

South African wine in the 21st century

By Christian Eedes

Introduction

Out of all the world's wine-producing nations, South Africa is unique in knowing the exact date on which its wine industry began, thanks to the entry on 2 February 1659 in the diary of Jan van Riebeeck, official of the Dutch East India Company and First Commander of the Cape: "Today, praise be to God, wine was made for the first time from Cape grapes."

In one sense, then, the South African wine industry is very well established. In another, it could be said that it dates no further back than some 20 years, 11 February 1990 being the date that Nelson Mandela walked free from Victor Verster Prison in Paarl, a watershed moment in the political and social transformation of the country.

The role of KWV during the 20th century

South Africa's transition to a democracy in the mid-1990s might have surprised the doomsayers in terms of the relative lack of upheaval which accompanied it, but it precipitated some major changes in the wine industry, the old regulated regime giving way to a few mass-market players and a multitude of niche producers.

To help understand just how rigid and unable to adapt the industry was, here follows a potted history of the late 19th and early 20th century. The dreaded root louse *Phylloxera* devastated the Cape vineyards during the 1880s but once the remedy was found of grafting wine-grape bearing *Vitis vinifera* onto *Phylloxera*-resistant American rootstock, the Cape vineyards were replanted. And hugely so, as the large influx of immigrants attracted by the discovery of gold and diamonds in the sub-continent at around the same time prompted expansion in anticipation of increased demand.

However, the second Boer War (1899–1902) between the British Empire and the Afrikaans-speaking Boers meant sales of wine decreased at home and abroad and yet wine farmers who had geared up for mass production continued to make wine they could not sell.

Large surpluses and low prices became the order of the day at the start of the 20th century. Super co-operative the Ko-operatiewe Wijnbouwers Vereniging van Zuid-Afrika (KWV) was formed with full government backing in 1918 as a consequence and it was to rule on every aspect of the wine industry until the mid-1990s.

KWV's masterstroke in addressing the issue of oversupply was to make superfluous wine grapes disappear into brandy spirit and grape juice concentrate. One specific power it was vested with was fixing minimum prices paid to producers and payment soon became based on quantity not quality. In terms of a quota system introduced in 1957, it also came to decide where and whether wine grapes could be grown.

Other important developments

In 1925, Pinotage came into being when Pinot Noir was crossed with Cinsaut (then known as Hermitage

and hence the contraction) to give a wine with the nobility of the former and the profligacy of the latter. The first Pinotage to be marketed was in 1961 – a 1959 vintage under the Lanzerac label.

In the 1950s, South Africa was ahead of other New World wine countries in terms of wine technology, in particular leading the way in terms of pioneering the use of cold fermentation techniques which allowed for lighter, drier, fresher, more aromatic white wine. A particular success was the launch in 1959 of low-cost, semi-sweet white wine Lieberstein by important producer-wholesaler Stellenbosch Famers' Winery. Consumers who had never even considered drinking wine developed the habit and Lieberstein was a huge success, sales topping 31-million litres by 1964, making it the world's largest selling branded wine at that time.

Sadly, the momentum created by Lieberstein ran out: South African Breweries, the country's powerful beer producer, stepped into ensure that wine didn't steal any more domestic market share, while KWV bureaucracy blocked the cultivation of fashionable grape varieties with the result that the South African wine offering was out of tune with international demand. South Africa, for instance, did not have access to Chardonnay plant material until the early 1980s when forward-thinking producers opted to smuggle it into the country illegally!

Real efforts to unlock the tourism potential of the beautiful Cape winelands, began with the establishment of the Stellenbosch wine route in 1971. The brainchild of the late Neil Joubert of Spier, the late Frans Malan of Simonsig, the late Stevie Smit of Koopmanskloof and Spatz Sperling of Delheim, it was the first organised network of wineries allowing the visitor to experience the product of the vine on site. Official wine routes in other wine regions blossomed in the years to come, counting 18 in total at the moment, which includes a brandy route.

Terroir is the notion that wines should taste of the place where the grapes grow but how to bring this to life and make it matter to the consumer? South Africa's Wine of Origin (WO) scheme came about in 1973, meaning that it has some of the most intricate and well established legislation of any of the New World wine producing countries when it comes to defining wine producing appellations. Today the WO classification recognises 'geographical units', 'regions', 'districts', 'wards' and 'single vineyards'.

