

DANISH WINE TRADERS ARE ACCUSED OF UNETHICAL IMPORTING

Wine from South Africa is popular in Denmark. But wine is produced under conditions that remind of the worst from apartheid times, is the accusation from the Consumer Council. The importers say they do not know about the conditions.

By Michael Muller
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“ In 2003 he told me with his mouth that he would buy us a house, but today I am still sitting here and cannot even walk. I got nothing from him. No thanks for my many years work. I worked as hard as a man, but only received women’s wages”

So says 77 year old Violet from South Africa who has worked for wine producer Delheim which the magazine Taenk (Think) has visited. During a trip to visit a number of wine producers, including Delheim, Sterhuis and Simonsig, the magazine can document that the employees of wine producers work under conditions that remind of those of the time of the apartheid regime. Furthermore a number of wine producers break the South African law that should ensure their hard-working employees a pension and the right to a home and a piece of land, but apparently the law does not work, because many workers experience being put out on the street without food and drink.

Connection to Denmark.

90% of the wine from South Africa is “bulk wine”, or cheap wine. This has pleased the Danish wine importers to such an extent that Denmark is the seventh largest importer in the world of South African wine. But the enthusiasm of the wine importers for South African wine has its dark side. Several of the suppliers which Danish importers have agreements with, are being accused of breaking the law and treating their workers as though the apartheid regime still exists. And this is not good enough on the part of the Danish wine importers.

“ The Danish wine importers do not live up to their responsibility. They focus on taste, but they do not have their sights on how the wine is produced and have not taken the trouble to ask the suppliers about work conditions,” says the Departmental head of the Consumer Council, Mette Boye, who does not feel that the Danish wine importers live up to the ethical rules within the CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) code that entails companies taking responsibility for their products being produced under reasonable conditions where the employees get decent wages and are treated with respect.

Among the Danish wine importers that are associated with unethical importing are VINOBLE, HOLTE VINLAGER, TUKAN and KJAER & SOMMERFELDT, who have dealt in South African wine for 25 years.

“ We do not have the possibility and resources to go out into the field and talk to workers,” says director Mads Stensgaard.

Kjaer & Sommerfeldt have contacted their suppliers and are waiting for a response. The same message was given by Vinoble to Berlingske Business, and Holte Vinlager. Has taken the consequences and stopped their co-operation with supplier, Sterhuis, but acknowledge at the same time that the well respected company has lacked focus in their choice of suppliers.

“ We are a little old fashioned at Holte Vinlager in that we do not ensure ourselves at all. We do not make contracts with our suppliers. One’s word is one’s word and in this way it is easier to back out if they do not behave properly. But I will say that it is not my task in Denmark to ensure that workers join a union,” says Henrik Nielsen, Admin. Director of Holte Vinlager. All the importers say that they have not had knowledge of the fatal conditions.

Not good enough

But the lack of information on the part of the Danish importers, their lack of resources and talk of it not being their responsibility that conditions for workers are adequate is not good enough when it comes to South Africa.

“ It is too easy to say that one lacks resources. It looks as though the wine branch has not woken up and ensured that things are produced in a responsible manner. When one imports from a country like South Africa, where there is history of discrimination, one cannot count on everything being in order. Importers must investigate things and be more pro-active toward suppliers,” says Anne Skjerring from Danwatch, an organisation that keeps an eye on the ethics of companies.

At the Consumer Council one understands that it can be difficult to investigate suppliers, it that does not mean that one should not do anything. Mette Boye suggests that importers join The Danish Initiative for Ethical Trade, which is an organisation consisting of the Consumer Council, trade unions and companies. Here firms can get the tools for investigating conditions.

Coop Denmark and Danish Supermarket that are some of the largest importers of South African wine to Denmark say that they do not have clear rules for ethical conditions which the suppliers have to live up to.

“ We do not make contracts with suppliers, unless they sign a BSCI agreement that ensures proper working conditions. Furthermore we always visit our suppliers and here I request time to go around and inspect conditions for myself., “ says Henrik Dahlgaard, purchasing chief at Danish Supermarket.

The Danish wine importers say that they can see the sense in a common initiative that can establish a true picture of what workers conditions are.