

Frostline Riesling 2003 South Africa

22 Mar 2004 by JR

This is an exciting new addition to the ever- expanding range of wines available from the Flagstone stable whose principal jockey is Bruce Jack, quoted in the estimable *John Platter Wine Guide 2004* (available internationally from www.platterwineguide.com or in the UK at £11.45 including postage from Richard Kelley MW, 45 Main Street, Whissendine, Rutland) thus: "it takes lots of beer to make a good wine".

He is the ideas man and wordsmith responsible for the 2002 Noon Gun inexpensive white blend which was a wine of the week last year and here is the first vintage of a fine, cool climate Riesling, produced in conjunction with wine marketer Graham Knox, which adds significantly to the range of flavours available from South Africa. The most admirable South African proper Rieslings to have come my way so far have been from the south coast, either Klein Constantia's and Buitenverwachting's from Constantia or Paul Kluwer's from much further east. These wines tend to show a rather soft, gentle, marine face of Riesling.

This Frostline Riesling comes from very different territory, a most unusual high altitude vineyard well inland which I will let the inimitable Jack describe:

This wine is from a very special vineyard that is over 1000m above sea level in the spectacular Swartberg mountains about 700km drive east of Cape Town - one of the most easterly vineyards in South Africa. To access the vineyards you can drive down the Meiringspoort Pass or up the Swartberg Mountain Pass. The latter is my preferred route. It was built between 1883 and 1886 by our most famous engineer, Thomas Bain. It is visually addictive - so beautifully improbable, like the winding road up to a Princess's cloud- veiled castle.

Frost is a constant threat during the growing season because of the plummeting temperatures at night, but of course this also means there is the reward of intense flavours, high natural acidity and more balanced, quicker phenolic ripening (although a longer hangtime is NOT an advantage, because of occasional late summer rain - in my opinion a long hangtime rarely is an advantage, but don't tell the wine writers).

Four or five times a summer the frost alarm rings (usually at 3am) and fires are lit in the vineyards to counteract the frost. Stems and pips are fully lignified at about 11 to 12 per cent alcohol. In retrospect we could have picked earlier in 2003, which we did do this year.

The farmer, Guillaume Swiegers, also breeds and raises ostriches, but has to sell them before they are six months old because they get stunted by the cold nights and don't grow taller than a metre.

It is a good 11 hour round trip by car to get there and back, so I sometimes fly up to the vineyards during crush. The problem with this rather romantic image is George Airport, which doesn't have the sophisticated radar systems needed for landing in heavy fog - the same omnipresent coastal fog that claims aeroplanes all the time. The last high profile crash killed our favourite cricket villain, Hansie "the devil made me do it" Cronje. On more than one occasion this year we had to circle for an hour above George until the ground temperature warmed to over 18 degrees C and the fog lifted enough for the pilot to fly into the white frothy soup and attempt to spot the runway before hitting it. This is not only a labour of love, but a nifty way to conquer any fear of flying. Hey, when the grapes are calling, you have to follow...

So there you have the romantic background. How does it taste in the glass? Well it is certainly no floral sweet confection. It belongs firmly on the dining table rather than the dressing table, and seems to me set for an admirably long life under the screwcap on its dark green bordeaux bottle. It's still pretty firm and dry and aims pretty Grosset- like in style. If there is such a thing as a masculine Riesling, this is it - and it could happily be cellared for five years and possibly more. Maybe subsequent vintages will be a little finer, but it is in the nature of these wines of the week to ensure you are the first to know of the new and exciting. Vineyard planted, with Geisenheim clone 239 for WSET students, in 1990. It is in such an out of the way area that is qualifies only for the vague Western Cape appellation.

Brits can find it at selected Oddbins for £8.99 a bottle and direct from Nick Tarayan of Wine of the Times, once the next shipment arrives in two or three months' time, at nicktarayan@aol.com. Germans, and possibly other Europeans should be able to track it down via Stephanie Kloos of Kloos & Kloos Weingenuss aus Sud Afrika.

Elsewhere, I'm afraid, you will just have to store its existence on your mental hard disks, or visit South Africa - possible for Cape Wine 2004 which takes place next weekend in Cape Town and celebrates 10 years since those amazing scenes of snaking, polychrome queues outside the polling stations and subsequent beginning of the era of majority rule.