In terms of geographical units, it is important to notice that currently there are five demarcated, namely Western Cape, Northern Cape, Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo, meaning that it is more appropriate to think of 'South African wine' rather than 'Cape wine' when referring to the industry as a whole. Plantings in the arid Northern Cape are spread out over some 300km and depend on flood irrigation from the Orange River, South Africa's largest inland waterway; plantings in the summer rainfall area of KwaZulu-Natal are recent and remain small.

The industry today

In the aftermath of the ANC coming to power, KWV relinquished its statutory powers, converted from a co-operative into a company and sought to enter the domestic market (from which it had previously been excluded). By 1999, the South African wine industry found itself without statutory surplus removal and minimum wine price support. On the plus side, international trade sanctions that had been in place

since the 1980s as a protest against Apartheid were lifted and the industry again had access to international markets. Things would never be the same again.

The way the industry is structured now is that there are two or three corporations accounting for the vast majority of the branded wholesale wine business and then an ever-increasing amount of boutique wineries which aspire to operate at the premium end of the market, with a few mid-sized operators in between.

Of the corporations, Distell (arising out of a merger between Distillers Corporation and Stellenbosch Farmers' Winery in 2000) is by far the largest, thought to control some 70% of the domestic wine and spirits market and having an annual turnover in excess of R7.9 billion (about \$1.1 billion). Other significant players (some for export only) are Accolade Wines South Africa (which owns the Kumala brand), DGB, FirstCape Vineyards, The Company of Wine People (which owns the Arniston Bay brand), Namaqua, Spier and, of course, KWV.

For an indication of how significantly the industry has altered over the last 20 years, consider that the number of primary grape growers has dropped from 4 786 in 1991 to 3 527 in 2011. For the many grape growers whose existence had depended on the safety nets provided by KWV, the end of regulation was challenging.

The number of wine cellars crushing grapes has increased dramatically over the same time period, up from 212 in 1991 to 582 in 2011, this due to the unabated rise in private cellars, 12 being registered during the course of 2011 alone, bringing the total to 505. Though their number declined marginally to 258 in 2011, reversing a long-term trend, micro-cellars vinifying fewer than 100 tons make up approximately 44% of all producers and remain a powerful force in the industry. These are generally the most cutting-edge producers in terms of both production techniques as well as marketing.

There were 52 co-operatives in South Africa in 2011 (down from 70 in 1991) most sourcing wines from the vineyards in their immediate proximity. The decline in number is again due to the industry's efforts to come into line with free market principles: many former co-ops (such as Boland) converted themselves to private companies, in order to free themselves of their obligation to take in grapes grown by their members whether or not they had commercial appeal and irrespective of their physical condition.

As for KWV, it now has 60% black ownership: chairman of the board is former trade unionist Marcel Golding, while the chief winemaker is Australian Richard Rowe, and there can be no greater demonstration of how far the South African wine industry has come than that.

How SA stacks up

According to the latest available data (2011 provisional), South Africa is the eighth largest wine producer in the world, producing 9.665 million hectolitres a year, putting it behind Chile in seventh place with 10.463 million hectolitres and ahead of Germany in ninth place with 9.611 million hectolitres (France and Italy vie year on year for biggest global producer overall).

Of the country's estimated total annual harvest of 1 083.5 m litres in 2012, 78% was devoted to the making of wine, 5.7% to wine for brandy, 12.5% to distilling wine and 3.6% to grape juice concentrate and grape juice.

Following political transformation, international markets opened up and exports grew significantly from 99.9 million litres in 1996 to an all-time high of 417 million litres in 2012, despite global economic difficulties. The United Kingdom remains South Africa's most important export market accounting for 21% of volume in the year ending February 2013, followed by Germany with 18.4% and Sweden with 7.5% (the USA made up 5.4%).

The domestic wine culture in South Africa is fragile with annual per capita consumption at a relatively low 6.9 litres in 2010 (compared to 48.7 litres per capita in France, 23.4 in the UK and 8.7 in the USA). South Africa remains very much a beer-drinking nation with this beverage having 54.6% share of the market for alcoholic beverages by value compared to around 10.4% for wine.

