

WINES OF THE TIMES; South African Wines Step Onto the Stage

Bei diesem Titel, der so viel heisst, Südafrikanische Weine betreten die Welt Wein Bühne, musste ich erst einmal Durchatmen..... Und wieder war es ein kleiner Boutique Produzent, der die Türen öffnet für Südafrika. Eben nicht eine Grosskellerei mit allen möglichen Resourcen, angefangen bei Geld um alles zu kaufen.. die besten Trauben, den besten Rebberg, den besten Weinmacher und das beste Marketing Team. David Trafford von de Trafford wines ist mal wieder schuld!

Lesen Sie den Bericht auf English. Weiter unten finden Sie auch den De Trafford Newsletter.



WINES OF THE TIMES; South African Wines Step Onto the Stage

By ERIC ASIMOV

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FORGIVE me if I'm excited, but I can't help it. I want to tell you straight out that South Africa, of all places, is one of the greatest sources for moderately priced cabernet sauvignon on the planet today.

I suspected this before, but after the wine panel tasted 25 South African cabernets recently, I can say it unequivocally, without the usual hedging and qualifications.

Well, almost, but I'll get to that later.

First I want to focus on the exciting news. If you like cabernets that are balanced, with a sense of structure and shape, that are indisputably cabernet sauvignon with flavors of cassis and violets, cedar and minerals, then you are going to love these wines.

In bottle after bottle, including one to which the panel gave a rare top rating of four stars, the defining characteristic was balance. These wines were not over-the-top fruit bombs, although, yes, we did find a few of those. Nor were they soft, plush and syrupy. They demonstrated power, but they also showed finesse. It would be a pleasure to serve our favorites with all sorts of different foods.



It would be tempting to characterize these wines as more Bordeaux than California, but I think that's too easy. A more accurate and meaningful comparison would be to liken these wines to Napa Valley cabernets of 25 to 30 years ago, a time before so many California producers began picking grapes that were riper than ripe, thus producing Napa red rather than Napa cabernet.

These wines would never be called weedy or thin, although some California producers might sneer at them as "green," simply because, like Bordeaux and an earlier generation of Napa cabernets, they offer herbal flavors like mint, sage and thyme. In my opinion, these flavors are not only appropriate but even delicious within the cabernet spectrum.

Not that we found any of our South African wines harking back to the bygone days of 12.5 percent alcohol.

No, these are potent bottles, most of them around 14 to 14.5 percent alcohol. But because they are so well balanced, they don't feel too big. Nor do they feel self-important or grandiose -- not at these prices, which are decidedly moderate by Napa standards. For the tasting, by the way, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Paul Grieco, an owner of Hearth, Insieme and Terroir in Manhattan, and Rebecca Foster, a representative with Empire Merchants, a distributor.

South Africa is not exactly the first country that comes to mind when one is thinking of good wine, at least not among Americans. In fact, many people do not associate South Africa with wine at all, which might be somewhat surprising when you consider that wine has been made there for hundreds of years.

We're more concerned with recent history, and for much of the second half of the 20th century, when wine exploded as a global commodity, South African wines were largely off limits to the rest of the world because of the country's apartheid policies.

In a way, the resurrection of the South African wine industry is analogous to the rebirth of wine producing in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall. There's been a lot of catching up in a very short time.

South Africa has caught up, and how. Just consider our No. 1 wine, the 2004 Stellenbosch cabernet from De Trafford, which we awarded a top score of four stars.

"Hallelujah!" exulted Paul, who found aromas of cedar and tobacco in the glass and declared it a wine of "absolute terroir." Florence and Rebecca both concurred, finding it rich yet graceful and structured. I was a touch more hesitant in my assessment (but only a touch) because of the ripeness of the fruit. But in the end the structure dominated the power, giving the wine shape and agility. A price of \$32 for a wine like this makes it a great deal.

