



**KAPWEINE**

The Home of South African Wines

[www.kapweine.ch](http://www.kapweine.ch)

KapWeine  
Cape Wine Selection SA  
Rütibüelstrasse 17  
CH-8820 Wädenswil

Telefon +41 (0)43 888 21 21  
Telefax +41 (0)43 888 21 22  
Mail [info@kapweine.ch](mailto:info@kapweine.ch)  
MwSt-Nr. CHE-107.570.196

Öffnungszeiten Büro/Showroom  
Montag – Freitag 9.00 – 18.00  
Donnerstag 9.00 – 20.00  
Samstag 10.00 – 16.00



Written by Jancis Robinson  
22 Jan 2015

## TT: Why is South Africa underrated?

*22 Jan 2015 Today's Throwback Thursday article from our archives was written a full seven years ago and, read in conjunction with my most recent report on South African wine last June, [South Africa's wind of change](#), shows just how rapidly the wines of that beautiful country have been evolving. But the overarching sentiment is still true today.*

---

Written by Jancis Robinson  
12 Jul 2014

## South Africa's wind of change

I'm not a great fan of the word 'icon' when attached to wine. It seems to me that wines ought to earn any iconic status from their admirers rather than have it thrust upon them by marketers keen to segment their product range.

So it was with a certain amount of scepticism that I attended a wine tasting last month billed as collection of South African Icons. The wines had been selected by Greg Sherwood, a South African Master of Wine who works for London wine merchant Handford Wines set up 25 years ago by Master of Wine James Handford. Sherwood has been championing the concept of fine South African wine in the UK for a dozen years now and it hasn't always been easy. The British supermarkets have conditioned their customers to associate Cape wine with some of the cheapest bottles on their shelves, typically bottled in the UK. Nearly two-thirds of all the wine exported last year to the UK, South Africa's most important market, left Cape Town in bulk rather than bottle.

Floating above this good-value but generally uninspiring quality level has long been a cohort of established South African wine producers, mainly making Cape versions of the established international wine styles, plus a few examples of the Cape's own crossing of Pinot Noir with Cinsault, Pinotage. But in my general tastings in Britain I had been becoming increasingly aware of a whole new wave of young South Africans making a quite different style of wine. So, despite the name, I was particularly keen to taste these 'icons'.

I was not disappointed. In fact the most exciting wines were in general from the least established names, typically blends of unusual grape varieties such as Sémillon, Clairette, Verdelho, Grenache Blanc, Palomino, Cinsault, Grenache Noir and, of course, South Africa's

most-planted variety Chenin Blanc. These were often from old vines, many of them growing in the up-and-coming Swartland region. They were intriguing, well balanced, appetising wines that promised interesting drinking in the future as well as the present, several of them from relatively unknown names. Most tastings I go to merely confirm what I already knew and give me a chance to identify the plums in any representation of a region, producer or new vintage. This collection of wines really did confirm the existence of a whole new era in a country's wine history.

The next day Sherwood explained his selection process to me: 'I wanted to include the classics that are still at the top of their game (Meerlust, Warwick, Hamilton Russell, etc) as well as young guns making waves and who I believe are not one-hit wonders. I will argue with anyone that Donovan Rall, Chris Alheit [see this [wine of the week](#)], Peter Allan Finlayson (Crystallum), Duncan Savage, Craig Hawkins (Testalonga), etc are as worthy of a spot as any.' The Savage White 2012, for example, is the very first offering from this new producer, so has no track record at all, but then in his day job at Cape Point winery, Duncan Savage has notched up more five-star ratings from the influential *Platter's South African Wine Guide* than anyone.

One man and one woman must take some credit for this new wave. [Eben Sadie](#) of Sadie Family Wines pioneered the model of a small, independent wine producer using their hands-on experience at a larger outfit to put into practice their own ideas, seeking out old vineyards in Swartland and, as he maintains proudly, never owing a penny to anyone. 'I have no ambitions to be rich or famous', he told me on his last visit to London in April, 'I just want to make wines I can see developing well in the future.'

He couldn't wait to point out the dramatic philosophical shift in his peer group of South African wine producers and how they were now all looking for freshness in their wines rather than over-ripeness and high scores in the US. 'Over 14% alcohol is too much', he maintains. The great majority of the new wave icon wines I tasted had alcohol levels below 14% and two of them were below 12%.