The national vineyard

Today, the national vineyard is planted to 56% white varieties and 44% red, compared to 84% white and 16% red in 1990. Post transformation, it quickly became apparent that the composition of the South African national vineyard was ill-matched to meeting the needs of the international market, plantings hugely skewed towards high-bearing white varieties suitable either for low-cost, easy-drinking wines or distillation. The industry undertook some radical restructuring that saw plantings of white varieties fall every year throughout the 1990s and early 2000s until eventually leveling out in 2004.

In 2011, the total area under vineyard amounted to 100 568ha (compared to 92 601ha in 1999), with Chenin Blanc the most widely planted variety making up 18.2% (down from 27% in 1999 and 32% in 1990). It was originally planted because of its versatility, disease resistance and propensity to yield big volumes, making it very much the workhorse of the industry and it remains so to this day – the decrease in plantings was inevitable but the rate of this decrease has now leveled out and it is sure to provide the underpinnings of the industry for a while yet.

In the mid-1990s an informal initiative known as the 'Chenin Renaissance' attracted a number of adventurous producers that sought to elevate the reputation of the variety above simply being a source of anodyne, overly commercial table wine and while this movement has enjoyed success, these premium wines account for less than 1% of total production of the variety.

It could be argued that Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Shiraz are the world's most fashionable varieties and it's again indicative of the huge shift that the South African industry has undergone in the modern era that the collective area planted to these has increased from 27% in 1999 to 46% in 2011. Currently, Cabernet Sauvignon is the second most planted variety overall making up 12% of the national vineyard.

DNA South Africa

What gives South African wine its particular identity and personality? In recent times, the industry has begun to rally behind the slogan 'Variety is in our nature'. A complex and diverse natural environment

means that there are no stereotypes in South African wine. While the industry is focused on achieving the quality standards that will ensure commercial success, there is also a realisation that if this is to be maintained over time, then all farming practices need to be both environmentally sustainable and socially responsible, and South Africa leads the way in terms of production integrity. It also has the most Fairtrade-certified wineries in the world. In addition, South Africa's complex culture plays a crucial role in ensuring wines that have real interest and are distinctive in a global context. For one thing, a winemaking history of over 350 years means the country has plenty of tradition to draw on, tradition that is enabling rather than limiting. For another, South Africa is a vibrant and multicultural society, and the constant discourse between the different sectors of the population are increasingly resulting in innovative and original wine styles.

Factors affecting taste and quality: climate

Virtually all the wine-producing areas of the world are located between 30° and 50° latitude in both hemispheres, the so-called temperate zones. Well-known winelands town Stellenbosch sits at a latitude of 33° 56' S, and a lot of South Africa's wine grape production areas are even closer to the equator. That South Africa manages such high wine quality is in a large part due to the influence of the two oceans, the Atlantic to the west and the Indian to the east. The traditional winegrowing areas in the coastal zone are seldom more than 50km from the sea and experience beneficial conditions, such as cooling onshore breezes.

Even so, how producers deal with excessive heat is one of the key issues affecting overall wine quality and, since the abolition of the quota system in 1992, the search has been on for cooler vineyard sites. Some very exciting new wine areas are now coming to the fore as the benefits of locations either with a pronounced maritime influence (such as such the ward of Elim in the district of Cape Agulhas) or at altitude (Cederberg and Elgin) are realised.

Factors affecting taste and quality: geology and soils

South Africa has some of the most ancient viticultural soils in the world, the oldest of these being shale and schists deposited some 1000 million to 550 million years ago in a marine basin. Subsequently, intrusions of granite domes occurred around 600 million years ago and then about 250 million years ago, intensive folding and uplifting, creating the distinctive sandstone mountain ranges and valleys of the Cape.

When it comes to soil, there can be great diversity over very short distances. South Africa's smaller producers are criticised in some quarters for not specialising but soil types can vary dramatically over just a few hectares and, in matching the most appropriate variety to a particular soil type, end up with a large number of different wines in their portfolios.

