Throughout the twentieth century, the South African wine industry struggled with problems of overproduction, which was closely related to a reputation for dubious quality. Although at particular moments, the export market seemed to hold out some promise, the international boycotts that followed the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 brought this to an abrupt end. The industry was therefore thrown back on the internal market. This was a market which was heavily skewed by the politics of race in South Africa (drinking spaces were heavily regulated), but also by the quite different consumer preferences that had become entrenched amongst the various population groups. Before 1964/65, Black South Africans were not permitted to purchase wine at all, Whites drank relatively little and had a preference for sweeter wines, whereas the Coloured population of the Cape consumed the bulk of the cheap table wines. The industry’s strategy, which was led by the KWV, was targeted selectively at each of these groups: whereas Whites were to be encouraged to embrace better quality wines as an accompaniment to food (and hence increasingly red wines) and conviviality, Blacks were to be weaned on to the sweeter wines, while marketing strategies by the larger companies pushed familiar brands onto the Coloured market. The products aimed at each group were different and the advertising strategies were tailored accordingly.

The paper examines some of the reasons why the plan failed in the 1970s and 1980s. It then proceeds to an analysis of current patterns of consumption. The South African wine industry remains heavily dependent on the internal market, despite some notable successes in expanding exports since the end of apartheid. Whereas the Coloured and White sectors of the market have provided a degree of stability at the top and lower ends of the price/quality spectrum, the emergence of a Black market for wine finally seems to be on the cards - half a century after it was so confidently predicted. This is driven in large part by the aspirations and self-image of a new Black middle class who have shown signs of losing their taste for beer. Although class and consumption are more closely correlated than ever before, race remains an important signifier within the wine sector.

The paper will draw on the plentiful data for the industry (much of it gathered by the KWV), but also on market research reports commissioned by the wine industry and the advertising materials housed within the archives of the Stellenbosch Farmers Winery (now part of Distell). The paper arises out of a larger book project on the history of the South African wine industry.