

## Stirling Wines: South Africa Revisited

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### Introduction

Over six years ago, one of the early editions of Stirling Wines focused on South Africa, then and now one of my favourite wine regions, not just because of the beauty of its amazing landscapes, but also the incredible value-for-money. Well since then, the quality of the wines has significantly further improved and the value-for-money is still great. So fill your boots!



There has been a tradition of making wine in South Africa since the 17th 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. The Constantia estate was established in 1685; and in the 18th Century, Vin de Constance was a world famous wine, much favoured by Napoleon, who had 30 bottles a month shipped to him in exile.

However, in the late 20th 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 led 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.

However, since then South Africa has started 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 wine-makers who have worked outside the country, lapping up the best of the New and the Old World. 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 Treasury Wine Estates in Australia. [Indeed, it is notable that one of the most successful South African brands in the UK, Kumala, was created by a UK importer, sold to Vincorp, then bought by Constellation, who subsequently sold it to an Australian private equity firm. 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. 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, and white wine-making has come on in leaps and bounds, with old vine Chenin Blanc a particular favourite of mine.

The go-to reference book on South African wine is the Platter guide, published every year, which also awards 5 stars to that year's top releases. I can also recommend the Wines of the New South Africa: Tradition and Revolution by Tim James, for those who want to dive deeper into the region.

### Overview of Wine Regions

The wine regions of South Africa are clustered to the North and East of Cape Town. The inland wine regions are mostly 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 Elgin and Walker Bay, as well as amazing wines coming from old vines in Swartland.

The climate in the Western Cape is in general warm Mediterranean, but inland regions can be much hotter, 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.

Exhibit 1  
Wine growing areas of South Africa

# WINEGROWING AREAS OF SOUTH AFRICA

## WESTERN CAPE

### COASTAL REGION

- Districts:
- SWARTLAND
  - STELLENBOSCH
  - TYGERBERG
  - CAPE POINT
  - CONSTANTIA (Ward)
  - TULBAGH
  - PAARL
  - FRANSCHHOEK VALLEY
  - DARLING

### KLEIN KAROO

- Districts:
- CALITZDORP
  - LANGEBERG-GARCIA

### CAPE SOUTH COAST

- OVERBERG
- WALKER BAY
- SWELLENDAM
- CAPE AGULHAS
- PLETTENBERG BAY
- ELGIN (Ward)

### OLIFANTS RIVER

- Districts:
- LUTZVILLE VALLEY
  - CITRUSDAL VALLEY
  - CITRUSDAL MOUNTAIN

### BREEDE RIVER VALLEY

- Districts:
- BREEDEKLOOF
  - WORCESTER
  - ROBERTSON

### WARDS NOT PART OF A REGION

- CERES
- CEDERBERG
- PRINCE ALBERT VALLEY
- SWARTBERG
- LAMBERT'S BAY

### NORTHERN CAPE

- CENTRAL ORANGE RIVER (Ward)



www.wosa.co.za  
www.varietyisinournature.com

Source: Wines of South Africa

## The Grapes

South Africa produces the full range of international varieties, with Pinot Noir, Syrah and Bordeaux blends, as well as Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay; and I will highlight superb examples of all of these below. However, there are two local specialities.

### 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, the workhorse grape for much of Saumur and Anjou.

In South Africa, for many years Chenin Blanc was also a workhorse, producing lakes of wine for distillation (as recently as 1990, only 30% of South African grapes were made into wine, the rest went into brandy or grape juice) or cheap table wine called Stein. Chenin still accounts for approx 17% of plantings and has been

rediscovered in recent years as a quality grape, with 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.

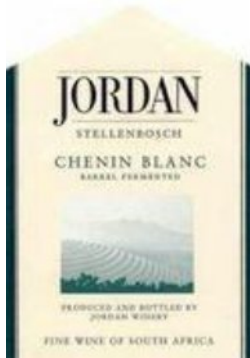
One of my favourites but hard to get hold of are the wines of a boutique grower called Jean Daneel. His Signature White is delicious world-class wine and a snip at just under £20.