If it had been only one wine that impressed us so much, we would not have been nearly so excited. But there were plenty of others, like our No. 2, the 2004 Stellenbosch cabernet from Rust en Vrede, a balanced, well-shaped wine with beautiful aromas of flowers, fruit, minerals and herbs, and our No. 3, the 2003 One Stroke One from Stellenbosch, which balanced lightness with intensity. In South Africa, by the way, One Stroke One goes by the name of its producer, Graceland Vineyards. In the United States, I guess, Elvis got there first.

While the four-star De Trafford could have been our best value in the tasting, I decided instead to give that honor to the least expensive wine in our top 10, the 2006 Bon Cap, a \$15 wine made from organic grapes that had lovely aromas of flowers, fruit, herbs and, yes, bacon.



There did seem to be some relation between price and quality in these wines. Of the 14 bottles in the blind tasting that were \$20 or under, only the Bon Cap and the 2004 Neil Ellis at \$20 made our list of favorites. By contrast, 8 of the 11 most expensive bottles made our top 10, including the 2005 Stark-Condé at \$40, which just squeaked in at No. 10. This wine, from the Jonkershoek Valley, a subdivision of the Stellenbosch region just east of Cape Town, was powerful and a little rounder than some of the more structured wines, yet it was still in balance.

Almost all of our other favorite cabernets came from the Stellenbosch region, practically on the southwestern tip of the African continent and centered on the old university town of Stellenbosch. The area is blessed with weather as gorgeous as the vistas for which it is renowned. The Bon Cap was the lone outsider, coming from Robertson in the Breede River Valley to the east.

Well, I've been all breathless enthusiasm up to here. Now it's time for my hedge.

In California, where producers used to strive to make wines like these, the trend in the last 15 years has been to pick grapes later and later, resulting in big, overly alcoholic wines of surpassing fruity sweetness but little shape or structure. These are the wines that have mostly received the greatest praise and for which producers have charged the most.

Could such an evolution occur with these South African wines? I can't answer that, but I see some possibly disturbing notes.

First, the 2006 Boekenhoutskloof cabernet from the Franschhoek region was, at \$47, the most expensive wine in our tasting. While the winemaker is critically acclaimed, we rejected the wine for its generic vanilla-cherry cheesecake flavors, which I often taste in New World red wines that are intended to please an international audience.

Second, while we all loved the 2004 De Trafford cabernet -- our No. 1 wine -- a look at the De Trafford Web site indicates that the next vintages are evolving in a bigger, riper direction. The 2004 was 14.5 percent alcohol, but the '05 and '06 are both well above 15 percent. Admittedly, I haven't tasted either of those wines, but on paper at least they seem ratcheted up in size.

If anything, our tasting indicates that South Africa has the potential for greatness. In the snapshot offered by these 25 bottles, we found a region offering wonderful values and lovely wines.

Yet the track record is slim. We don't know yet how these wines will age. Many of these producers are too new to have shown consistency over time.

Winemakers cannot change the soil in which they plant their vines. Nor can they influence the climate or change the weather. The main thing they can control is the style of wine they make.

We very much enjoyed the styles of cabernet sauvignon we sampled, and we appreciate the fact that the winemakers' sites and climate permit them to make cabernets in these styles. As for next year and the year after that, we hope for the best.

Tasting Report: Cabernets, Here Defined by Their Balance

De Trafford Stellenbosch Cabernet Sauvignon 2004

\$32



Ripe yet structured and graceful with aromas and flavors of rich fruit, flowers and cedar. (Importer: Boutique Wine Collection, Philadelphia)

Rust en Vrede Stellenbosch Cabernet Sauvignon 2004

\$27

Aromas of violets, minerals, earth and herbs; well balanced and nicely shaped. (Terlato Wines International, Lake Bluff, Ill.)

One Stroke One Stellenbosch Cabernet Sauvignon 2003

\$28

Light-bodied and intense with aromas of blackberries, flowers and herbs. (Fairest Cape Beverages, Santa Ana, Calif.)

BEST VALUE

Bon Cap Robertson Cabernet Sauvignon 2006

\$15

** 1/2

Balanced, earthy and well structured with flavors of fruit and a touch of bacon. (Indigo Wine Group, Venice, Fla.)