These soils, along with the interplay of topology and climate, result in extraordinary biodiversity, the Cape Floral Kingdom (CFK) stretching in a narrow band from the Cederberg on the west coast to Port Elizabeth on the south-east coast, being the smallest and richest of the six on earth. Precisely how small? It's 90 000km² in size, the equivalent of just 0.02% of the earth's total surface area, and yet it contains an astounding over 10 000 plant species, 70% of which occur nowhere else in the world. By

comparison, other floral kingdoms typically cover huge areas such as the whole of Australia or most of the Northern Hemisphere, so the concentration of different plants in the CFK really is quite extraordinary – there are, for instance, more species on Table Mountain than in the whole of the United Kingdom. This abundance is a clear indication of the potential for South Africa to make authentic and distinctive wine, and it should come as no surprise that nearly 95% of the South Africa's vine cultivation takes place in the CFK.

Here mention must be made of the Biodiversity and Wine Initiative. In 2004, faced with just 4% of the CFK's unique renosterveld remaining and much of its lowland fynbos ecosystems under threat, the wine industry developed a conservation partnership with the Botanical Society of South Africa, Conservation International and The Green Trust, which led to the establishment of the Biodiversity and Wine Initiative (BWI), now based within the South African office of the global conservation organisation, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). Its mandate is not only confined to protecting natural habitat but also encouraging wine producers to farm sustainably and express the advantages of the Cape's abundant diversity in their wines. Over 130 000 hectares of natural area have been conserved by BWI producers to date. This means that the South African wine industry's conservation footprint is well in excess of its current vineyard footprint of 100 568 hectares.

Further to the BWI initiative is an eco-sustainability and product traceability seal that the regulatory body that is the Wine and Spirit Board began issuing in 2010. Producers who are certified by voluntary environmental management scheme Sustainable Wine South Africa are able to use a seal bearing a protea to highlight their commitment to environmentally sustainable wine production. Consumers will be able to input the code on the seal to establish exactly what vineyard and cellar practices were applied in the production of that wine.

What to expect in the glass

Only 30% of South African production is suitable to high-volume low-cost wines. When it comes to fine wine, South Africa has great diversity of climate and terroir, which leaves it well positioned relative to its competitors. An overview of the various categories follows.

Méthode Cap Classique

Méthode Cap Classique (MCC) is the South African term used since 1992 to describe sparkling wines made by means of a secondary fermentation in bottle, the technique traditionally associated with the Champagne region in France. The wines are given their bubbles by carbon dioxide, a by-product of the fermentation process that is allowed to escape during the normal fermentation process.

All sorts of grape varieties are used in the production of Cap Classique, but the most successful examples are typically made from the traditional Champagne varieties of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Local producers don't struggle to achieve ripeness thanks to generally warm growing conditions but retaining freshness is more difficult. Those producers that attempt a more lively, elegant style by picking earlier sometimes end up with wines that are a bit thin and weak; those that go for a riper, richer style occasionally produce wines that are over-done and prone to develop too quickly.

Cap Classique typically displays pure, clean fruit, while producers on occasion struggle to achieve very great complexity. It has however become a major category only recently and there is every expectation that the wines will become finer and more intricate as producers gained experience in bubbly production.

Top producers include Bon Courage and Graham Beck (both from Robertson); Colmant (Franschhoek); Simonsig and Villiera (both Stellenbosch); and Pongrácz (owned by producer-wholesaler Distell).

Sauvignon Blanc

Total plantings in South Africa at the end of 2011: 9 644ha (9.6% of the national vineyard).

If the quality of South African Sauvignon Blanc was no more than serviceable ten years ago, it is now one of South Africa's strongest categories, having benefited in particular from the modern quest to identify more cool-climate vineyard sites.

Whereas in the past South African Sauvignon tended to be excessively methoxypyrazine driven (displaying too much of the compound responsible for the variety's grassy or herbaceous character), they increasingly show good fruit expression and are well balanced thanks to vineyards being located in areas that allow optimal ripeness.

The category now has such great depth that singling out particular producers is unfair. For Sauvignon Blanc that displays pure, clean fruit and fresh acidity, the production areas of Cape Point, Constantia, Darling, Durbanville and Elim, as well as the as yet unclassified Schapenberg in Stellenbosch lead the way. The stylistic spectrum is getting broader all the time, however, and a sub-group of wines has sprung up that shows clever use of oak, these wines typically having less overt aromatics but greater palate weight.

Chardonnay

Total plantings in South Africa at the end of 2011: 8 092ha (8.1% of the national vineyard).

