

Chenin Blanc in South Africa



Chenin Blanc Association



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**COMPILED BY
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History of SA Chenin Blanc:

- Chenin blanc has a long and interesting history in South Africa and is believed to be amongst the first vine cuttings that arrived here in 1655 during the time of Dutch colonial administrator, Jan van Riebeeck. He was Commander of the Cape from 1652 to 1662. These first cuttings were noted as Fransdruiif (Palomino), Groendruiif (Semillon) and Steen (Chenin blanc). It became evident later that the origin of the names Fransdruiif and Steen were intertwined.
- The first vines arrived in the Cape on 22 July 1655 on the ship Leeuwin. However, no official documentation exists regarding the provenance of these first cuttings. The next cuttings arrived on 11th March 1656 on the Dordrecht with cuttings "uit Vranckryk" (from France) and a month later another batch of cuttings on the Parel.
- The first grapes were pressed on 2 February 1659, from grapes "from 2 jaaren hier geweest" (from 2 year old vines). The assumption is thus that the first pressing of grapes was from the cuttings that arrived with the ships Dordrecht and Parel and that these documented press samples were from Steen and made from cuttings that arrived from France in 1656.
- The origin and identity of Steen were unknown until the 1960's when Stellenbosch University's Professor C.J. Orffer finally discovered in Volume III of GALET (1962), the name "Franche" and also saw an illustration of a vine leaf, which looked very similar to the leaves of Steen. To test his observations he imported Chenin blanc shoots from the Loire and cultivated them in South Africa in order to compare these leaves with Steen. When these proved to be exactly the same he finally proclaimed Steen as Chenin blanc and by then it was already widely planted in South Africa.

Plantings in SA

- The adaptability and versatility of Chenin blanc have been a mainstay in South Africa from the onset. This has contributed to its remaining the most planted wine grape cultivar in South Africa. It has always been one of the cornerstones of the industry and continues to be used successfully for the production of quality wines across a broad style spectrum, varying from sparkling, dry and semi-sweet table wines to the fullest, honey-sweet late harvest types.

Year	Hectares
1984	29 421
1989	30 680
1994	27 409
1999	24 767

2004	19 148
2009	18 666
2014	17 933
2015	17 640
2016	17 707
2017	17 543
2018	17 242
2019	17 103
2020	17 148

Since 1974, the first year of official records, Chenin blanc was the most planted cultivar in the South African (SA) wine industry. Information supplied by SAWIS (South African Wine & Industry information and Systems). www.sawis.co.za

- The Loire has 9728 ha Chenin blanc vineyards (France 10 000 ha).

Winegrowing areas

- Most premium quality Chenin blanc is grown in the Stellenbosch, Swartland and Breede-kloof areas. The growing area however covers many different climates, ranging from the cool coastal areas of Walker Bay and high altitudes of Cederberg (1000+ m) and Pienekierskloof (as high as 750 m) to much lower (e.g. Walker Bay/Bot River) and warmer (e.g. Paarl) areas.

Climate

- The traditional coastal and bordering inland vineyard areas benefit from a Mediterranean climate, but are cooler than similar areas at the same latitudes in the Northern Hemisphere. In the coastal zone, this is predominantly due to the influence of the nearby cold Atlantic and warmer Indian oceans.
- Rainfall generally decreases from the coast to the inland areas and from south to north. The varied topography of the Western Cape further causes rainfall to be highly variable, with mountains and associated valleys generally receiving higher rainfall than surrounding areas.
- Rainfall usually ranges from 400-800 mm per year, with about 30% falling during early summer and virtually nothing during late summer and the grape ripening period. This forces producers to hoard winter rain in dams where possible and then use the water as irrigation during dry spells as necessary.

Note: SA has experienced low rainfall 2015-2018.

- Chenin blanc has high acidity and good sugar levels at optimum maturity. The climatic differences between the Loire and South Africa place a different emphasis on these properties, resulting in disparate wine styles. For SA producers, we thus have the sunshine almost guaranteed, hence the need for cool sites. And, although Chenin blanc is remarkably resistant to heat, it truly does thrive where it gets abundant sunshine and an element of cooling.

