

Sauvignon Blanc has had something of a chequered history in South Africa. It first appeared (in the era of the modern wine industry) in the early 1980s but its popularity was almost immediately superseded by chardonnay. Then, at the time of the fake chardonnay scandal, it swept back into fashion. More recently it seems to be marking time, with other cultivars enjoying the limelight. Nominally a particularly heat sensitive variety, sauvignon has always been marketed as the product of place (with words like “cool climate” appearing on most back labels).

This suggests that style is largely determined by factors beyond the control of the winemakers. Grapes from cooler sites generally present as “grassy” while those from warmer ones are more “tropical.” The truth however is that the winemaker elects when to harvest: less ripe will deliver more herbaceous notes, enhanced ripeness anything from canned gooseberries to passion fruit. Of course some vineyards deliver their own particularities such as whiffs of black-currant leaf, or even what the French call “tilleul” or lime blossom.

The role of the winemaker extends well beyond a choice of harvest dates, together with the stylistics that will be determined by this decision. The use of oak - increasingly fashionable especially in Stellenbosch - is a case in point: Jose Conde of Stark-Conde has made several fine vintages of his Round Mountain sauvignon using a mixture of new and older oak barrels to add texture and richness to the mouthfeel. Some might argue that wood flavours interfere with the purity of the sauvignon, though both Conde's 2016 (which topped the Sauvignon class at this year's Old Mutual Trophy Wine Show and walked off with a double gold at the Six Nations in Sydney) and the newly released 2017 have exuberant varietal character. If you have an aversion to the grassiness of the greener sauvignons, it's worth trying his wines.

Producers can also elect to add undisclosed blending components - the law allows them a 15% leeway (in other words, only 85% of a wine labelled “sauvignon blanc” must comprise the designated cultivar.) In South Africa this often means the judicious addition of semillon (sometimes with a barrel-aged component) or a variety called nouvelle which lifts the greener notes. Lately, as verdelho plantings increase, we are seeing it creeping into sauvignon - for much the same reason. This pattern is not limited to the Cape: in Rueda in Spain, where Verdejo is the traditional white cultivar, sauvignon blanc is becoming more widespread and often both cultivars land up in the same bottle.

All this is sometimes a little confusing for the punters who remember sauvignon blanc as a light, aperitif-style white free of the almond-vanilla notes of oak barrels, zesty and fresh - an easy beverage to consume in bucket-loads next to the pool on a hot Sunday afternoon. Of course there are still many such examples, ranging from reliable and inexpensive brands such as Porcupine Ridge and Tall Horse through to several which have long been South African classics. Klein Constantia's Perdeblokke, Diemersdal's various cuvées (from the competitively priced standard release all the way up to the Eight Rows), Elgin's Oak Valley, Highland Road and Paul Cluver all tend to offer a similar flavour profile, but with greater intensity, nuance and detail - befitting their more elevated price points.

It's also worth reflecting for a moment on an unlikely sauvignon classic - Abrie Bruwer's Springfield Special Cuvée. On paper the Robertson-Bonnievale region should not be the source of one of the Cape's iconic sauvignons - it really is too warm for the fruit to retain the freshness and zestiness which are the defining features of a good unwooded example. Great vineyard management and highly focused vinification strategies achieve

the seemingly impossible, and the 2017 which I tasted recently is a standout example. Powerful passion fruit notes, a lovely tension between richness and tanginess on the palate, and great length help to explain why Springfield occupies its own place on the sauvignon Olympus.