



KAPWEINE
The Home of South African Wines

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<https://www.thedrinksbusiness.com/2018/10/what-to-look-for-in-south-africa/>

What to look for in South Africa

by Rupert Millar

Anyone with even a passing interest in wine not interested in looking at what South Africa is producing today needs their head examined.



From fresh and defined white wines to red wines with elegance and finesse, regal sweet wines and top notch fizz, the Cape has it all and the wines are only going to go from strength to strength as this happy and collaborative bunch hone their techniques even further.

The South African industry is not without its problems – as examined [by the drinks business here](#) – with profitability a major issue across the winelands and precious old vine material being lost at a terrible rate.



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Yet there has never been better time to buy South African wine. Not only is the quality on the up but the exchange rate is ludicrously in our (the UK/US/Europe's) favour.

For the on-trade it offers food-friendly wines at excellent value as well as Pinot Noirs and Chardonnay that are rapidly becoming more expensive and harder to source from more 'traditional' sources.

For the off-trade there is that magic mix of affordable wines for everyday drinking pleasure and some seriously smart wines that merit cellaring – and which still don't cost the earth.

It's an industry that deserves support and attention, not as a charity case but on its own merits.

The 'bad old' days of South African winemaking are, if not totally eradicated, receding into the past at a cracking pace and the wine world is only going to benefit as a result – as long as South Africa does too.

The 2017 vintage:





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Photo credit: WOSA

Vintage variation in the New World does exist but its effects are often more subtle than in parts of Europe. Suffice to say, however, that 2017 in South Africa is really very fine indeed. Although marked by a drought that reduced yields by as much as 25%, the year was very cool, leading to wines full of concentration and purity of fruit but also with a taut, linear acid structure and wonderful freshness. If there was ever a vintage to show South African winemaking at its best, this is it.

Chenin Blanc, Semillon and Sauvignon Blanc:



Chenin Blanc is South Africa's standard-bearer and quite rightly so. Not only are the wines full of honeyed, appley, steely excellence, but the number of old 'steen' (as Chenin was known in South Africa) vineyards is one of the world's great viticultural patrimonies.

No other country in the world puts Chenin on a pedestal in quite the way South Africa does and it deserves to be celebrated and loved.



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Semillon too has some wonderful old vineyards making thrilling, complex wine and South Africa is forging a path with some refreshing, not-overly aromatic Sauvignon Blancs which are more Ligerien than Malburian and all the better for it. Oh and the Semillon-Sauvignon blends aren't too bad either (see next slide).

White blends:



Photo credit: Bosman Wines

Bordeaux, Rhône and 'Cape', be they traditional (the first two) or a little wacky (the latter) in composition, South African white blends really stand out as excellent food wines, with complexity and texture. Everything from crisp and zippy to unctuous and fleshy, they also help set South Africa apart from its more mono-varietal counterparts in Australia, New Zealand or Chile – and are brilliant value for money.

There's very little doubt that white wines – varietal or blends – are South Africa's bread and butter and what is being produced now is not only world class but world beating.



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Syrah and Cinsault:



Photo credit: WOSA

Two wildly different varieties but ones that are increasingly making standout wines in the Cape. With its Mediterranean climate, South Africa is perhaps home to some of the most Rhône-esque Syrah in the world (and Rhône red blends for that matter). Less full-on than some Aussie Shiraz, these display the floral, peppery and savoury character that makes Cornas or Hermitage so appealing.

As for Cinsault, once South Africa's workhorse grape, it is increasingly being worked into characterful and terroir-marked wines. Light, fresh and pretty, occasionally a little muscular, it makes for wines that have that 'smashable' appeal. It might be billed as 'poor man's Pinot', but it would be wrong to overlook it, especially from Darling where it can have superb aromatics.



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Smart Pinot and Chardonnay:



The Ataraxia chapel in Hemel-en-Aarde

There seem to be complaints in the on-trade that it's increasingly difficult to put Burgundy on a list at a decent price, so a simple Bourgogne Rouge is often £40-£50 a bottle and any 'village' wine a lot more unless it comes from somewhere less fashionable such as the Côte Chalonnaise.

Here's an idea; in the quest to give one's customers value for money, stick a Hemel-en-Aarde or Elgin Pinot or Chardonnay on the list for the same amount instead. Not only should a sommelier not fear that these wines don't age (they do), but in a vintage such as 2017 they are arguably finer, more worthy wines than basic Burgundy.



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Other curiosities:



There are few places in the world where you are likely to come across Touriga Nacional, Tinta Barroca, Mourvedre, Grenache Gris, Palomino, Muscat of Alexandria, Clairette, Vedelho and Harslevelu in close proximity.

Too diverse to really pin down, depending on the place and producer they may be bottled individually or in blends but all are worth exploring.

The reds combine that lovely plummy, savoury character that makes Portuguese reds so appealing, and perfectly suit the dry, Cape climate while also blending well with some of the Syrah being made as well. The same can be said of Mourvedre for which there are some truly exciting wines being made from Swartland to Botsrivier.

The whites meanwhile offer up a varied tasting wheel of salinity, biscuits, turmeric, white flowers, honey, quince, apples and a lot more besides.

They be produced in tiny quantities but these little gems are the hundreds and thousands decorating the top of the South African cake making it all the more delicious.



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Pinotage:



The grape the wine trade loves to hate. Whenever someone expresses their dislike of Chardonnay there's no amount of falling over themselves the Chardonnay-loving trade won't go to 'correct' the deviant in their views and nurture a love of Meursault in every beating heart.

Yet mention an interest in Pinotage and the inverse snobbery can be, at times, alarming. 'Oh, you don't *drink* that do you?'

Admittedly, there's a good reason for this. In the wake of apartheid and the coming of South African wines to the market there was some appalling quality Pinotage that was burnt and rubbery, and green, viciously tannic and over-oaked and just...horrible!

And to an extent there are still some wines like that but things are changing. Anyone who tells you today they still hate Pinotage hasn't been tasting what's being made now at the sharp end of Cape viticulture because if they'd tasted what David & Nadia, B Vintners, Kanonkop, Ashbourne, Lammershoek, Diemersdal, Meerendal and many others are doing with Pinotage today then they wouldn't be saying it.



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For a start, many young producers are stepping back a little and seeing how to do things better. Pinotage doesn't do well in the hottest spots, you need to keep yields down, a bit of whole bunch helps freshness and you hardly need to touch it to get the colour and tannins you need so treat it with kid gloves. And it can express terroir very well (it has Pinot as a parent after all) and it can be muscular and rich or it can be surprisingly dainty and pretty (its other parent is Cinsault).

They still might not be the greatest wines South Africa has to offer but before too long people are going to be taking a lot more interest in this maligned grape.