Alheit, Cartology 2011 Western Cape

2 Oct 2012 by Julia Harding MW

From 185 rand, £23

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The French have a unit of sensory measurement known as a *caudalie*, 'equal to one second's length of a wine's impact on the palate after swallowing or spitting' (*Oxford Companion to Wine*). I don't think I have ever heard anyone use this term but I lost count of my caudalies with this wonderful South African Chenin Blanc in its maiden vintage. I tasted the wine at my desk one evening, wrote my tasting note, then wandered off to do something else. When I came back to my desk many caudalies later (minutes rather than seconds), I still had that lovely flavour in my mouth.

My tasting note reads: Very pale, soft gold colour. Even when quite chilled and first opened, an inviting aroma: sharpness of quince plus the richness of just-ripe apricots, plus a mealy, leesy depth. The palate is a wonderful combination of tension and freshness with a creamy, nutty spread across the breadth and length of the palate. At this youthful stage, a little smoky and mineral and a very slight chew on the finish. Great concentration and length yet still so lively and a hint of saltiness on the finish.

Cartology (meaning 'the study of maps') is made by Chris (right) and Suzaan (below) Alheit from very old, unirrigated bushvines in different parts of the Cape (see the map below, taken from their website): 30% Perdeberg, 30% Skurfberg (Citrusdal Mountain), 20% Kasteelberg, 12% Bottelary Hills, 8% Franschhoek. It is all Chenin Blanc apart from the 8% from Franschhoek, which is old-vine Sémillon.

The Alheits, who have worked not only in the Cape but also in the Napa Valley, Western Australia, Clare Valley, St-Émilion, the Mosel, intend their wine 'to be a picture of the Cape, seen through the lens of her mature vineyards, in a given vintage'.

In order to do this, and to make their wine a 'gymnast rather than a sumo wrestler', the grapes are cooled, hand sorted and whole-bunch pressed. The juice is lightly settled and then goes into old oak barrels. Once fermentation has started, without the addition of yeasts, the barrels are monitored daily. They make no acid adjustment, add no enzymes and add SO2 only post fermentation. Total production of this wine is just 5,000 bottles.

The Alheits are based at a mountain farm high on the Hemel & Aarde Ridge in Walker Bay. There's more information about them and their philosophy on their very attractive website.

The wine has just arrived in the UK, imported by ABS Wine Agencies, where the recently arrived South African (and Loire) expert Richart Kelley MW is introducing some great new wines. It is, or very soon will be, available from The Wine Society, The Wright Wine Company (Skipton), Handford Wines (London SW7), Lay & Wheeler,? Harrogate Wine Company and? Noel Young (Cambridge). The Alheits are also working with Pascal Schildt in the US, Lovett Vins in Québec and Peter de Leeuw in Belgium. Wine-searcher currently gives just two sources in South Africa: Wine Cellar and Cybercellar. It's not cheap – the vine yields are tiny, the total production very limited – but each mouthful lasts for ever.

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