

## STIRLING WINES: South Africa

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### Introduction

On a day that we published a report on the prospects for the South African beer market, it seems appropriate that we balance this with some commentary on the delights of South African wine.

There has been a tradition of making wine in South Africa since the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, with Jan van Riebeeck, the Cape's first European settler, writing on 6 April 1652, 'Today, praise be to God, wine was pressed for the first time from Cape grapes'. Subsequent immigration by French Huguenot refugees brought further vinous expertise. Indeed in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, Vin de Constance from the estate of Constantia near Cape Town was a world famous wine.

But in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, South African wine never seemed to deliver its potential. First, there were the dark days of Apartheid and the associated sanctions and consumer ill-will. Perhaps even more damaging than the export bans was the lack of contact with the outside world which lead to complacency and distinctly inferior wine-making. This was compounded by vineyards that were significantly affected by viral disease. Then from 2004-2006, the Rand strengthened strongly, making it difficult for South African producers to compete on the global stage.

Today, I believe that South Africa is poised to show the world what it can really do. The vineyards that were planted post-Apartheid are starting to reach maturity. There is a generation of South African wine-makers who have worked outside the country, lapping up the best of New and Old World techniques. The industry is changing from one oriented to bulk 'industrial' production of wine (often destined to be distilled into Cape brandy), to one where there is much greater risk-taking and exciting developments in higher-quality, lower-yield cool climate zones. Finally, the rand is now trading at a level which makes exports very competitive.

One final comment is that high-quality South African wine is not as widely available as it deserves. Partly, this is due to the lack of a large well-capitalized export-oriented domestic player such as Concha y Toro in Chile or Hardy's and Southcorp in Australia. (Indeed, it is notable that

the most successful South African brand in the UK, Kumala, was created by a UK importer, which was subsequently sold to Vincorp and then bought by Constellation. Until recently the brand was not even available in South Africa!) Partly, this is just because South African wines are not yet on the radar screen of the cognoscenti. In short there are superb bargains to be had in the £10-£20 range, especially for someone who is able to cellar reds for 5-10 years.

### The Wine Regions

The wine regions of South Africa are clustered to the North and East of Cape Town. There are two inland wines regions but these are irrigated hot-climate river valleys, oriented to the production of industrial wine. The most famous regions are those near to Cape Town: Constantia, Paarl and Stellenbosch. But there are also exciting developments in newer, cooler-climate regions such as Walker Bay.



### The Wines

The climate in the Western Cape is in general warm Mediterranean, but inland regions can be much warmer, edging into semi-desert in the Karoo. There is also an incredible complexity of local geology and micro-climates due to the influence of altitude and the cooling impact of the sea. This means that there is good wine being produced all over South Africa. For me, there are four styles of wine where South Africa

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produces top-class, sometimes close to world class, wines.

### Cabernet Sauvignon/Bordeaux Blends

Perhaps the most famous wines from the Cape are the Cabernet Sauvignon/Bordeaux blends. I have a personal preference for Cab/Merlot blends over straight Cabernet Sauvignon but there are one or two South African versions which tempt me from the straight and narrow.

**Vergelegen** is a most spectacularly beautiful estate to the East of Cape Town. They make a straight Cab but I think that their so-called Flagship or Prestige Red is much better and indeed gives many Bordeaux Chateau a run for their money at approximately £20/bottle.



This is a wine best kept for 10 years. The 2001 is brilliant and still available, but stay away from the 2002, when the weather across the Cape was pretty dodgy. Vergelegen also make a super-premium wine called V which I think is a bit over-extracted and over-priced; but it was only first produced in 2001 and may prove me wrong.

**Meerlust** is another established winery from the Stellenbosch area, with a Bordeaux blend called Rubicon which has reached icon status.



Once again, the 2001 of this wine is still available and is a great buy.

**Thelema** make what is probably the most consistently great straight Cabernet Sauvignon in South Africa. They claim that the 2004 is one of their best vintages so far. I have not personally



tasted this wine, but it has won a cupboard full of medals. This is another winery with a most amazing location, on the saddle of the Helshoogte pass between Stellenbosch and Franschoek – worth a visit just for the view.

**Veenwouden** is a boutique winery which used to belong to international opera singer Deon van der Walt before he was recently tragically killed. It was only founded in 1993 but has since then collected a raft of awards and 90+ scores. The Classic is as it says: a classic blend of Cabernet



Sauvignon and Merlot with a splash of Cabernet Franc and Malbec. The Vivat Bacchus is a similar blend, but more understated. London-based readers may be interested to know that there is a very good restaurant in Smithfield, owned by South Africans, named after Vivat Bacchus, with the best South African wine list that I have seen in any country.

### Syrah/Shiraz

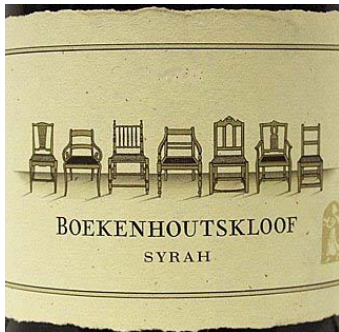
Even though it is Cabernet and its blends that are most famous, I think that the most exciting red wines from South Africa are its Syrah/Shiraz's (see a previous edition of Stirling Wines for a discussion of this great grape with the schizoid name). Much of South Africa is really too warm for a grape from maritime Bordeaux but is perfect suited to the sun- and heat-loving Syrah.

