

The quality and diversity of South African white wine is unique in the world of wine. Most of the best examples are produced within 100 kilometres of Cape Town, an area significantly smaller than Bordeaux (where only two white cultivars hold sway). The effect on climate of two ocean currents (one equatorial, one originating in Antarctica) on the relatively small land mass is partly what makes possible the production of world-class chardonnay, chenin, sauvignon blanc and sauvignon/semillon blends (amongst others). In France, the prime regions which are home to the same four varieties are separated by the breadth of the entire country. To drive from Beaune via Rochecorbon to Bordeaux would take a day, even on the French autoroutes, and you would traverse over 800 kilometres. Even the most direct route between the two extremities is further than Johannesburg is from Durban.

The mere idea that South Africa is a source of whites wines that compare comfortably with the best of the Old (or New) World would have been considered incredible, if not outrageous, twenty years ago. In the early 1990s the late Pamela Vandyke Price, a distinguished British wine writer with over twenty major titles behind her name, pronounced imperiously that “South Africa was not chardonnay country.” As for the other varieties, chenin was used to produce bulk wine sold under generic names such as “blanc de blanc” while the sauvignon blanc producers of that era felt it necessary to add fake flavourant to make their wines more expressive.

Nowadays there's ample evidence, from competitions and from the comments and scores of international critics, that in all these categories South Africa plays in the first division. Even excluding chardonnay, which deserves a stand-alone review (watch this space), the line-up of world-class whites from South Africa is impressive. We should start with the sauvignon blancs, of which Oz Clarke observed that South Africa, unconstrained by a single definitive style like the Kiwis, performs comfortably over a much wider spectrum. There are the gently fragrant examples (like the new generation wines from Klein Constantia), the more intense wines, like the latest Paul Cluver (where 8% semillon bolsters the mid-palate), those with light-oaking, such as the Mulderbosch 1000 Miles and Starke-Conde's Round Mountain, and the full spectrum offering from Diemersdal.

In fact, Diemersdal's range, which begins with an impressive entry-level standard release at around R70 and moves through a profoundly good Reserve wine to some single cuvées, shows what can be done with thoughtful handling of good fruit. The Winter Ferment bottling has almost viscous textures, for sauvignon drinkers who dislike grippy acidity; the Eight Rows meets the needs of people who are willing to pay extra for a whiff of exclusivity.

When it comes to chenin blanc South Africans are now spoiled for choice: for less than R100 Marras offers two separate Swartland cuvées. Grande Provence in Franschhoek has an excellent 2017 which won gold medals at Veritas and the Old Mutual Trophy Wine Show. The DeMorgenzon Reserve is always worth tracking down, so too Ken Forrester's FMC and the Spier 21 Gables. I recently tasted the Doolhof Riviersteen, a wine so beautifully crafted I wasn't entirely surprised by the R350 price point.

Our wine producers have done very well with the white Rhone varieties, except for the most widely planted of them, viognier. Most of the examples I've tasted are simply too big, too oily. Happily it seems that the new winemaker at Tamboerskloof, Reynie Oosthuizen, has worked out how to make it perfectly. His 2018 (priced at about R125) has a classical Northern Rhone feel to it. Finely perfumed, with wonderful peachy notes, it is fresh, low-ish in alcohol and without any overt oak notes. Also for aficionados of Rhone whites is the new French Quarter blend from the Old Road winery. A thoughtfully assembled combination of marsanne, roussanne, grenache blanc and semillon, it has nuance, detail charm and poise - everything you would expect from a wine selling for double its R130 price-tag.