

The Chenin renaissance of the past two decades has been remarkable. It came out of a campaign which I initiated in the first half of the 1990s, with the enthusiastic assistance of the late Harold Eedes, publisher of Wine Magazine, the encouragement of Jannie Retief at the KWV, and the support of Ian Bromley, visionary marketing manager of SAA. While at first there was only a little interest from the country's major producers, the "young Turks" of that era recognised the potential of the old vine resource unique to the variety in South Africa. It was easy and inexpensive for them to obtain fruit from long established vineyards, while the cultivar's versatility made it the ideal candidate for the kind of experimentation which adventurous newcomers are more open to than their corporate counterparts.

Within the first five years of the Wine Magazine-sponsored Chenin Challenge we were treated to a range of style, mostly heavily oaked, and almost all with strong, sometimes "funky" leesy notes. These stylistics made a real impact on the wine judges of that era - but we quite quickly worked out that the "blockbuster" wines weren't as easy to drink as the fresher, less showy examples. The winemakers also began to understand better the nuances of their fruit sources, and were therefore less inclined to conceal vinous purity behind an oak facade. By the millennium the pendulum had swung towards the over-lean style of the new avante-garde - and for a time the middle ground was a bit of a no-man's-land.

All this is now distant history. Consumers everywhere recognise that South Africa offers the most interesting chenin in the world. The over-worked "orphan" cultivar of the industry has become the national calling card. There are more fine Cape Chenins hyped in the international press than any other variety, and the average on-shelf price has increased way ahead of inflation. If you ignore the cosmetically priced "statement" wines selling at R250 or more and the cheap-and-cheerful "quaffers" wines which some producers can still turn out for R30, there's a solid core of decent wines at really acceptable prices.

The Breedekloof region accounts for 20% of the country's chenin blanc. However, because it has historically been a source of bulk wine (much destined for the national wholesalers) the producers were tardier than their Coastal Region colleagues in catching the premium wave. Chef Peter Goffe-Wood knows the area well, and it struck him that a focused effort, accompanied with a regional roadshow, would help to change perceptions about the quality of what the Breedekloof has to offer. He wasn't wrong. At the event he recently hosted I tasted several standout wines, and no real duds. More importantly, the line-up served to confirm that even in Breedekloof, historically a region where bulk predominates over boutique, there is a wealth of very fine Chenin to be found.

Among the wines which really impressed me were the Botha barrel-fermented bush vine 2017. The vineyard is almost 30 years old, and accordingly is now yielding more concentrated fruit. About a third of the production was naturally fermented: the final alcohol sits at 13.5% offering restraint and ample freshness. Delicate and tightly structured, it is elegant, youthful and impressive. I also liked the Opstal Carl Everson 2016, an equally unshowy but finely crafted wine. First launched some five years ago, it enjoys an established reputation - with a price to match (+-R180). The Lategansdorp Zahir 2016 is similarly restrained, noticeably flintier, and at 12% alcohol, crisper than most. It needs time to evolve, but already offers lovely detail on the palate. Amongst the fuller, less austere wines, the Stofberg Marietha 2017 is limey and concentrated, refreshed by bright acidity, and perfectly dry on the finish. The Olifantsberg 2017 is well-priced, and worth the punt.

Except for a concern about the speed with which some of the Breedekloof producers are boarding the pricing bandwagon, it's impossible to recommend these wines too highly.