The woman so closely involved in this Cape wine revolution is Rosa Kruger, the self-styled 'vineyard manager' about whom I wrote in [Rosa Kruger - old-vine champion](#). She has done more than anyone to identify the old vineyards of interest to these ambitious new producers, many of whom, according to Sherwood, 'spend every last penny they have buying famous foreign wines to educate their palates further'. It has to be pointed out, however, that many of them are secretive about the exact source of their fruit, fearful of bigger, better-funded companies outbidding them. This can result in their using the vague appellations Western Cape or Coastal Region rather than anything more specific.

Since the 'icon' tasting I have gone out of my way to taste as many new-wave South African wines as possible. Handford Wines still have stocks of most of the wines shown at their tasting, but there are other sources of great South African wine in the UK. London online retailer Swig and Harrogate Fine Wines have long worked hard at South Africa, like Stone, Vine & Sun. South African Wines Online ([www.sawinesonline.co.uk](http://www.sawinesonline.co.uk)) offer a particularly wide range but you have to buy at least six bottles. Two importers, Vincisive of Lechlade and Hong Kong and Indigo Wines of London, have gone in search of some of the most exciting new-wave producers, and the restaurant High Timber practically under London's Millennium Bridge has one of the country's best selections of South African wines.

Last year the US was only the fourth biggest market for bottled South African wine (beaten by the UK, Germany and Holland) but even the hard-nosed drinks industry commentator Shanken News Daily admitted recently, 'South African wines are gaining traction in the US'. The substantial investments in South African wine made by Charles Banks, once responsible for Screaming Eagle, the most expensive Napa Valley wine of all, and prominent California oenologist Zelma Long with Vilafonté, are surely likely to raise the profile of South African wine with their fellow Americans.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* has an icon as 'something regarded as a representative symbol or as worthy of veneration'. You win, Sherwood.

These are the South African wines I have tasted recently that I gave at least 17.5 out of 20. There were many more at 17.

### **WHITES**

A A Badehorst 2010 Coastal Region  
Alheit Cartology 2012 Western Cape  
Mullineux 2012 Swartland  
Rall 2012 Swartland  
Sadie Family, Old Vine Series Skerpioen 2012 Swartland  
Sadie Family, Old Vine Series Palladius 2012 Swartland

### **REDS**

Crystallum, Cuvée Cinema Pinot Noir 2012 Hemel-en-Aarde Ridge  
Rall 2012 Swartland  
Sadie Family, Columella 2010 Swartland

---

**29 March 2008** See also [Some great South African wine buys.](#)

One of the great mysteries of the world of wine is why South African wine is not more celebrated. The best examples offer wine lovers some of the finest value in the world today yet they remain a secret relative to the wines of, say, California or Australia, even though it is only relatively recently that Australia has made more wine than the Cape.

South African wine producers increasingly need friends abroad. The domestic market has been shrinking. Meanwhile the quality of South African wine, never shameful in a global context even in the shameful apartheid era, just goes on getting better and better as a new generation of winemakers travel, and learn as much as they possibly can from their frequent visitors from foreign wine regions.

Prominent Bordelais who have established a base, a serious label or a major consultancy in South Africa include May-Eliane de Lencquesaing of Ch Pichon Lalande (Glenelly), Pierre Lurton (Morgenster), Paul Pontallier of Ch Margaux (Plaisir de Merle in its infancy), Bruno Prats of Ch Cos d'Estournel and Hubert de Boüard de Laforest of Ch Angélu (Anwilka), Christian Dauriac of Ch Destieux (Marianne Estate), Alain Moueix of Ch Fonroque (Ingwe) and Michel Rolland of just about everywhere (Bonne Nouvelle). Younger South Africans are particularly keen to learn. Alexandre Thienpont of Pomerol's Vieux Château Certan

commented after his first visit to the Cape with its exhaustingly curious wine producers, “I’ve never felt more like a lemon being squeezed until my pips squeaked”.

Although all of these French wine producers are best known for their reds, I believe that South Africa is one of the very few non-European wine-producing countries with an outstanding track record for white wine production. Chenin Blanc has for long been the country’s most planted vine variety and is still present in the form of ancient bush vines that can yield outstandingly concentrated yet crisp Chenins rivalled only by the best of the Loire Valley, while some of the more basic South African Chenin Blanc goes into the world’s best value dry white.