I can also recommend the wines of Ken Forrester whose flagship wine FMC is a wonderful, extremely powerful, manifestation of this grape's potential.

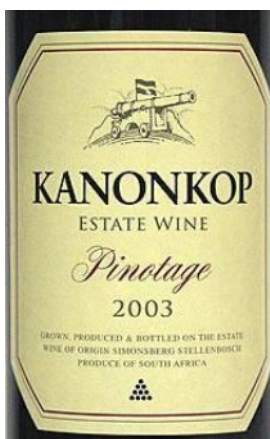


The last of current top three is a wine from the Jordan estate (of which more below). They make a very elegant, extremely attractively priced barrel-fermented Chenin, currently £9 at the Wine Society.



### *Pinotage*

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. However, 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.



### **The Cape & Constantia**

The Cape peninsula is definitely a cool climate by South Africa standards, cooled on both sides by the ocean, well suited for Sauvignon Blanc and white grapes. There are four fragments of the old Constantia estate: Groot Constantia, Klein Constantia and Constantia Uitsig and Buitenverwachting (beyond expectation in Dutch). Buitenverwachting's best wine is arguably an excellent silky Bordeaux blend called Christine.



Further south on the Atlantic side of the Cape of Good Hope is Cape Point who make excellent Sauvignon Blancs, typically with a splash of Semillon to round it out.



In what will become a recurring theme, a number of the vineyards have top-class restaurants, notably Buitenverwachting and Constantia Uitsig (La Colombe)

### **Stellenbosch, Paarl & Franschoek**

These areas to the east and north-east of Cape Town form the traditional heartland of quality South African wine. There is a huge range of micro-climates, elevations and soils, meaning that there is a good home for virtually every grape variety, though arguably most of the sub-region is a little on the hot side for Sauvignon and Pinot Noir. Perhaps the most famous wines from the region 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 GVB Estate Red is much better and indeed gives many Bordeaux Chateaux a run for their money at approximately £20/bottle. This is a wine best kept for 10 years. Vergelegen also make a super-premium wine called V, which in its early days was perhaps a bit over-extracted; but the wine-making has become much more subtle over the years, although I have not tasted a more recent example. Finally, do try Vergelegen's Estate White. This is sumptuous wine, based on the Bordeaux blend of Sauvignon Bland and Semillon with a touch of subtle oak, full-bodied but not flabby, powerful and austere, a wine that can be drunk young but once again will benefit from ageing.



Meerlust is another established winery from the Stellenbosch area, with a Bordeaux blend called Rubicon which has reached icon status, and is on the wine list at the Fat Duck in Bray.



Jordan (sold under Jardin in the USA) make a wide range of white and red wines (including the barrel-fermented Chenin that I mentioned above) but they are probably best known for their Bordeaux Blends (called Cobbler's Hill and Sophia, the latter being a barrel election, both delicious wines age-worthy wines) and their Chardonnays. The Nine Yards is their top Chardonnay, with the 2011 winning 5\* in Platter, also available from the Wine Society in the UK.



Jordan are unique in my knowledge in having a great restaurant on their South African estate *and* also co-owning a restaurant in the City of London, called High Timber, highly recommended for its good food and its awesome collection of top South African wines.

Thelema make what has been for many years one of the most consistently great straight Cabernet Sauvignon in South Africa. This is another winery with a most amazing location, on the saddle of the Helshoogte pass between Stellenbosch and Franschhoek – worth a visit just for the view.

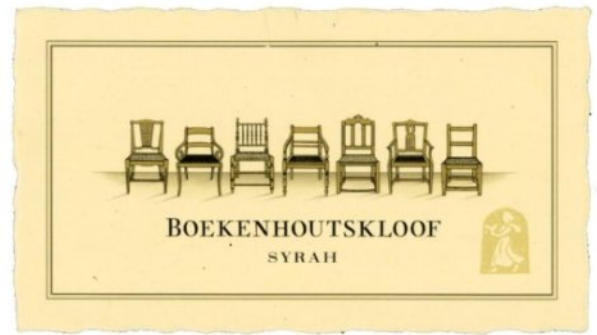


Just up the hill from Thelema is Tokara, another winery with a superb restaurant attached, and even more spectacular views. Once again, for me the Director's Reserve Bordeaux blends are the top picks here, both red and white, with the 2011 White another Platter 5\* wine.



