South Africa lightens up

3 Feb 2010 by Jancis Robinson

See a new report on the potential for safely using lighter bottles for sparkling wines here.

Unlike most, South Africa's wine industry is doing rather well in terms of exports, but this presents it with a problem in its attempts to be one of the world's most ecologically sound winemaking nations and self-styled 'leader in production integrity'.

'As we raise our export volumes of mostly bottled wines, we also increase our carbon emissions, so it becomes a delicate balancing act to enhance our sustainability profile while pushing up our output', explained Su Birch, CEO of Wines of South Africa (WOSA), one of the leading champions of the country's efforts to grow, make and market wines in a way that is least harmful to the environment.

The response, just announced, is the introduction in South Africa of a 75 cl wine bottle that weighs only 350 grams, which will be available this year in time for Cape wine producers' 2010 harvest. Scheduled for a launch in mid April, these compare with an average bottle weight of over 500 grams just four years ago.

The picture below shows screwcapped bordeaux-shaped bottles weighing, from left to right, 650, 460, 460, 400 and 350 grams. While bottle recycling programmes have been endorsed in South Africa in recent years, the focus is now on introducing lightweight wine bottles as well.

The new 350 gram glass bottles have been designed for screwcap closures, which account for over 65% of South Africa's wine production. Meanwhile, the average weight of bottles sealed with corks has been reduced in weight from 570 grams to 460 grams, according to Birch.

According to Consol Glass, South Africa's leading bottle manufacturer, until 2006 the average weight of a 750 ml non-returnable wine bottle was 516 grams, which by last year had dropped to 437 grams, a decrease of 15%. The new lightweight bottle will bring down the average still further.

Birch added that alternative wine packaging, such as the wine pouch offered by the important export brand Arniston Bay, had also been welcomed in many export markets. South African bag-in-box wines are also particularly popular in Scandinavia.

'On the face of it, one solution might be to ship more of our wines in bulk directly to their export destinations for off-shore bottling', said Birch. 'However, this poses a major problem in that many jobs would be lost during what must rank as the worst recession in current memory. Last year over a million jobs were shed in the formal sector, forcing many further millions of South Africans into a state of dire poverty.'

She said the wine industry body, SA Wine Industry Information Systems (SAWIS), had calculated that for every 10 million litres of wine shipped in bulk, just over 107 jobs would be lost. 'This figure does not even factor in the multiplier effect that such job losses bring. It has, for example, been reported that for every one of Unilever's direct jobs in South Africa, another 22 workers depend on the company for at least a part of their livelihood. This is an indication of just how crucial each job is to a developing economy such as ours.'

The wine industry currently provides direct employment for nearly 276,000 people, she said.

Last year, South Africa exported 389 million litres of wine. Of the total, less than half - 150.5 million litres - was exported in bulk. 'Fortunately, the volume of bulk exports dropped 18% in 2009, compared with the year before, whereas packaged exports rose 7% over the same period. This is not only good for individual brands and for jobs but for the quality standing of Brand South Africa.'