One reason why South Africa seems undervalued may be that red wines are today so often (unfairly in my view) seen as a country’s calling card but Cape reds have long lagged behind the whites. South Africa’s vineyards were more recently planted with today’s fashionable red wine grapes than happened in most other New World wine-producing countries – and as though younger vines were not handicap enough, the country still suffers a serious virus problem which particularly afflicts vines for red wines, sometimes preventing the grapes from ripening fully. South Africa’s best reds are admirable but many of the lesser ones can taste strangely earthy to foreigners. Having gone through a Cabernet Sauvignon phase, South African wine producers and wine lovers themselves are currently besotted by the grape they call either Shiraz, if made in full-on Australian style, or Syrah if lighter and more perfumed *à la française*.

But at least the South African wine scene is extremely easy for outsiders to understand. I can think of no other country which has a single annual, thoroughly comprehensive and recognisably definitive guide to the wines produced there. Ex foreign correspondent turned winemaker John Platter gave his name to it even though he is no longer involved in *Platter’s South African Wine Guide*.

The pinnacle of vinous fame in South Africa is to be awarded five stars in ‘Platter’. The 15 respected tasters who divide all the wines between them for assessment for the guide, generally giving them a one- to four-star rating, nominate their very top wines as candidates for five stars. The tasters then get together, taste all of these blind and vote as to whether they deserve the five-star rating or not. Those that miss out on a majority vote are given 4.5 stars. In the current 2008 guide a total of 21 wines, including five made in the image of port, are given five stars and 312 are given 4.5.

A couple of weeks ago I tasted a selection of Platter 5- and 4.5-star wines in London, and very impressed I was too – especially in view of the retail prices which are a fraction of what similar quality California wines would cost, and many look very good value compared with their Australian counterparts. Following modern mores, and as is my wont on my website, I gave each wine a score out of 20. I am habitually stingy with point so 17 is a very good mark for me. (For example, I gave a mere 55 out of the thousands of red bordeaux 2004 a mark of 17 or above.) I tasted a total of 55 wines that had been awarded 5 and 4.5 stars and ended up giving a score of 17 or more to one Chenin Blanc, five Sauvignon Blancs (an impressive total), five Chardonnays, two Sauvignon/Semillon blends, one Pinot Noir, two Shiraz/Syrahs and a full eight Cabernet Sauvignon/Bordeaux blends, making that 44% of all wines tasted.

This was all the more impressive in view of the fact that the average (pre-Budget) retail price of the Sauvignons was only just over £10 a bottle and the average Chardonnay price was only about £13 for quality that would not be out of place in the Côte de Beaune. In fact there were

a number of wines I would love to see blind alongside their European prototypes, such as both of the Sauvignon/Semillon blends with a fine dry white Graves, and the Hamilton Russell Pinot Noir 2006 alongside (an admittedly more mature) red burgundy. In general the whites are much better value than the reds, with Simonsig, a 5-star regular, still seriously undercharging for its wines. Even Anglo American's wine estate Vergelegen, whose very top bottlings are very expensive, offer their other wines at very reasonable prices in view of their quality.

Another great aspect of buying wines from a country that seems, unfairly to me, unfashionable, is that it can be relatively easy to find mature vintages. Waterford Cabernet Sauvignon 2003, for example, is a lovely drink now, beautifully made and already quite complex, but costs only £14.50 a bottle from Berry Bros. Another delicious Bordeaux blend from this particularly successful vintage for South African reds is Buitenverwachting, Christine 2003, which is hardly more expensive.

The top Platter wines I tasted were only a selection of these emblems of the best of South African wine. Many other of the names emerging via the annual Platter rating process as South Africa's first growths such as Boekenhoutskloof, Cape Point, De Trafford, Sadie Family, Steenberg and Tulbagh Mountain Vineyards were not even represented in my tasting. Those who have not yet discovered the joys of South African wine should do so.

International stockists from [www.wine-searcher.com](http://www.wine-searcher.com). UK specialist retailer [www.sawinesonline.co.uk](http://www.sawinesonline.co.uk).

See my full [tasting notes](#) on all these wines.

## **SOUTH AFRICAN TOP SCORERS**

Below are the wines available in the UK to which I gave more than 17 points out of 20 with approximate retail prices.

### **WHITES**

Ken Forrester, FMC Chenin Blanc 2006 Stellenbosch

Vergelegen Chardonnay Reserve 2006 Stellenbosch

Oak Valley Chardonnay 2006 Elgin

Vergelegen White 2006 Stellenbosch 2006

### **REDS**

Hamilton Russell Vineyards Pinot Noir 2006 Walker Bay

Rustenberg, Peter Barlow 2004 Simonsberg-Stellenbosch

Thelema, The Mint Cabernet Sauvignon 2005 Stellenbosch

Buitenverwachting, Christine 2003 Constantia