Wines in this category come in a wide range of styles, quality being quite variable, a factor in part of attempting to meet a wide range of price points. While most wines appear technically correct at least, the best have both substance and nuance.

This is thanks to more careful site selection but also a growing maturity among South Africa's winemakers who are increasingly unlikely to undertake major intervention in the cellar: there's more astute oak judgment as well as less inclination to apply the second, softening malolactic fermentation and stirring of the lees willy-nilly.

Perhaps most exciting of all is the emergence of what might be termed a uniquely South African take on the variety. It is a cliché to refer to local wine as sitting stylistically somewhere between the Old and the New World, but increasingly we are seeing examples that simultaneously offer the complexity of the former and the fruit expression of the latter.

Top producers include Ataraxia, Bouchard Finlayson and Hamilton Russell Vineyards (all of Walker Bay); Chamonix (Franschhoek); De Wetshof (Robertson); Mulderbosch and Rustenberg (both of Stellenbosch); and Paul Cluver (Elgin).

Chenin Blanc

Total plantings in South Africa at the end of 2011: 18 326ha (18.2% of the national vineyard).

Since the mid-1990s, there have been concerted efforts to see Cape Chenin Blanc considered among the world's greatest wines, and a huge advantage for winemakers in pursuit of complexity is access to relatively old vines: in 2011, 37.6% of Chenin plantings were over 20 years old, compared to 27% of all white wine vineyards and only 7% of red.

Early innovators developed a formula which involved oxidative handling, ample new oak and the inclusion of small portion of botrytised fruit. If South African Chenin had previously had a reputation for being bland and simple, the best were now plush and oaky. The leading makers of the variety are constantly refining their approach and newer releases now show greater fruit purity, this fruit concentration balanced by fresh but not overly marked acidity and less overt oak.

Top producers include Beaumont (Walker Bay); Ken Forrester, Kleine Zalze, Teddy Hall and Villiera (Stellenbosch); Jean Daneel (based near Napier in the Overberg), Perdeberg (Paarl) and Rijk's Private Cellar (Tulbagh).

White Blends

White blends currently offer some of the most exciting wines to be had out of South Africa, with there being Bordeaux-style blends (Sauvignon Blanc-Semillon), Mediterranean-style blends (typically Chenin Blanc-driven and made in an oxidative manner) and various other styles (from entry-level to ultra-premium). The best Bordeaux-style wines typically come from maritime locations and offer poise and focus; the so-called Mediterranean-style are strongly but not exclusively associated with the Swartland and offer richness and complexity; and those that do not conform to any conventional template fascinate precisely because of how exotic they appear.

Top producers of Bordeaux-style white blends include Cape Point Vineyards (Cape Point); Steenberg (Constantia); Strandveld (Elim); and Tokara and Vergelegen (both of Stellenbosch).

Top producers of Mediterranean-style white blends include AA Badenhorst Family Wines, Lammershoek and Sadie Family Wines (all of Swartland); and Miles Mossop Wines (Stellenbosch).

Ashbourne Sandstone and Nederburg Ingenuity, meanwhile, are two prominent examples of wines made according to a very specific and non-conformist aesthetic vision. There are a plenty of others.

Semillon

Total plantings in South Africa at the end of 2011: 1 193ha (1.2% of the national vineyard).

This category may be small but tends to produce wines of very high quality. There are two basic styles when it comes to table wine. Firstly, there are those with high methoxypyrazine counts, typically from cooler climate areas and secondly, there are those from old vines that have had some oak treatment, these tending to take on a waxy character with time in bottle.

Top producers include Constantia Uitsig and Steenberg (both Constantia) as well as Boekenhoutskloof (Franschhoek).

Other varieties – white

Colombar is South Africa's third most planted variety making up a steady 11% of total vineyard area. It is one of the mainstays of brandy production but also found in numerous varietal and blended wines, these typically being easy drinking if not very profound. Plantings of Riesling amounted to all of 189ha (0.18% of the national vineyard) at the end of 2011, but thanks to producer association Just Riesling, there have been concentrated efforts to uplift the quality and generate a greater public following. Viognier plantings stood at 894ha (0.9% of the national vineyard) and this variety has attracted something of a cult following, the wines typically being very expressive but arguably difficult to drink on account of high alcohol by volume.

Cabernet Sauvignon

Total plantings in South Africa at the end of 2011: 12 104ha (12% of the national vineyard).

