

Client: Ehrmanns Ltd
Source: The Daily Telegraph (Weekend)
Date: 14 November 2009
Page: 7
Circulation: 801782
Size: 734cm2
Value: 18386.7

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FOOD & DRINK



By Jonathan Ray

10 of the best South African wines

From ripe cheninins to silky pinots, South Africa has a winning mix

South Africa has come a long way. During its isolation, most of the country's wines were tired and dreary, with the reds often tasting of burnt rubber and the whites of acid drops. But since then there has been a dramatic increase in quality.

South Africa is currently the world's ninth largest wine producer with more than 600 wineries and 6,000 wines. It is the fastest growing wine-supplying country in Britain,

with a 12.1 per cent share of the market, hot on the heels of Italy and France (13 and 13.1 per cent, respectively).

Much of this is driven by the big brands such as Arniston Bay and Kumala, but the top end has played its part, too, with fabulous wines to be enjoyed from the likes of Thelema, Tokara, Hamilton Russell, Vergelegen, Meinert, Iona, Raats Family, Meerlust, Kanonkop, Boschendal, Boekenhoutskloof, Jordan, Morgenster and Rustenberg. South Africa now competes

in every category, with crisp sauvignons and creamy chardonnays; honeyed chenin blancs and silky pinots. Even pinotage, notorious as something of an acquired taste, is producing some wonderful fruit-driven wines.

Next year's football World Cup will be held in South Africa and to help you start preparing your palate here is my top 10.



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1 2009 Ken Forrester Cape Breeze Chenin Blanc, 13%vol, South Africa (£4.98; Asda)

Ken Forrester knows his chenin blanc inside out, and his so-called FMC (Forrester Meinert Chenin) is a much-loved classic (and highest-ever scoring South African white in *Wine Spectator*). This entry-level version might sound like a shampoo or a Dulux paint, but it's a great value introduction to the grape, with crisp, sweet-edged fruit and a dry finish. An ideal crowd-pleaser for parties.

2 2009 Flagstone Noon Gun Dry White, 13.5%vol, South Africa (£4.99 reduced from £6.99 until Dec 1; Tesco)

Bruce Jack, one of the nicest and quirkiest of all SA winemakers, shocked many by signing up with the world's largest wine producer, Constellation. Flagstone, housed in a former dynamite factory, is his baby, though, and he vows he'll be left to his own devices. This chenin blanc/viognier/sauvignon blend is a typical Jack charmer, being light, aromatic and fruity. Delicious with grilled sea bass.

3 2008 Beyerskloof Pinotage, 14%vol, South Africa (£5.99 if you buy 3, otherwise £8.99; Wine Rack)

Pinotage, a cross between cinsault and pinot noir, is South Africa's USP, loved for its fruit by some, dismissed as tired and redolent of burnt rubber by others. In the hands of Beyerskloof's Beyers Truter,

one of the grape's most vociferous supporters, it works a dream. Here, his entry-level version is ripe, juicy and full of spicy plum fruit, with no hint of rubber. Enjoy with slow roast belly of pork.

4 2009 Stellar Organics Syrah Rosé, 13.5%vol, South Africa (£6.05; Asda, Budgens, Londis, Spar)

South Africa is strong on Fairtrade and Stellar was the first organic winery in the world to be so accredited. The winery gets its fruit from farms along the northern boundary of Olifant's River and processes around 4,500 tons of organic grapes a year. This pink syrah is hardly complex, just delightfully fruity and off-dry in the mouth, with a dryish, peppery finish. Serve it well-chilled at parties, or with stuffed red peppers or roasted root vegetables.

5 2007 Bellingham Bernard Series Old Vine Chenin Blanc, 14.5%vol, South Africa (£8.99; Majestic)

Chenin blanc does better in South Africa than anywhere else outside the Loire Valley, and this from Bellingham's Bernard Series (formerly the Maverick range) is a first-rate example of real style. Made from 40-year-old, high-altitude bush vines, it has wonderfully concentrated rich, ripe fruit with hints of peach, apricot and cream. A touch full-flavoured for an aperitif, it works really well with fish pie or creamy mushroom pasta.

6 2007 Paul Cluver Weisser Riesling Noble Late Harvest, 12%vol, South Africa (£11.49 per 37.5cl; selected Waitrose stores and www.waitrosewine.com)

Andries Burger of Paul Cluver Estate makes smashing wines and I've long been a fan of the estate's pinot noir and their classy gewürztraminer. This is a corker too: a late-picked, botrytised, cool-climate riesling, packed with concentrated honeyed apple/peach flavours and a zingy acidity. It's great with desserts such as *tarte tatin*, but even better with gooey blue cheese.

7 2005 Iona The Gunnar, 14%vol, South Africa (£11.95-£14.95; Really Fine Wine Co 0131 669 7716, Swig Wines 08000 272272, Hic Wines 01977 550047)

Iona is celebrated for its chardonnays and sauvignons and does a fine syrah, too (and a brand new Noble Late Harvest sauvignon, which is gorgeous). This blended red, from cabernet, merlot and petit verdot, is a belter as well. Inimitably SA of course, it also has a touch of Left Bank bordeaux style and is smooth and rounded with luscious ripe fruit. Enjoy with roast loin of venison.

8 Graham Beck Brut NV, 13%vol, South Africa (£12.99; Waitrose, Wholefoods 020 7368 4500, DJ Foodfare 020 8748 5974)

I've always enjoyed Graham Beck's sparklers, made in the champagne method under the supervision of the legendary Pieter "Bubbles" Ferreira. This 50-50 blend of chardonnay and pinot noir from the Robertson region is about as good as it gets for a non-champagne fizz, being crisp and clean, but toasty and *brioche*-like too. A cracking aperitif.

9 2001 Morgenhof Cape Late Bottled Vintage, 17.5%vol, South Africa (£16.99; Cellar Door Wines 01727 854488, Wright Wine Co 01756 700886)

This is scrumptious stuff, the Cape's answer to the Douro Valley. Made from 100 per cent tinta barroca, one of port's major grapes, and aged for four years in French oak, it has raisins, liquorice and ripe damsons on the palate and a rich, succulent finish. Enjoy as you would any LBV port, with cheese, chocolate puddings or a hearty Cuban cigar.

10 2007 Hamilton Russell Pinot Noir, 13%vol, South Africa (£24.99; Wine Society, Harvey Nichols)

The Hemel-en-Aarde Valley, near Hermanus, is home to some fascinating wines. Although nobody agrees on exactly where the prime valley starts and ends, it's fair to say that Hamilton Russell put the region on the map with its pinots and chardonnays. Known as the most "Burgundian" of SA's pinots, this is as elegant and silky as they come, with a touch of vegetal spice and dark berry fruit. Perfect with chicken and truffle risotto.

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READER OFFER

Château Haut-Brion has organised a spectacular dinner at Calcot Manor, nr Tetbury, Glos, to be presented by HRH Prince Robert of Luxembourg, President of Château Haut-Brion, on Thursday, Nov 26. Champagne reception and five-course dinner with matching vintage wines. Tickets, £190, 0845 863 0996



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