



# The International Wine Review

Double Issue  
February 2012

## Report # 30: The Wines of South Africa

### Introduction



South Africa's reputation for making high quality wine is centuries' old, but the world largely forgot it by the time apartheid ended less than 20 years ago. Since then the industry has rapidly modernized, and South

African winemakers have reacquainted themselves with the rest of the wine world. In November 2011 we traveled to South Africa to meet many of these winemakers and to taste their wines. Although we had tasted South African wines in America, we were amazed by what we found. Not only is the wine scene highly dynamic with scores of new, young winemakers and freshly planted vineyards in remote regions, but South Africa is today producing some of the finest wines in the world.

Despite producing more wine than Chile and about half that of the U.S., South African wine is still little known in other countries. While most of the grape varieties (excepting Pinotage) are familiar, the appellations, wineries, brand names, and winemakers by and large are not. The structure of the South African wine industry—many family-run, small-scale producers—makes the task of learning about and understanding wine there all the more challenging for the consumer and wine professional alike.

In this report, the International Wine Review traces the long history of wine in South Africa and explores the diverse wine-growing regions of South Africa. These regions include Constantia, located within Cape Town's city limits; Stellenbosch, the region most familiar to wine lovers; the warmer, inland areas like Swartland; and the vineyards of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean coasts. Similar to California, many of the best vineyards are located within easy driving distance of one of the world's most beautiful cities, in this case Cape Town.

The focus of our analysis is on the country's premium and ultra-premium wines, which cost above \$15 per bottle in the US

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market. South Africa produces many high volume, high value entry-level wines that are exported to the US and other markets. But we think it is the premium wines that are distinctive and are of the greatest interest to wine lovers. We therefore profile

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the country's premium wine producers, evaluate their wines, and identify the best wines in each major variety and blend category.

We tasted more than 750 wines for this report covering all major varieties and styles. Our wine reviews include the country's workhorse grape—Chenin Blanc—which was brought to the country from the Loire Valley in the 17th century. Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay are the other popular white varieties. The reds include, in addition to South Africa's own Pinotage, both Bordeaux and Rhône varieties with Syrah enjoying particular attention in recent years. Arguably the best red wines are the Bordeaux, Rhône and Pinotage blends.

In our view, the high quality of South African wines is a consequence of several factors discussed throughout the report: intelligent vineyard management practices, including the careful selection of vineyard sites and grape varieties; a strong commitment by a growing number of small producers to craft terroir-based wines; the expertise applied in winemaking across the board, including the use of minimalist winemaking techniques whenever possible; and a profound commitment to protecting and conserving South Africa's bio-diversity through sustainable farming, including organic and biodynamic practices. All these factors augur well for the future of the industry.

Unfortunately, a surprising number of world class South African wines are not even imported to the US. South Africa's share of US imports is small, and the percent of South African wines sold in the US is tiny. There's obviously huge upside potential for South African wine in the US, and marketing of the type provided by the Wines of South Africa (WOSA) can have large payoffs.

Finally, this report examines wine tourism in South Africa. While the country is located far from most foreign wine lovers, it offers huge rewards to those who visit its wine country. Wine tourism is better developed in South Africa than any country we know. Most wineries have excellent tasting facilities, and many have superb restaurants with spectacular mountain vineyard views offering the special wild game and seafood of the country. Most wineries practice sustainable viticulture and actively protect the Cape's unique flora, and visitors can combine tasting wine with viewing the protea, fynbos, and renosterbos that constitute the world's smallest plant kingdom. [Photos can be seen on our Facebook album.]

**Acknowledgements.** We thank, first and foremost, Wines of South Africa and its dedicated staff—Su Birch(CEO), André Morgenthal, Matome Mbatha, Rory Callahan, Helene Oosthuizen, and others—for their support in helping us get to know the wines and winemakers of South Africa. In all our wine travels, we have never worked with a more professional and supportive wine marketing organization. We also greatly appreciate the knowledge and advice given to us by the many wine professionals in South Africa, especially, Michael Bampfield-Duggan, Irina von Holdt, Neil Pendock, Dave Hughes, and James Pietersen. Thanks, also, to the people in the wine industry who provided information to us and helped correct our mistakes, including Ina Smith, Manager, Chenin Blanc Association, Edmund Terblanche, Chairman, Shiraz South Africa, Pieter de Waal, Secretary, Sauvignon Blanc Interest Group and Christian Eedes, former Editor of Wine Magazine. Thanks, also, to Cathy Brewer and Maree Louw for permission to use their photos. We also express our appreciation to the many US importers who provided us with samples and technical information. Many of these importers see their mission as familiarizing Americans with South African wine. Bryce McNamee of Boutique Wines, Theresa Morrison of 34 South, Fran Kysela of Kysela Imports, and Mark Longsworth of Country Vintners all advised and educated us. Finally, we thank the many winemakers and others who spent their time teaching us about South African wine during our 15-day tour of the wine lands. Some spent an extraordinary amount of time with us, and we express our heartfelt appreciation to them.

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