South Africa's most widely planted grape on account of how adaptable it is, retaining a recognisable character even when planted in less suitable locations. There are single varietal expressions that count among South Africa's very best wines but it is also frequently blended with Merlot and the other traditional Bordeaux varieties according to the well-established template of that region or with Shiraz according to the Australian model.

South African producers seem increasingly capable of achieving balance in their wines, and there is plenty of pure, clean fruit on display. Local reds used to be criticised for being green, which was then followed by an over-reaction where winemakers gunned for concentration at all costs. Now winemakers seem to be finding a happy middle ground.

Top producers include Boekenhoutskloof (Franschhoek); and Grangehurst; Kanonkop, Le Riche; Rustenberg; Stark-Condé, Thelema and Watford (all of Stellenbosch).

Merlot

Total plantings in South Africa at the end of 2011: 6 416ha (6.4% of the national vineyard).

Merlot is a classic blending partner (as in Bordeaux) for Cabernet Sauvignon and South Africa has some very accomplished wines in this vein. Single variety examples, however, tend to disappoint, at best amounting to light and fruity generic dry red, and at worst being green and astringent. A possible explanation for this is that Merlot is something of a brand in its own right, the red answer to

Chardonnay, and consumers tend to buy it, regardless of its shortcomings. Although there are relatively few producers attempting to make high quality, ultra-premium wines, these should not be overlooked.

Top producers include Hartenberg, Laibach and Thelema (all of Stellenbosch; and Shannon Vineyards (Elgin).

Pinotage

Total plantings in South Africa at the end of 2011: 6 535ha (6.5% of the national vineyard).

A cross between Pinot Noir and Cinsaut developed in South Africa, this makes South Africa's most controversial wine.

Those lucky enough to have tasted Pinotage from the 1970s will know that the variety is capable of very good, even great wine. Unfortunately, during the mid-1990s, the period which saw South Africa re-enter international markets post transformation, it did not enjoy its finest hour: at entry level, greedy producers flooded the market with very dull stuff, while at premium level, the variety proved difficult to work with, the resulting wines prone to acetone aromas, bitterness, bacterial spoilage and oxidation.

However, there has been much research into how to overcome these problems since then, and the best examples are no longer quirky oddities but can hold their own in any company. In terms of flavour profile, Stellenbosch Pinotage typically displays black cherry, plum and black currant fruit with firm tannins, more inland areas such as Tulbagh produce wines of even more pronounced dark fruit flavour and are typically very rich and full while more maritime areas such as Walker Bay give wines that are more red-fruited, medium bodied and reminiscent of Pinot Noir.

Top producers include Beyerskloof, De Waal, Kaapzicht, Kanonkop. L'Avenir and Simonsig (all of Stellenbosch); Flagstone (from Breedekloof fruit); Rijk's Private Cellar (Tulbagh); and Southern Right (Walker Bay).

Pinot Noir

Total plantings in South Africa at the end of 2011: 1 019ha (1.0% of the national vineyard).

The first Pinot Noir vines were planted on Stellenbosch property in 1927 while one of the leading producers of the modern era, namely Walker Bay property Hamilton Russell Vineyards, celebrated 30 consecutive vintages in 2010. Though plantings of the variety remain small, significant quality improvements have been noted in recent years. South Africa is not generally suited to cool-climate Pinot Noir, but it seems there's a growing realisation among those brave enough to tackle this fickle grape that if they are to have even the vaguest hope of success, then site selection must be astute and viticulture and winemaking meticulous.

Top producers include Bouchard Finlayson, Crystallum, Hamilton Russell Vineyards and Newton Johnson (all of Walker Bay although some using Elgin fruit); Chamonix (Franschhoek); Meerlust (Stellenbosch); and Strandveld (Elim).

Shiraz

Total plantings in South Africa at the end of 2011: 10 321ha (10.3% of the national vineyard).

Clearly happy in warmer climates, Shiraz is seen by many as the great hope for South African red wine. What retards the push for quality at this stage, however, is the youthfulness of the vines – no other variety has had been planted at a faster rate in the last ten years or so, with the variety going from 4% of the national vineyard in 1999 to just over 10% in 2011. The defining character of the best examples is density of fruit rather than real complexity but there is every indication that this will come as the vineyards in question get older.