Even though it is Cabernet and its blends that are more famous, I think that the some of 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 perfectly suited to the sun- and heat-loving Syrah.

At the other end of the Franschhoek valley from the Helshoogte pass, Marc Kent at Boekenhoutskloof was the first producer of top-class South African Syrah. He also makes a top-class Cabernet; but the Syrah in my view steals the show, consistently winning top prizes in South Africa and 90+ scores in the USA. Jeroboams stock it in the UK but wait a few years before diving into it – very approachable young but even better after 7+ years.

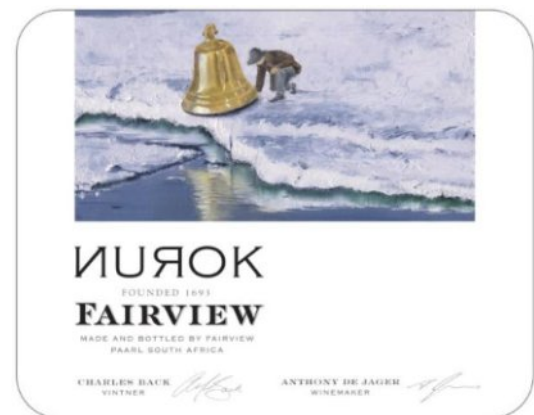


It's interesting to note that six years ago when I first wrote about South Africa, it was unusual for a syrah to feature in Platter, today there are more Syrah/Shiraz than red Bordeaux blends.

Charles Back at Fairview is perhaps best known 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.



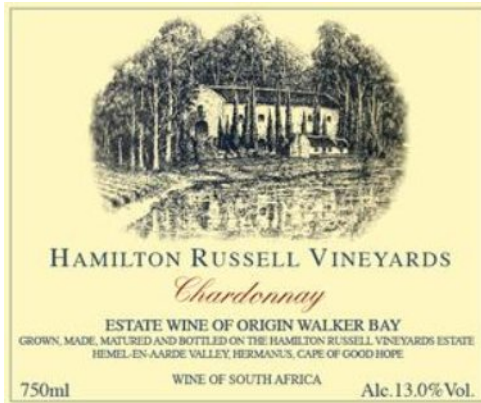
Fairview also make excellent high-end wines, with three 5\* wines this year: a Shiraz (Jakkalsfontein, actually from Swartland – see below), a Chenin Blanc straw wine (La Beryl Blanc), and a white Rhone blend (Nurok).



### Walker Bay, Elgin & Cape Agulhas

In the past, South African Chardonnays were very variable in style (and quality), with a tendency to over-ripeness and a tad too much oak. Although there are still some overblown Dolly Partons, more and more wineries are being established in cooler climate

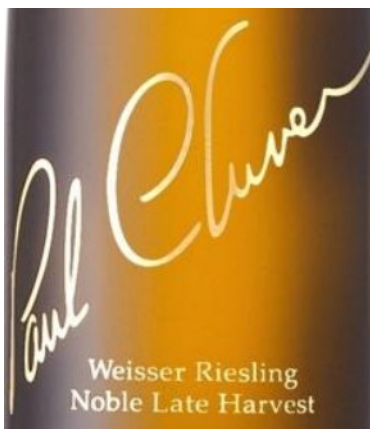
regions. One of the pioneers in this regard was Hamilton Russell, from the cool-climate Walker Bay area on the Indian Ocean, to the south-east of Cape Town. Their flagship Chardonnay from the Hemel-en-Aarde valley is truly Burgundian in style, albeit more Meursault than Chablis.



