

# Rainbow Nation

South Africa may be the oldest of the New World wine nations, with records showing the first wines made from Cape grapes in 1652, but apartheid and sanctions had effectively imprisoned her wines inside the country until recently. The Cape wine industry was reborn to the outside world in the early 1990s with the release of Nelson Mandela and since then changes have been enormous. Until the famous walk to freedom, South African wine in Britain had been limited to a little KWV tucked under the counter for diehard Cape lovers, immune to appearing PC. The first wave of new wine was all "love at first sight", combined with the "feel-good factor" of supporting the new regime. However, even in 1995 the industry was dominated by stubborn (mostly) Afrikaners, who couldn't quite believe that their wines did not match up to the best in the world and certainly didn't like being told so (especially by women – a real problem as so many major buyers are female). Since then, commercial reality has had to set in – buyers and consumers will only keep coming back if the wine inside the bottle actually tastes nice and is fair value. At least here the Cape has a flying start - with the Rand close to an all time low, the raw cost of wine from South Africa is rock bottom and it doesn't have to travel as far as some of its Antipodean competitors. This should make South Africa a happy hunting ground for the wine lover.

## Root and Branch

South Africa is the 8<sup>th</sup> largest wine producer in the world, yet her vineyards cover a little less land than Bordeaux, shared between around 4500 growers and 350 wineries. The industry has a history of producing bulk white wine for bags and brandy distillation, so the varieties planted don't exactly match international demand. In 1999, the crush was 85% white grapes with Chenin Blanc and Colombard accounting for nearly half the harvest. Reds are being planted frantically, but there's a shortage of cuttings and it takes time for nurseries to respond. In addition, many growers simply do not understand why growing grapes for quality wine is different. Wine drinking is not such a widespread habit and for many growers, it's just another fruit crop among the orchards. They see their responsibility stop once the truck of grapes is tipped out at the co-operative.

What South Africa definitely still lacks is an icon wine like Penfold's Grange, Screaming Eagle or Almaviva to raise the image and aspirations of the industry. There's no strong mid-market producer brand either though Kumala and Arniston Bay are clearly setting themselves at this market, so successfully dominated by the likes of Jacobs Creek, Lindemans and Gallo. South Africa is still very polarised between the smaller estates who, if their wines are any good, are perpetually sold out (and thus difficult to find in the UK) and the big bulk concerns who need to shift volume and are prepared to sell cheap to do so.

## A Touch of the "Flu"

Most of the Cape's vineyards are infected with virus (either leafroll or fanleaf). Just as with influenza, there's no actual cure, and with vines all you can do is learn to live with it or grub up the sick plants and start again. The real problem with virus infection (especially for reds) is that the vine struggles to ripen its fruit giving thin colours and lean, mean wines. This explains a lot about the traditional Cape style of winemaking – stick the wine in barrel until the tannins soften – but by then what little fruit there was has long gone.

Today's approach means managing the vineyards to reduce crop load and keeping leaf canopies well-trimmed to expose the berries to plenty of sun – a difficult concept for the fruit farming mentality. The alternative is replanting with

certified healthy material. Unfortunately, strict quarantine means there's only so much available and not always the best clones. The industry is still smarting from the discovery in the mid 1980s that most of the vines sold by the nurseries as Chardonnay were actually a grape called Auxerrois. Worse still, many growers have found that their so-called healthy vines were infected after all, or rapidly got zapped again by the mealy bug that carries the disease with it.

#### Passionate about Pinotage

California has its Zinfandel, Chile its Carmenere and Argentina its Malbec, while for a band of enthusiasts in the Cape, Pinotage is the great red hope. It was first produced in 1924 as an experimental cross between Cinsaut (known locally as Hermitage) and Pinot Noir. Just 4 seedlings hung on in a forgotten corner till the 1940s, but it was in 1959 when Pinotage hit the top spot with a major show trophy.

Pinotage is a funny old grape which doesn't much resemble either parent in colour or flavour. It's a real maverick in the winery (perhaps no surprise when you remember what a tricky beast its daddy Pinot Noir can be). Ferment it too warm and it reeks of rusty nails and lollipops; too cool and it's all acetone and nail varnish; macerate it too long and it can be nastily bitter. Understanding the Pinotage recipe is getting better, with the formation of the Pinotage Association who endlessly debate the technical stuff (unless the rugby is on). Recent tastings suggest that Pinotage shows best as a medium to full-bodied wine to emphasize the plum and black cherry fruit, often combined with a touch of spice and hints of banana. There's still a big debate over use of wood – French oak is more common - but the old or new argument is still going on. For all the technology, gut-feel still counts for a lot. Beyers Truter, who is the greatest evangelist for Pinotage, points out there's no substitute for going out into the vineyards "you have to taste and spit – if the spit is pink it's not ripe – it has to be purple" He's made wine at Kanoncop since graduating and he certainly talks enough to live up to a sign on the winery wall "Pinotage is a wine made of woman's tongues and lion's hearts. After drinking a sufficient quantity of it, one can talk forever and fight the devil"

Look out for the inky intense Kanoncop Pinotage (around £12 Majestic, Oddbins) or the lighter deliciously fruity Beyerskloof Pinotage, also made by Truter (£5.49 to £6.49 Unwins, Oddbins and virginwines.com). Other good Pinotages that you should be able to find are Fairview and Spice Route (£5.99 Waitrose). Incidentally Kanoncop is also a leading candidate for icon status with the multi-award winning and impressive Paul Sauer (it may seem pricey at around £15 in Majestic/Oddbins but is an incredible amount of wine for the money). Baby brother Kadette (£5.99 Majestic/Safeway) lives up to the estate reputation too.

