to history records the actual trophy was presented to "The Prime Minister General Smuts" in 1943, where after his family passed it on to the Cape of Good Hope Agricultural Society of old (today known as Agri-Expo) in later years. For his contribution to the promotion of the wine industry the organisers of the country's oldest and biggest wine competition, which was first presented in 1833, deemed it desirable to pay tribute to Smuts by naming the trophy for the best young wine after him.

The impressively and beautiful Sterling Silver trophy with its intricate detail was awarded for the first time in 1952 to AP Conradie, and has been coveted by wine makers as one of the most significant wine awards ever since.

Criteria for awarding the General Smuts Trophy have varied through the years. From 1952 to 1970 the trophy was given to a wine maker or cellar that performed best at the show by receiving the highest points. These points were calculated according to a set formula. During the four years from 1971 to 1974 the recipient of the trophy was the exhibitor with the most excellent wine but no records exist about the specific winning cultivars or wines. From 1975 to 1986 the organisers again awarded the trophy for the wine maker that received the highest marks.

Only after 1987 was the cultivar again noted and since then Cabernet Sauvignon is the leader on the trophy list with four wins, followed by Sauvignon Blanc and Shiraz with three wins each. Nederburg holds the record for the cellar winning the trophy most often. They won the trophy no less than eight times between 1953 and 1970. Faure & Faure and JP Bredell are their closest rivals with four and three wins respectively. Since then no other cellar has dominated the victory list, but Backsberg, Rooiberg, Klein Constantia Estate, DF Malan and AP Conradie all succeeded in winning the trophy twice.

Another highlight in the General Smuts trophy history is when Pinotage burst onto the wine scene and was named champion young wine in 1959. It was entered by PK Morkel from Bellevue and reached the market in 1961 under the Lanzerac Pinotage label.

Pietman Hugo – the Boland’s Mr Farmer

The Pietman Hugo trophy, for the cellar that receives the highest marks from five best entries, was for the first time awarded in 1994. In essence it rewards cellars not only for the quality of their wines but also for the consistency in quality along a wide range of wines.

Pietman Hugo, after whom this trophy was named, was one of South Africa’s most prominent personalities on the Boland agricultural scene during the latter half of the 20th Century. He even turned down the position of minister of agriculture as he felt that he could serve agriculture best as part of the KWV. Consequently he served on the KWV Board of Directors for more than three decades – ten of which as chairperson. He initiated a plant improvement scheme for the wine industry, co-established the SA Brandy Foundation and the KWV Brandy Cellar in Worcester, as well as three major grape juice concentrate plants.

Slanghoek Cellar has won this trophy a whopping seven times – uninterrupted from 1997 to 2001 and again in 2003 and 2004. Badsberg, this year’s recipient of the Pietman Hugo trophy, has won the trophy four times and Boland Cellar thrice (sharing it with Slanghoek in 1999).

Although this wine competition is not consumer driven with no attention given to labels appearing on bottles, the honour of being on the receiving end of a SA Young Wine Show award is indeed high praise for any wine maker or cellar master. The South African National Wine Show Association, the organisers of this Show have ensured that the names Smuts and Hugo, as well as their stories, will be remembered from one wine making generation to the next.

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