

Can a South African winery supplying grape alternatives help to bring the faithful back to the fold, asks Ivo Tennant



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On first impressions, there is nothing about the Stellar Organics wine estate at Olifants River that would make it stand out from any of the vineyards in South Africa. But what makes the cabernet sauvignon produced here so notable is that the grapes are destined for a higher purpose: they are to be used in the first Fairtrade holy communion wine.

The Bible is full of links between Church and grape: Noah planted the first vine in Genesis. Communion wine has been produced for hundreds of years in southern Spain and France and is traditionally lightly fortified and sweetened to give it longevity and to ensure it is palatable. It is drunk, primarily, by confirmed members of the Church of England and Roman Catholic churches, at services in the morning, watered down at the altar before being presented as the blood of Christ in the chalice. The smallest of sips sufficed when I first sampled it in my village church in Kent in the 1970s: the Rector doubtless would have been just as happy to give us Ribena, as is the Methodist way. But the Rites and Ceremonies of the Eucharistic Celebration specify that the wine “must be natural, made from grapes of the vine, and not corrupt”, although there is no shortage of anecdotes of altar boys dipping into Communion wine or clergy taking more than they should.

More than 100,000 litres of rather yukky communion wine is uncorked in the UK each year, but some members of the clergy — reflecting the more sophisticated tastes of congregations — are opting for something more refined. And their choice will benefit the poorest of grape pickers too. At Lambeth Palace, as at Iona Abbey and 2,700 churches in Britain, they have turned to the Fairtrade communion wine produced by Stellar. It has the endorsement of several bishops who know their wines and who are taken with the premium on each case paid to the African workers. There are now more than 300 workers spread over 13 farms who have been granted a 26 per cent share-holding in Stellar Organics, the winery owned by an Afrikaner family, the Rossouws. Given that Lambeth has put in repeat orders, it can be assumed this is also to the taste of the Archbishop of Canterbury. The unspoken belief is that Jesus would have approved. Buying Fairtrade wine is the Christian way. Every diocese is trying to become a Fairtrade diocese, signing an agreement to purchase Fairtrade products wherever possible.

It has taken a former theology student-cum-wine merchant to source something that would not cause early morning worshippers to feel queasy, that would cut out the middleman and that would be acceptable to the rigorous demands of the Fairtrade label ... and all for under £80 a case.

“I was fed up with the quality of wine I was getting,” says Francis Peel of Whitebridge Wines. “Church suppliers were buying from southern Spain and France and the quality was fairly ropey. It had to be sweet because people were drinking early in the day. I first tried to import wine from Chile under the Fairtrade label but sadly the Chileans were a victim of the recession. We then managed to source the wine from Stellar — a great improvement.” Now there are two styles: Poterion red made from cabernet sauvignon and Poterion Amber from muscat grapes.

Although churches have been using Fairtrade coffee and tea for some time it took a while for Peel to persuade winemakers in South Africa that there was a market for the Fairtrade wine. Peel requested 100 grammes of residual sugar per litre, the same as port, and an alcohol level of 15 per cent, permitted under both Anglican and Roman Catholic law. As the wine is consecrated, it cannot be put back into a bottle once the service is over, so longevity is essential. Peel adds: “Several times at services the vicar has said to me ‘Can’t you help me out? We have to finish this’, so I wanted something I could enjoy drinking.

“We had to go through a long process of accreditation to comply with Fairtrade requirements. Most communion wine had been known by Latin names, so we decided to call ours Poterion Fairtrade, after Poterion, the Greek word for cup, which most clerics would recognise.” Peel’s father had dispensed fino sherry as chaplain at Rossall School in Lancashire — “but I thought we should do a lot better”.

What if a clergyman who is short of wine — a large congregation of 400 would require three bottles once water has been added — simply prefers to go to the local Co-op? The Code of Canon Law decrees that the wine used at services is “the fermented juice of the grape, good and wholesome”, so there is no reason why he cannot buy Fairtrade products, but Poterion — which has been specifically fortified — is the only Fairtrade communion wine.

According to Loraine Vaaltyn, a senior manager at Stellar, “there is no racism here”. The 39 cellar workers, bolstered by pickers at harvest, give no impression of being cowed or resentful of the apartheid era, when any kind of share-holding would have been a pipe dream. They are encouraged to use their own initiative by the Rossouw family, who became determined to improve the lot of their staff when 53 individuals who worked on their vegetable farms were killed in the Krantskop Bridge disaster of 1989.

“After Stellar Organics became a Fairtrade-accredited farm, the standards of everybody on the farm changed,” Maria Malan, its managing director, told me. “Our houses are more than 90 per cent electrified and we have the necessary sanitary systems. Before linking with Fairtrade, all the money went to the owner of the farm.” The workers receive £1 a case in addition to owning 50 per cent of the vineyard holding.

So much for the economics, what about the taste? “Some communion wines do taste actively nasty, but this is not one of them,” says the Bishop of Repton, the Right Rev Humphrey Southern. “It has a pleasant, uncloying taste. Derby Cathedral has taken to it.”

Yet there was a threat to Stellar’s grape pickers that harked back to an earlier crisis. The Church of England thought that the fear of contracting a serious illness at Holy Communion departed when the hysteria over Aids subsided, but it reckoned without swine flu. The subsequent decision by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York to withdraw the chalice had unwarranted commercial implications. Swine flu was seen in much the same light as the Black Death would have been regarded in the Middle Ages.

This year, more than two million bottles — cabernet sauvignon, pinotage, merlot, shiraz and dessert wine from the muscat grape — of Fairtrade wine, including Poterion, will be bottled at Stellar, whose workers will receive dividends as a result. And if any vicar is concerned about dwindling attendances, how about putting a bottle or two on display?

poterionfairtrade.co.uk