Marc Kent at **Boekenhoutskloof** was the first producer of top-class South African Syrah. He also makes a top-class Cabernet but the Syrah

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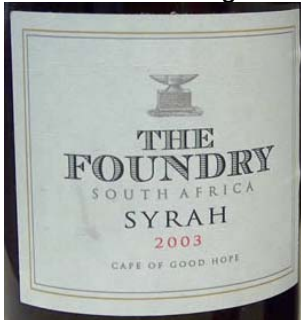
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steals the show. This is a wine that can sit comfortably alongside Hermitage and Côte Rôtie. It consistently wins top prizes in South Africa and 90+ scores in the USA. Oddbins stock it in the UK but wait a few years before diving into it – best after 7+ years.

The wine-maker from Meerlust (see above) has recently set up his own venture called **The Foundry** which even though it's early days is



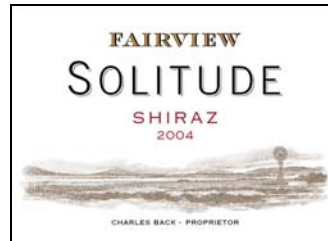
also producing fantastic wines. Interestingly, he adds a splash of the white wine Viognier to this wine in the same way that they do in Côte Rôtie in the Rhône valley.

Charles Back at **Fairview** is most famous for two mid-market wines based on Rhône grapes called: Goats do Roam (Côte du Rhône) and Goats Rôtie (Côte Rôtie) – get it? Well the French didn't and he was unsuccessfully sued



for copyright infringement! These wines are actually very well made and great value for money. **Solitude** is in a different league –

serious grown-up wine that has been aged for 16months in French oak barriques. This is full-bodied stuff, perhaps somewhat more Barossa than Rhône; hence the name Shiraz rather than Syrah.



### Chenin Blanc

When the first grapes were planted in South Africa, they reputedly came from Western France. Indeed there was a strong historic link between the Loire and Holland. Often the wine was distilled before shipment - known as Brandewijn ('burnt wine') in Dutch, from which derives the English word brandy. Since they came from the lower Loire, there is a possibility that these first grapes were Chenin Blanc grapes the workhorse grape for much of Saumur and Anjou.

In South Africa for many years Chenin Blanc was also a workhorse, produces lakes of wine for distillation or cheap table wine called Stein. However, the grape has been rediscovered in recent years and there are some fantastic wines being produced. They are dry but full-bodied wines which go better with roast chicken or Asian food rather than a delicate fish.

My current favourite but hard to get hold of are the wines of a boutique grower called **Jean Daneel**. His Signature White is delicious world-class wine and a snip at approx £15.



The wines of **Spice Route** are much more widely available. This is another venture by Charles Back of Fairview (see above). He founded the winery in the North-West Cape, a warmer area, and relies on bought-in grapes to add to his own. But in his words by 'matching traditional practices in the vineyards with modern, minimalist approaches in the cellar, they produce exceptionally ripe and deep-flavoured wines'. All their wines are excellent value for money, including their Chenin Blanc.



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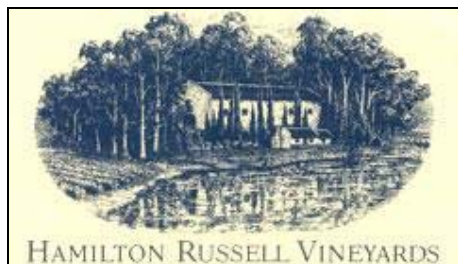


Last-but-not-least for UK readers, the **Wine Society** sells an excellent barrel-fermented 'Exhibition Chenin Blanc' for £10/bottle.

### Chardonnay

South African chardonnays can be very variable in style (and quality) with a slight tendency to over-ripeness and a tad too much oak. However, for the careful stock-picker, there are some great bargains.

One of these is the **Hamilton Russell** chardonnay. This comes from the cool-climate Walker Bay area on the Indian Ocean, to the east of Cape Town. It is truly Burundian in style.



Full-bodied, well balanced oak, with bundles of acidity and a finish that goes on for ever - a relative bargain at approx £15. This estate also makes a world-class Pinot Noir which is on the wine lists of 3\* restaurants – Spain's El Bulli and the UK's Fat Duck.

**Buitenverwachting** is in the area of Constantia on the Eastern slopes of Table Mountain (see photograph below). The climate is slightly warmer here than Walker Bay so the style is slightly less acidic but still delicious, and even more of a bargain at £10. This estate also makes an excellent silky Bordeaux blend called Christine and has a top-class restaurant in the grounds if ever you visit Cape Town.



If you like your Chardonnays big and bold, try **Springfield's Methode Ancienne**. This wine is produced in Robertson, a dry warm area but the soil is limestone, similar to Burgundy. Unlike most New World wineries, Springfield uses wild yeast (not cultured) and no fining/filtration. In their words, with which I fully concur: 'tropical fruit nuances layered by lime and cream – a big wine with classical character!'



### Pinotage

Finally, no description of South African wine would be complete without mention of Pinotage. In 1925, a Stellenbosch University viticulturist crossed Pinot Noir and Cinsaut, then commonly called Hermitage in South Africa, hence the name Pinotage. This grape polarizes. It was long the Chenin Blanc of red wine and forms the base of a great deal of cheap gut rot. Some quality producers are making high quality wines with Pinotage. I have never quite found one I like but then I haven't tried that many either. The consistently highest rated Pinotage is **Kanonkop**



### Buitenverwachting with Table Mountain in the Background



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