Top producers include Boekenhoutskloof (from Wellington fruit); Eagles' Nest (Constantia); and Hartenberg, Haskell and Saxenburg (all of Stellenbosch).

Bordeaux-style red blends

The first ever Bordeaux-style red blend to be made in South Africa came from Paarl property Welgemeend's 1979 vintage, to be followed by Rubicon from Meerlust in Stellenbosch the following year. Today, it is one of South Africa's most prestigious wine categories.

Top producers include Beyerskloof, Jordan, Kanonkop, Meerlust, Tokara, Vergelegen and Warwick (all of Stellenbosch); Chamonix (Franschhoek); Rupert & Rothschild (multi-regional blend); and Saronsberg (Tulbagh).

Other red blends

A decade ago, a movement sprung up among South African producers to establish a 'Cape Blend' category, the thinking being that wines ought to contain a minimum of 30% Pinotage and a maximum of 70% to qualify as such.

There have been some quite accomplished wines made according to this template, Steytler Vision featuring Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot in addition to Pinotage from Kaapzicht in Stellenbosch arguably the most decorated while Synergy Reserve from another Stellenbosch farm Beyerskloof also has well established credentials.

Even so, the sub-category has failed to generate much excitement among either critics or consumers to date. The best examples are intriguing on account of their unusual flavour profiles and tannin structures but somehow seem less than fully formed; the lesser wines appear hotchpotch. Recently, however, a major bank announced that it would sponsor a competition to promote Cape Blends from 2011 in addition to the Pinotage Top 10 competition it also underwrites.

Wines incorporating varieties associated with the Rhône are also increasingly to the fore, these typically having Shiraz in a prominent role but then combining the likes of Grenache, Mourvèdre and Viognier. Perhaps the most celebrated example of a wine in this idiom is Columella, a blend of Shiraz and Mourvèdre, from Swartland producer Eben Sadie, who is convinced that he gets far greater complexity than he ever would if he made a single-variety Shiraz.

Perhaps most exciting of all is that South Africa is starting to see its winemakers trust their intuition as to what combination of varieties work best in a blend rather than using templates inherited from Europe or blindly adhering to predetermined parameters, and so we have wines like The Jem from Stellenbosch property Waterford, the 2006 a blend of 60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 15% Shiraz, 7.5% Cabernet Franc, 7.5% Malbec, 5% Mourvèdre, 2,5% Barbera and 2.5% Sangiovese.

Other varieties – red

Ruby Cabernet (a US cross between Cabernet Sauvignon and Carignan designed for heat resistance) is South Africa's ninth most planted variety, making up 2.2% of the national vineyard, but makes rather rustic wine used mainly in cheap blends. As for other red varieties, there is definitely a sense that South African winemakers are unduly restricted in terms of what they have to work with. Plantings of the southern Rhône varieties, like Grenache and Mourvèdre, plus the great Italian varieties Nebbiolo and Sangiovese, remain minute.

Sweet Wine

South Africa's sweet wines tend to be of a very high standard, perhaps the most famous being Vin de Constance, made since 1986 from raisined Muscat de Frontignan grapes and recalling the great Constantia wines of the 18th and 19th century.

Almost as famous is Nederburg Edelkeur from Chenin Blanc, the first sweet wine in South Africa to be made from grapes infected with noble rot (*botrytis*), the maiden vintage being 1969 and hence giving birth to the Noble Late Harvest category.

The more adventurous wine enthusiast should also seek out Muscadel. These wines are made either from Muscat Blanc à Petit Grains or Muscat de Frontignan, and are fortified, that is to say they consist of grape juice to which grape spirit has been added. Worcester winery Nuy is a master practitioner, these wines taking decades before drinking at their best.

Port

South Africa makes excellent Tawny Port (smooth and nutty thanks to extended maturation time) but this is a declining resource as it is expensive to make and yet does not demand a premium. When it comes to Vintage Port, producers are 'chasing the holy grail' in the sense of trying to emulate the best of Portugal and the likes of Calitzdorp producers Boplaas and De Krans, as well as JP Bredell Wines in Stellenbosch, come close. While Port can be made from any variety, these top producers use Touriga Nacional, Tinta Barocca and Souzão, as grown in the Douro region of Portugal where Port originated.