#### A Pot of White Gold

With the ABC (Anything But Chardonnay) movement growing ever stronger, a group of Cape producers are pinning their hopes on Chenin Blanc. Originally a Loire white (used for Vouvray and Saumur), its old local name of Steen has been dropped and the area it covers has fallen to around 21% of vineyards. It's mostly produced at high yields for the mass market, but in amongst all this are patches of gnarled old bush vines. Fruit from these low-yielding vines, once separated and handled with care are capable of producing very appealing, if not world shattering, whites. Most producers are going for a little barrel fermentation, but without obvious oak. As with Pinotage, many are difficult to track down in the major retailers – but look out for Villiera Chenin (Thresher/Bottoms Up around £6), L'Avenir Chenin (Unwins £6.99), Fairview Chenin (Waitrose £4.99) and Kanu (virginwines.com £7.99) in a fuller oaked style.

As for other whites, there are some decent Chardonnays to be found, as you would expect from this easy going international traveller, in spite of the Cape's late start with the real thing. Producers like Danie de Wet (widely stocked), Glen Carlou (Waitrose £7.99), Longridge (Oddbins £7.99) and Thandi (Waitrose £5.99) are well worth a taste, but it may be Sauvignon Blanc that has the greater claim to distinction. Pioneers like Neil Ellis were among the first to seek out cooler areas like Elgin and his Groenenkloof Sauvignon (Safeway £7.99) is a wonderfully intense and aromatic example. Klein Constantia from one of the oldest wine farms in the Cape is another good one – when you can get it (£7.49 Oddbins)

### Spice Notes

While Pinotage has its outspoken fans, it may well be Shiraz that is South Africa's true red hope. Of the international invaders, it's now the third biggest of the noble reds with 30% of all new red vines planted in 2000, limited only by shortages from the nurseries. A couple of Shiraz/Syrah wines are among contenders for icon status with wines like Stellenzicht's stellar 1994 and 1997 Syrahs and the stunning Boekenhoutskloof 1997 made by Marc Kent (sadly the vineyard is now under an industrial estate though Marc did rescue some cuttings). Shiraz seems to be a more consistent performer than the Bordeaux varieties, in spite of virus problems. Better clones are becoming available so Shiraz is definitely a variety to watch.

Marc Kent also makes the superb value Porcupine Ridge (Asda £5.99) and other recommendations include Graham Beck's The Ridge (£12.99 selected Safeway) and his cheaper Coastal Shiraz. Charles Back's Fairview Shiraz is around £6 in Parisa Unwins and Tesco and his special selection Cyril Back (Waitrose £8.99). Other good wines are Delheim (Thresher £7.99), Spice Route and Neil Ellis (though these may be tricky to find). Finally, as part of a Rhone-style mixture, Charles Back's Goats do Roam is a tasty red while the rosé is a surprisingly delicious mouthful and a revelation for anyone who has not tried pink wine for a while (£4.99 Tesco/Oddbins).

### Righting the Wrongs

For a first time visitor to the Cape, the sight of the corrugated shanty townships of the Cape Flats is shocking and the sense of shock is heightened by the wealthy greenery and Cape Dutch architecture of the winelands.

The wine industry is built on white foundations and there are around 350 years of wrongs and injustices to right. There's been a lot of talk about empowerment and workers co-operatives, but it's a big project with a massive need for education, skills training and changing the culture of dependency. Learning to take decisions is important and as Victor Titus of New Beginnings points out "people need to be allowed to foul up too." Some welfare changes are not obvious – provision of housing may seem generous, but it leaves workers vulnerable if they want to change jobs, and probably homeless when they retire. Producers like Jeff Grier at Villiera have quietly improved the lot of their workers, while Charles Back (Fairview and Spice Route) has been described as a "visionary with a social conscience" and prefers to pay higher wages along with providing a crèche so women can work too.

There's 40% unemployment overall in the Cape, but the wine industry cannot afford to employ more people and still be competitive. However, "if the industry can grow there will be more to share" points out Trevor Steyn of Thandi. One problem is that wine is not really part of black culture (beer and spirits are the

drinks of choice) so it's not an aspirational career for young blacks, though there is a growing black professional class who are taking up the wine habit.

Look out for names like Fair Valley, Tukulú, Winds of Change and Freedom Road – all the result of community empowerment projects. Thandi's Elgin Chardonnay is a particularly stylish elegant wine that shows that "feel good" can taste good too and its red partners Cabernet (£6.99 Waitrose) and Pinot Noir (£6.99 Tesco) are impressive too.

#### The Way Ahead

There's no doubt that South Africa still has many challenges ahead. The industry may be wedged between a rock and a hard place today, but with innovative winemakers and an increasing understanding of the potential of the best vineyards, Cape wines look set to make waves over the next few years.

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