

Live from Cape Town

26 Sep 2012 by Richard Hemming

Cape Town has been populated en masse by the world's wine trade this week for the Cape Wine 2012 trade fair.

If the calibre of attendees is anything to go by, then South African wine is in rude health. There are buyers from around the world, several dozen MWs and contingents of the press from the UK, Scandinavia, Korea, Belgium, Japan, New Zealand and doubtless countless others I have yet to encounter.

I am visiting as part of the UK group, as guests of WOSA, the generic promotional body. We're on a programme packed with activity around the fair itself, on which I will be reporting. In her opening speech, Su Birch, WOSA's CEO, set the scene for South African wine.

Twenty years ago, South Africa's wine exports totalled 27m litres and were sent almost exclusively to the UK. Today, they have ballooned to 377m litres and 134 countries, and are still growing at a rate of 7.8% a year. There is some concern, however, that bulk exports are taking a growing proportion of that volume, which puts jobs at bottling plants at risk – see [here](#) for a recent report on the issue.

The South African wine industry was also [criticised recently](#) for its poor working conditions. A [lengthy rebuttal from WOSA](#) followed, and a new 'agricultural ethical trade initiative' was recently [reported by Jancis](#) as a means of assuring the wellbeing of employees throughout the wine supply chain.

The Wine and Agricultural Industry Ethical Trade Association (WIETA) auditing process is meticulous and exhaustive. The most recurrent problems concern health and safety and staff training – for example, carrying out risk assessments, ensuring temporary workers are properly contracted and even regulating the usage of mobile toilets in vineyards.

Ultimately, the aim is to achieve one combined seal of approval for all South African wines that encapsulates all of the WIETA objectives as well as the existing 'integrity and sustainability' seal for which 97% of South African wineries already qualify.

If they can sustain the level of energy and enthusiasm that is pulsing through Cape Town this week, it is surely only a matter of time before they achieve their goal.