



KAPWEINE

The Home of South African Wines

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Is Stellenbosch the New Saint-Emilion?

An influx of new talent is pushing to make South African wines some of the very best in the world!



THE LAST TIME I VISITED Klein Constantia, one of South Africa's oldest wine farms, I had a long conversation about baboons. I won't go into the details; suffice to say I hadn't appreciated the havoc a hungry troop could cause. Winemaker and owner Lowell Jooste eventually took me outside to show me where he was thinking of installing some high electric fences. Now, the fences are installed—and pretty much everything else has changed too.

The Jooste family sold the estate to Zdenek Bakala and Charles Harman in 2010, and the winemaking duties are now fulfilled by Matthew Day, a frighteningly young-looking 29-year-old with an impressive resume that includes stints in Bordeaux, Australia's Barossa Valley and Dancing Hares Estate in Napa.

In many ways, Klein Constantia reflects what is happening more widely in the Western Cape today. Since I first visited the region in 2008, the scene has changed considerably, with an influx of new talent with high ambitions to make wines that sit alongside the very best in the world.

As U.K. Master of Wine Tim Atkin wrote in his July South African report: "Maybe I'm just getting old, but the average age of the leading Cape winemakers seems to be getting younger." It does.

Last year, Mr. Atkin published a classification of wineries in South Africa—which he updated in July—based on the Bordeaux system of 1855. In it, he points to a handful of First Growth estates such as Alheit, Crystallum and Cape Point, which are barely two decades old—some a lot younger.

"There's a new, revived energy in the South African wine industry at the moment," says Klein Constantia's Mr. Day, as we taste a range of his Sauvignon Blancs in London. Mr. Day is typical of the new breed of South African winemakers. He says the old-school ways of using a lot of new oak and copious amounts of sulfur are gone. Instead, he's looking for freshness. And as for putting in additives, he calls that "a whole lot of rubbish."

His Sauvignon Blancs are truly impressive. Delicate and gentle, they possess an intensity and tangy acidity that is a halfway house between the opulence of New Zealand and the freshness of the Loire. He says the cold nights in Constantia give the wines naturally high acidity, while the granite soil is ideally suited to the variety.

The estate's Metis Sauvignon Blanc is a collaboration with Sancerre producer Pascal Jolivet, and it shows, with the sort of taut acidity and savoriness you might expect from a French Sauvignon.

Sauvignon Blanc is an interesting variety for South Africa. I would also look out for Chenin Blanc, the so-called "Bordeaux blends" and Shiraz-Cabernet blends. As well as Klein Constantia, Iona, Cape Point, Hamilton Russell, Kanonkop, Meerlust, Vergelegen and Warwick are all wineries to watch. But given the pace of change in the region, that list will probably need to be redrawn next year.



THREE SOUTH AFRICAN WINES WORTH SEEKING OUT

2013 Iona Sauvignon Blanc

Alcohol: 13.5%

Iona has one of the coolest vineyard sites in South Africa, with vines 450 meters above sea level. This climatic freshness is evident in the wine, imparting a refreshing tangy character. Some citrus and lemon notes add to its complexity. Perfect with sushi.

2013 Klein Constantia Sauvignon Blanc

Alcohol: 13.2%

Delicacy is this wine's watchword. Matthew Day uses the coolness of his vineyards to good effect, producing a wine with a bright intense color and restrained fruit aromas, but once in the mouth, the sensation is one of freshness, finishing off with a moreish, tangy acidity.

2009 Anwilka

Alcohol: 14.5%

A collaboration between Lowell Jooste and Bordeaux heavyweights Hubert de Bouard of Château Angélu and Bruno Prats, former owner of Chateau Cos d'Estournel, this is a class act, with black-berry and mulberry fruit underpinned by an appealing intensity and freshness.