South Africa

7 Aug 2008 by Jancis Robinson

In a nutshell: Distinctive reds, a good range of whites, some bargains and increasingly convincing answers to international styles.

Main grapes: Chenin Blanc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinotage and the usual international mix.

One of the exciting things about the wine business is the reliable way in which it mirrors social and political change. The image of mixed races of the South African population patiently lining up in the hot sun to vote together for the very first time may well be the most moving sight in our lifetimes. As soon as Nelson Mandela was voted in to power and apartheid reliably a thing of the past, wine lovers the world over had to revise the habits of a lifetime and begin to take a positive interest in once-reviled exports from South Africa, of which wine, with its labelling for all to see, is the most obvious.

For South African wine producers the transformations of 1993 and 1994 heralded an era of potential prosperity, with previously forbidden export markets opened up almost overnight, but also created the challenge of seeing their wines exposed to international competition. One result of South Africa's prolonged isolation was that wine consumers, commentators and producers seemed to be almost unhealthily obsessed by the detailed results of comparative tastings.

Thanks to the country's surplus of clean, well-made, bargain-basement dry white (and to systematic export subsidies), South Africa saw her wine exports to the UK grow rapidly from the mid 1990s on, although the US is still to take a serious interest in wines from an exporter which had previously been scorned. One would expect the fact that South Africa's wine country is the most dramatically beautiful in the world to help the fortunes of its produce abroad.

Within South Africa's vineyards and cellars themselves, producers have shown how rapidly they can absorb and adapt new techniques and fashions in wine styles. The current objectives are to continue to maximise the quality of their raw material - most obviously systematically replacing the vines whose output has been seriously affected by viruses, but also continuing to understand better which clones are best suited to local conditions (and getting them through national plant quarantines). A second imperative is to raise the image of South African wines abroad so that they get beyond the cheap and cheerful slot filled by brands such as Kumala, Arniston Bay and First Cape in the early 21st century.

Wine has been made on the Cape of Good Hope since the mid 17th century, which means that South Africa has a much longer, unbroken history of winemaking than either Australia or California. Even today the influence of the Cape Dutch, the original settlers, is strong, as witness the scalloped white gables of many a winery and the Afrikaans names, which many potential wine importers find so difficult to pronounce.

Only the south-western limit of the country (and continent), lapped by the Indian Ocean but cooled to a varied extent by winds off the Atlantic and currents from the Antarctic, is suitable for vine-growing. The climate of the wine regions is in very general terms slightly hotter than California's best known (few coastal fogs here) but ever cooler areas are being sought, found and planted, especially near the coast.

Most table wines are labelled varietally, making them easily accessible to worldwide consumers. The Wine of Origin system (similar to *appellation contrôlée* in France, see below) has been in existence for more than 30 years but regions and subregions are not widely recognised outside South Africa and regional characteristics are still only partially defined. The chief grape variety (almost invariably called 'cultivar' in South Africa) by far is Chenin Blanc, which can easily be persuaded to produce large volumes of clean, refreshing, very keenly priced dry and medium-dry white, occasionally still called Steen within South Africa. Chenin is capable of much greater concentration and sophistication, especially from older bush vines, but such wines are harder to find outside South Africa. Other important white varieties include Colombar(d) (a significant ingredient in South Africa's cheap dry whites), Cape Riesling (Crouchen), Sémillon, Riesling, Gewürztraminer, various Muscats and, of course, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, which are now the country's third and fourth most planted white varieties respectively. It took South African nurseries time to offer any seriously good Chardonnay cuttings, which may help to explain South Africa's unusual fondness for Chardonnay blends. Sauvignon Blanc, on the other hand, has been planted here for a century and can make some wonderfully self-confident, fruity wines - as well as some very inexpensive, less concentrated ones. Old vine Semillon can also make really complex, ageworthy

wines.

Plantings of red varieties have increased dramatically in the last 10 years and now represent more than 40 per cent of the vineyard area destined for wine. Cabernet Sauvignon is now the dominant variety, followed at some distance by Shiraz and Merlot. Cabernet Sauvignon is regarded as the aristocrat of the Cape's vineyards, but it needs careful treatment in the cellar to yield a deep-coloured, well-balanced, seriously long-lived wine. Tannins can be obtrusive. Merlot is increasingly made as a varietal as well as being used to blend with Cabernet, and fashionable Shiraz is made in both New World and Rhône styles, the latter often indicated by the use of Syrah rather than Shiraz on the label.

Pinotage, a 1920s Cape crossing of Pinot Noir and Cinsaut, is the national speciality and the main ingredient in what have become known as ‘Cape blends’, but it has a very distinctive, sometimes slightly burnt flavour, and producers and consumers alike are divided on its potential to make great wine. It can be lively and aromatic and some see it as South Africa's answer to California's Zinfandel and Australia's Shiraz. Pinot Noir is grown only in the coolest spots with any success and even here growers have been hampered by a lack of Burgundian (as opposed to Swiss) clones. The Cape's excellent ‘port’-making heritage has also resulted in significant plantings of Portuguese vines such as Tinta Barroca, which may also be made into substantial dry reds.

The structure of the South African wine business has also changed dramatically in the last 10 years. While the 60 or so co-ops are still important, providing grapes for cheap wines on the domestic market and some of the big export brands, there are now nearly 500 private wineries. It is hard to believe that only recently have individual wine estates been even allowed to buy in grapes, although a separate name must be used for the wine they produce - quite a contrast with most New World wine producing countries!