Thelema Stellenbosch Cabernet Sauvignon 2004

\$33

** 1/2

Elegant and restrained with balanced, delicate flavors of fruit and herbs. (Cape Classics, New York)

Neil Ellis Stellenbosch Cabernet Sauvignon 2004

\$20

** 1/2

Dry and cedary with flavors of blackberries and minerals. (Vineyard Brands, Birmingham, Ala.)



Bilton Stellenbosch Cabernet Sauvignon 2004

\$25

** 1/2

Nicely structured with pretty aromas of flowers and plums. (Southern Starz, Huntington Beach, Calif.)

Waterford Estate Stellenbosch Cabernet Sauvignon 2005

\$29

** 1/2

Big, bright and fruity yet balanced and structured. (Yellowwood Wine, Calistoga, Calif.)

Alto Estate Stellenbosch Cabernet Sauvignon 2005

\$30

**

Ripe fruit and earthy flavors with a spine of acidity. (Tafelberg Imports, Emerson, N.J.)

Stark-Condé Jonkershoek Valley Twin Peak Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 2005

\$40

**

Pretty floral aromas; powerful yet balanced. (Vineyard Brands)

WHAT THE STARS MEAN:

Ratings, from zero to four stars, reflect the panel's reaction to the wines, which were tasted with names and vintages concealed. The wines represent a selection generally available in good retail shops and restaurants and on the Internet. Prices are those paid in shops in the New York region.

Tasting coordinator: Bernard Kirsch

Recipe: Lamb Shanks in Red Wine With Prunes Time: 2 hours 15 minutes

Earthy. Plummy. Balanced with acidity.

These were my descriptions of the South African cabernet sauvignon wines we tasted. They reminded me of just how good cabernet can be when the winemaker does not aim for a skyscraper when 10 stories will do.



I wanted to enjoy the wines with lamb, and hearty shanks braised with fruit and spice did the trick. The acid balance in many of the wines gracefully tamed the richness of the sauce.

You should figure one shank a person, so try to buy smallish ones, about a pound each. And serve the dish with couscous.

Time: 2 hours 15 minutes

1 cup pitted prunes

1 cup dry red wine

2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

4 lamb shanks, about 1 pound each, fat well trimmed

1 cup finely chopped onion

8 cloves garlic, minced

1 red bell pepper, cored and slivered

1 teaspoon ground cumin

1/2 teaspoon smoked paprika

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

4 sprigs thyme

2 teaspoons grated orange zest

Cayenne to taste

Cooked couscous for serving.

1. Place prunes in a bowl, add wine and set aside. Heat oil in a 6-quart casserole or sauté pan. Add lamb and brown on all sides over medium heat. Remove. Stir in onion and garlic. Sauté on low until soft. Stir in bell pepper, cumin and paprika. Sauté a few minutes. Return lamb to pan, season with salt and pepper. Add thyme, prunes and wine. Cover and simmer 1 hour.

2. Turn shanks in pan and baste. Add zest and cayenne. Cover and cook on low about 45 minutes more, until lamb is tender when pierced with a fork. Check seasoning. Serve with couscous.

Yield: 4 servings.

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NEWSLETTER APRIL 2009

NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE

Wow.... what a start to the year! We jointly won the inaugural Trophy Wine Show, we've won the Chenin Blanc Challenge twice, scored 5 stars in the Platter Guide and the Wine magazine and scored 94 points in the Wine Spectator five times, but none of this compares to the response we received to Eric Asimov's article in the New York Times that was published the day after the U.S. Presidential inauguration. To quote: "Forgive me if I'm excited, but I can't help it. I want to tell you straight out that South Africa, of all places, is one of the greatest sources for moderately priced Cabernet Sauvignon on the planet today.".... "South Africa has caught up, and how, just consider our No. 1, the 2004 Stellenbosch cabernet from De Trafford, which we awarded a top score of four stars. "

To put this into perspective, our US importer explained that a top score of 4 stars was last awarded nearly four years ago! This has resulted in February being our biggest sales month since inception by far and our tasting room has never been busier. We do apologize to those who did not receive our full attention over the last few weeks.