Viticulture

- In South Africa, Chenin blanc is a vigorous vine, susceptible to oidium, downy mildew and dead-arm, but resistant to anthracnose. As a result of compact bunches, it is exceedingly susceptible to botrytis and sour rot. It buds early and ripens late. Rigorous canopy management is required if rot is to be avoided and full ripening achieved. Early bud burst subjects it to damage from spring frost, but with their strong tendrils, the vines are very resistant to wind damage.
- It can produce very high yields (up to 40 tons per hectare) in South Africa. Top producers however work with yields of 10 tons/ha or less. (1 ton/ha is equivalent to approximately 4hl/ha).
- Most South African vineyards are cultivated according to the Integrated Production of Wine (IPW: www.ipw.co.za) system, while a small percentage is organically or biodynamically produced.
- Some Chenin blanc vineyards are not trellised, but rather trained as bush vines. Bush vines, traditional low-vigour goblet shaped vines, are easily recognised by their short trunks that carry several node-bearing spurs. Three strand and Perold trellising systems (the vertical trellising system used in South Africa) are two of the more popular systems used to train Chenin blanc vines.
- Many quality driven producers work with old vines (>35 years) which are naturally in balance, producing low yields. For younger vines, a key tool for optimising ripeness is rigorous canopy management, and include, suckering, de-budding and green harvesting as well as rigorous pruning.
- Visit www.oldvineproject.co.za for more info re Old Vine Project.

Vinification methods

- Chenin blanc vinification techniques undergo continuous innovation in South Africa. The establishment of the Chenin blanc Association in 2000

also added impetus to assist in lifting quality levels across all styles of Chenin blanc.

- For quality Chenin blanc, many producers use both natural fermentation, inoculated fermentation with different yeasts, and a combination of natural and inoculated fermentation. The outcomes of vinification trials are frequently supported by the research in the form of full-scale chemical and sensory tests, as well as consumer preference and liking tests, before commercial release of the wines.
- The wines that are aged in different (mostly) French oak barrels range from new oak to 4th or more fill, but the barrel fermentation period differs amongst the producers. The same applies to lees aging.
- The use of oak, (whether new or old, but a definite move towards subtleness), the use of indigenous yeast and natural fermentation, skin contact, lees contact, use of amphorae all help to create wines with more complexity and character.

Soils

- South Africa has some of the oldest viticultural soils in the world, which makes any wine produced here truly unique. They are highly varied, mainly due to pronounced differences in topography and geology, greatly impacting on mesoclimate and vine performance. Various weather cycles and several periods of inundation by the sea, together with the pronounced and varied geography of the Western Cape, gave rise to great soil diversity over short distances.
- In the coastal zone, the general pattern is Sandstone Mountains, often resting on granite intrusions, surrounded by shale at lower altitudes, whereas further inland, shale parent material and river deposits usually predominate. Chenin blanc reflects the soil too with sandy soils producing lighter wines, whereas clay soils will normally give weightier, richer wines more susceptible to botrytis.
- Stellenbosch is South Africa's premiere wine region for many varieties, including Chenin blanc. It is a complex region with hills and mountains offering widely varying altitudes and soils (mostly sandstone and granite). Many of South Africa's most prestigious producers of Chenin blanc are located here.
- Swartland region soils tend to be shale and sandstone. It's also home to many old vineyards of Chenin blanc bush vines.

Styles

- Since 2010 the CBA has embarked on a joint research project with the Institute for Wine Biotechnology and the Sensory Research Unit of The University of Stellenbosch. The main investigations identified the key sensory and chemical features of the various styles (fresh and fruity, rich and ripe, sweet).

- The focus is on two main styles which are: Fresh, vibrant white fruits, with zest and crisp finish on the one hand and full ripe, rich wines with oak barrel fermentation and aging making for complex powerful wines on the other hand.

The CBA

- 140 Members Chairman: Ken Forrester Manager: Ina Smith
- Was formed in 2000 by few concerned winemakers in response to a dramatic decrease in plantings
- Part of our mission is to extend membership to all producers irrespective of wine produced.
- Promote the variety and raise the image of Chenin blanc
- To assist in lifting quality levels across all styles of Chenin blanc

Standard Bank Chenin Blanc Top 10 Challenge

- The Chenin Blanc Association of South Africa is proud to have a sponsorship agreement with Standard Bank in support of a Top 10 Chenin Blanc Competition, known as the Standard Bank/Chenin Blanc Top Ten Challenge.
- The reward to the top 10 winners is unique and specifically designed to reinforce the economic and social benefits to the workplace and workforce.
- Winners receive R25 000 each and the money must be used to reinforce the economic and social benefits in the workplace and to the workforce.

“The Chenin Blanc Association has grown in stature both locally, as well as internationally and represents the largest single segment of the SA wine industry. Chenin Blanc offers something very unique to our consumers and is probably the most effective driver for our industry”