Full-bodied, well balanced oak, with bundles of acidity and a finish that goes on forever - a relative bargain at approx £18. This estate also makes a world-class Pinot Noir which is on the wine lists of several 3\* restaurants, including El Bulli when it was still open.

Elsewhere in Walker Bay, do try the wines of the relatively established Bouchard Finlayson & newcomer Ataraxia, founded by Kevin Grant the former wine-maker at Hamilton Russell.

To the east of Cape Town, another cool climate region that is developing rapidly is Elgin. This is fruit farming country, dominated by orchards of apples and pears, which seems particularly well suited to growing Sauvignon Blanc. My favourite grower in the area is Paul Cluver, whose best wines in my view are his Pinot Noir (especially the top Seven Flags) and his Rieslings, both dry and above all his Noble Late Harvest (a 5\* botrytis wine which won Platter's White Wine of the Year in 2011)



Finally, the most southerly point of South Africa is not the Cape of Good Hope but rather Cape Agulhas, over

200km south-east of Cape Town. This cool climate region is one to watch.

### Robertson

If you like your Chardonnays big and bold, try Springfield's Méthode 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!'



### Swartland

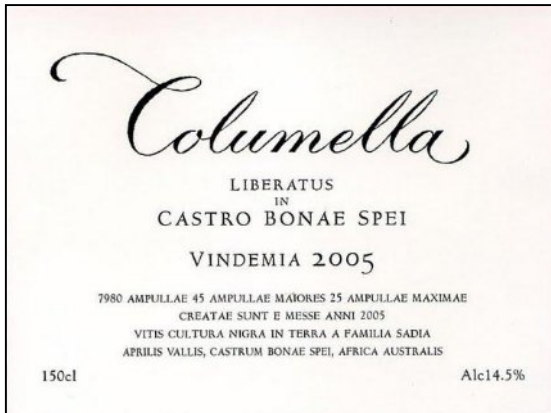
Last, but definitely not least, is the region of Swartland, due north of Cape Town. When I wrote my last piece on South Africa six years ago, I did not even mention Swartland, which historically was filled with high-yielding, irrigated vineyards destined for Cape brandy. However, today it is a hot bed of innovation, based on very old vines (up to 100 years old Chenin Blanc), and home to a number of rising stars.

The pioneer of this region was Charles Back of Fairview who in 1998 set up Spice Route, harvesting old vine Chenin Blanc and planting a wide range of Mediterranean red grapes, mostly French but also Tempranillo, Barbera and Zinfandel. For my money, his old vine Chenin is still the pick of the crop, and his 2011 vintage won a 5\* in Platter.

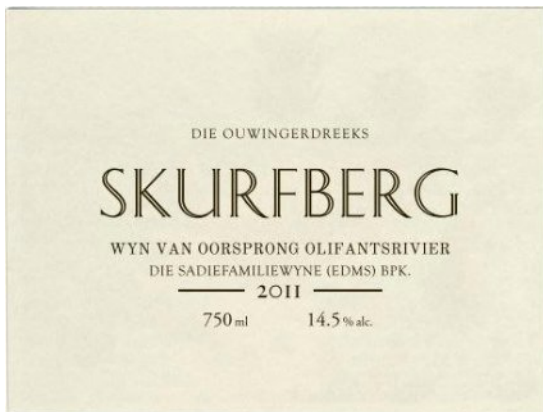


Eben Sadie was the first wine maker at Spice Route but left after three years to set up his own eponymous

firm. He burst on the scene in 2001 with Columella, a massive block-buster of a wine, based on Syrah with a splash of Mourvèdre. I found the initial vintages a little bit too full-throttle; but over the years the wine has become a lot more subtle, using older oak and 'cement eggs' for maturation.

