Tortoise Hill Red 2003 Paarl

19 Oct 2005 by JR

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Perhaps I am picking up some strange signals but my sense is that we are all getting a bit blasé about single varietals whereas weird and wonderful blends have increasing allure. And if the blends are sold at a particularly good price, so much the better.

Flagstone Wines of South Africa (see recent story on brett in South African reds in inside information) have their interesting **Noon Gun** white blend whose 2002 vintage I chose as a previous wine of the week a couple of years ago. But Tortoise Hill comes from a much more established address, Glen Carlou, no less, which has regularly made some of the finest Chardonnay to be found in the southern hemisphere, and certainly its best value.

David Finlayson of **Glen Carlou** is the son of Walter who founded the winery back in 1984 and was always keen to establish a line with his own signature on it. Tortoise Hill (initially just red) was the result, a delightfully approachable and interesting blend of 50 per cent Cabernet Sauvignon with 20 per cent Zinfandel plus 10 per cent apiece of Touriga Nacional, Syrah and Merlot. The wine is aged in used, but obviously top quality, French and American oak and altogether tastes as though it should sell for more than the £6.99 currently asked for it in the UK. Here's how David F describes the rationale:

"The idea for **Tortoise Hill Red** started in the mid to late 1990s when I wanted to move away from my father's way of making a second label Bordeaux-style blend which at the time was called Les Trois. Having worked in Australia, I planted Syrah upon my return in 1995 and I also planted Zinfandel because my father had a great reputation for it during his days at Blaauwklippen.

"These vines produced their first crops in 1999 and when I looked at blending them, the components worked pretty well with the Cabernet and Merlot that we had over after the Grand Classique [Glen Carlou's Bordelais flagship] was blended up. As a further twist in the blend, I have added Touriga Nacional and Tempranillo in some vintages because of the spicy, exotic flavours they add to the wine.

"The name was decided upon after delving into the history of the property which was originally called *Skilpadje*, Dutch for tortoise, of which by the way we find many every year in the vineyards and surrounding bush and the hill behind the winery is shaped like a tortoise shell.

"Our first exported vintage of THR was 2000 and the volume has grown from 500 cases of a dozen bottles to 10,000 cases per annum. It is not yet sold in the US but we hope that by end 2006 it will be. (Dollar exchange rates and price points make it very difficult to make a profit in the US right now.)

"**Tortoise Hill White** is only in its second year and stems from our need to find a matching partner for the success of the red. I decided to try my hand at Sauvignon Blanc and Viognier, tank fermented, and then went on to blend them with the Chardonnay, some of which sees older wood. The first vintage was off-dry made for alfresco dining without much seriousness but the demand has been huge and with the request for a drier finish, so this year, 2005, we produced 5,500 cases.

"This wine is also currently focussed on South Africa and the UK as our main target markets but with the idea to hit the US end 2006."

So, again, I'm very sorry that it's not yet available in the US, but since Glen Carlou is now part of Donald Hess's empire (Hess Collection of Napa Valley, Peter Lehmann of Barossa, Colomé of Argentina etc), it will surely not be long before it is.

The red really is a lovely, interesting drink – not so complicated or ambitious that you have to put it in the cellar, but with sufficient structure to drink it any time over the next year or two.

The Tortoise Hill White, a blend of 65 per cent Sauvignon Blanc with 30 per cent Chardonnay and five per cent Viognier is also good, but I feel it ought not to cost as much as the Tortoise Hill Red, being two years younger and not having been treated to nearly such an expensive elevage. (It is common practice to price a red and a white of a pair at the same price when the white almost always costs *far* less to produce.)

UK stockists include Oddbins, Cheers, George Hills of Loughborough, Dallas Liquormart, Christopher Piper. Or try find this wine. At the time of writing it's available in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Norway and – Brazil!