Apart from giving a substantial boost to our profile, this article is great for South African wine. As Michael Fridjhon commented in the Business Day: "If – and this is not an insignificant "if" – the rush to bottles stores his comments may induce does not peter out for lack of stock and a failure to capitalize on this golden moment, history may date the arrival of Cape wine in America (350 years almost to the day after Van Riebeeck crushed his first grapes) to the publication of this article."

FIRE AND THE 2009 HARVEST



Wow.... what a start to the harvest! A fire accidentally started in the Jonkershoek valley around 12 km north of us. As it burnt in our direction against the prevailing SE wind, we expected it to be put out before it reached us. Unfortunately, and rather shockingly, there were another 90 fires in the Western Cape at the time and fire fighting resources were so diluted, the fire raged on unabated and reached us in full force less than 3 days later. Fortunately though the smoke was blowing away from us, until it reached the top of our young Cabernet Franc vineyard. We managed to water most of the surrounding vegetation shortly before the fire reached the vineyard, but due to the wind direction changing at the last minute, about 350 vines were scorched. The smoke affected this block badly and the wine looks destined for Plan B – or Smoky B!



Once the fire got around this block and headed towards our house the helicopter finally arrived, and together with a number of firefighters and volunteers, was put out around 50m from our home. This was not to be the end though – the fire raged on uncontrollably in the pine plantations of neighboring Lourensford Estate, on the other side of the mountain. This led to another two fires raging past our vineyard and house. A hectic week all in all, with our whole valley now burnt, apart from the vineyards and homesteads.

As far as smoke taint is concerned, we managed to water the vineyards and we had three rainfalls shortly after the fire. Our initial observations are that the areas close to the fires, which were picked separately, have a noticeably smoky character, while the others are barely perceptible.

There is no doubt that this will go down as one of the most eventful harvests ever. It may also turn out to be one of the very best too. At this early stage it looks like all the Chenin Blanc and Shiraz looks exceptional, as does our Mont Fleur block of Merlot. The Cabernet Sauvignon (just picked) from the older blocks (+10 years) looks rather exciting, while the younger vines, even though they were carefully watered, struggled with the long dry ripening conditions, and are less convincing.

We will certainly be nursing these wines in the barrel with great care and interest.



Hendry and his old friend



Inspecting the shrivel for the Straw Wine

350 YEAR OFFER: To celebrate 350 years of wine production in the Cape as well as, more recently, the 350 000 km our trusty old Isuzu bakkie has managed over our bumpy road, we are offering the following wines at current vintage prices:

Cabernet Sauvignon 2002 – Admittedly a weaker vintage, though our highest scoring Cabernet Sauvignon in the local Wine magazine, it is drinking really well now.

Merlot 2004 – A restrained, stylish vintage, just starting to open up now, improving significantly over the last year and with a long life ahead.

Shiraz 2004 – As with all our 2004 reds, more restrained and elegant and just starting to show well now. Red, rather than dark fruits to the fore and the beginnings of some maturation complexity.



EASTER WEEKEND CLOSURE

We have had an exhausting harvest and will press our last few tanks shortly before the Easter weekend. Everyone deserves a rest and a break and we will be closed for the Easter weekend. All who serve in the tasting room are intimately involved in the winemaking process and we are not prepared to get casual staff. We apologize for any inconvenience or disappointment.

NEW RELEASES

Straw Wine 2007

A tiny production of just 2 barrels due to the intermittent rain, but the quality is exceptional. Very intense and sweet with 280g/l sugar, but nicely balanced.

Plan B 2006

It may seem a little strange that we release this after the 2007, but it is mostly a collection of barrels that struggled to finish fermenting – spending nearly 3 years in barrel. 37% Merlot; 25% Cabernet Franc; 25% Roobernet and 13% 2008 Shiraz.

Pinot Noir 2007

Extremely low yield producing only 1 barrel from the vineyard behind our house. Although typically silky textured and light coloured, has proper concentration and should develop beautifully in the bottle.

We look forward to your visit, phone call, fax or email: info@detrafford.co.za.

Best regards

David, Rita and the de Trafford team.