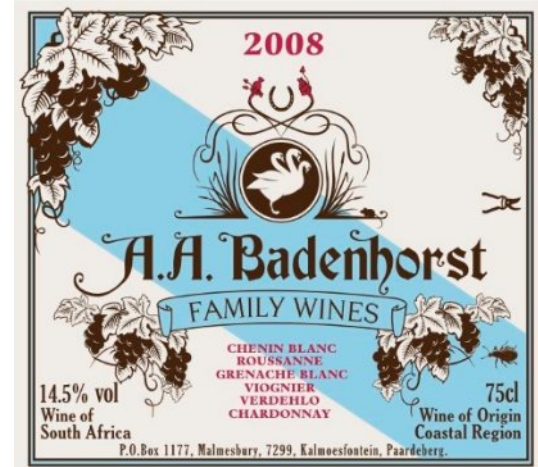


His equivalent flagship white is Palladius a complex blend of Chenin Blanc and Mediterranean white grapes. However, I find I prefer his second wines called Sequillo, available in both red and white. He has also released a series of Old Vine wines. I have not tasted them; but one of these (Skrufberg, another old vine Chenin Blanc) has won 5\* this year alongside Columella.

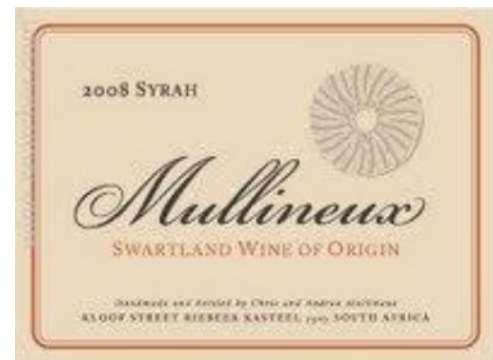


The second representative of the three younger musketeers is Adi Badenhorst. Adi also came from a flagship winery, in his case Rustenberg, home of the renowned John X Merriman Bordeaux blend. However, in Swartland, he left his classicism behind and makes two flagship wines. A red blend along classic Rhone GSM lines (66% Shiraz, 16% Mourvèdre, 14% Grenache & 4% Cinsaut). And a white blend made from up to 10 different varieties; the 2009 vintage had: 29% Chenin Blanc, 23% Roussanne, 10% Grenache Blanc, 11% Viognier, 2% Verdelho, 11% Chardonnay, 5% Colombard, 5% Grenache Gris, 2% Semillon & 2% Clairette Blanche.

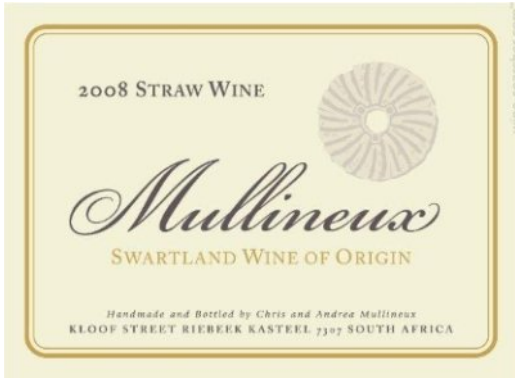
Utterly confusing, but utterly delicious. The 2010 white is another Platter 5\* wine.



Our third musketeer is Chris Mullineux, co-founder of Mullineux Family Wines, together with his American wife Andrea. Chris follows the same path as Eben and Adi in terms of seeking out old vines. However, his wines have slightly fewer varieties within, and to my mind a lighter touch. His flagship reds are two single vineyard Syrahs – Granite & Schist; but it was his lesser 'Family' Syrah that this year won Red Wine of the Year in Platter. The author has to admit to sampling a bottle of this wine with great pleasure last night. As it says on the label: 'An honest wine, fermented with indigenous yeast, bottled unfiltered and unfiltered, with minimal addition of sulphur'. Incredibly toothsome today, and likely to improve with another few years of age, for those who have a sufficiently iron will to cellar it rather than drink it, and great value at approx £18/bottle.



Chris also makes a 5\* winning Straw Wine, a dessert wine made from air-dried Chenin Blanc grapes, in the same way as a French vin de paille or an Italian passito. Liquid gold that would give most Sauternes a very good run for their money.



*Source for wine labels: company websites, used with permission.*

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