South Africa is firmly hanging its hat on a programme encouraging wine farmers to adopt sustainable farming techniques and to retain the country’s exceptional biodiversity.

The main wine regions

Constantia on the southern outskirts of Cape Town is the Cape's oldest wine region and one of its coolest. Its sweet white wines were once as famous in Europe as those of Hungary's Tokaj. The Klein Constantia winery has revived this style with a Vin de Constance Muscat, although it and Buitenverwachting also make a fine range of dry whites and Bordeaux-style reds. Sauvignon Blanc is particularly successful and intensely flavoured here, though the fruit flavours tend to be less ripe than typical New Zealand Sauvignon. **Cape Point** is an even cooler area to the south west.

Some favourite producers: Buitenverwachting, Constantia Glen, Constantia Uitsig, Groot Constantia, Klein Constantia, Steenberg.

The university town of **Stellenbosch** is regarded as the South African wine industry's spiritual home. Many of the larger wineries have their headquarters here. The natural conditions of the region vary enormously but most vineyards benefit from the cooling influence of the Atlantic in summer. This is where the country's greatest concentration of dedicated individual estates is to be found, with a traditional reputation for reds – notably Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Shiraz – but some increasingly exciting whites too. Some of the best wines come from the estates around the town itself since these are cooled by ocean breezes from False Bay, or from those higher up in the hills.

Some favourite producers: Delheim, De Trafford, Jordan, Kanonkop, Flagstone, The Foundry, Forrester/Meinert, Meerlust, Morgenster, Mulderbosch, Neethlingshof, Overgaauw, Quoin Rock, Rustenberg, Rust en Vrede, Thelema, Tokara,, Vergelegen, Warwick, Waterford.

Paarl produces even more wine than Stellenbosch and gained some of its earlier importance as the headquarters of the once-powerful KWV organisation, which for years controlled the industry's output with stifling regulation and blanket support. Much fortified wine is still made here, including some quite convincing flor sherry-style wines and the large producer Nederburg pioneered botrytised Chenin Blanc. However, it is the table wines and reds in particular which now dominate.

Some favourite producers: Fairview, Glen Carlou, Rupert & Rothschild, Plaisir de Merle, Villiera.

Franschhoek (meaning 'French corner', a reference to early Huguenot settlers) is technically a subregion in the east of Paarl but has established its own reputation thanks to a handful of top producers such as Boekenhoutskloof, Boschendal, Cabrière, Chamonix, Dieu Donné, La Motte and L'Ormarins, although most of them also source fruit from other, less fashionable subregions of Paarl such as Wellington.

Even further inland than Paarl is **Worcester**, the Cape's answer to California's Central Valley. Hot, dry and fertile, the region's vineyards need extensive irrigation and produce vast quantities of grapes, raw materials for inexpensive dry whites, some rich fortified wines and the full range of 'vine products' other than wine.

South east of Worcester, with a similar dry climate but more suitable soils for vine-growing, is **Robertson**, a noted white-wine producing region with some interesting co-operative wines as well as estates such as De Wetshof making waves with Chardonnay. Graham Beck produces a wide range of wine styles and specialises in sparkling wine, while Springfield has a strong reputation for minerally Sauvignon.

To the east stretches the increasingly hot and arid **Little Karoo**, where vines, many of them for bulk produce, tend to be planted close to rivers for irrigation water. The **Calitzdorp** district has a strong suit in fortified wines, particularly those made in the image of port. There are even hotter, drier conditions in the Orange River, many miles north and inland from the main Cape wine regions.

Tulbagh and Swartland are adjoining wine regions west and north of Worcester at low latitudes but enjoy some influence from the Atlantic. **Swartland** was for years associated with heavy reds but is now home to some of South Africa's most admired unirrigated vineyards, first promoted by Charles Back of Fairview and now also by a new generation of winemakers such as Eben Sadie. Old-vine Shiraz and Chenin are producing impressive results. The **Darling** subregion, cooled by the Atlantic, has a reputation for Sauvignon Blanc thanks to producers such as Neil Ellis. Like Swartland, **Tulbagh** is showing signs of renaissance.

Olifants River is the northern, Atlantic-influenced extension of this part of the Cape, transforming the waters of the Olifants River into bulk and distilling wine and some crisp dry whites such as those exported, with surprising success, under the Gôiya, Namaqua and Raindance labels (among others) by the WestCorp co-operative, South Africa's largest winery created by the merger of Spruitdrift and Vredendal wineries. Fryer's Cove in the small, northerly Bamboes Bay subregion producers some surprisingly fine Sauvignon Blanc.

On the southern, Indian Ocean coast are an increasing number of wine estates taking advantage of the cool conditions there. In **Walker Bay** the likes of Bouchard-Finlayson and Hamilton Russell produce elegant Pinot Noir and burgundian Chardonnay. To the east lies the even cooler region of **Cape Agulhas**, which may prove a good source of Sauvignon. **Elgin**, in the region of Overberg north of Walker Bay, is well suited to Sauvignon Blanc, Sémillon, Pinot Noir and Shiraz. **Elim**also shows promise.

South African wine geography is far from settled.

See Wines of South Africa for more information on this region.