

If you are a red wine drinker, you're probably tired of hearing that the Cape's white wines generally outperform the reds in international competitions. While this was an absolute rule ten years ago, it's much less evident today. It is probable that you will still find better value amongst the country's white wines, though this is partly a function of pricing: all other things being equal, whites trade at about a 20% discount to the reds. In effect this means that there are some pretty neat whites from about R50 per bottle upwards (at R80 - R100 you're spoilt for choice). With reds however you're more likely to find something worth drinking if you set the lower threshold at R60, and the "sweet spot" somewhere between R120 and R160.

If you've been tracking the South African wine scene you would now have to be aware of the quality surge in the chenin blanc category. This pattern dates from the early 1990s and has been in full flight for the past five to ten years. With most of our older vineyards planted to what was once the country's standby grape, there's no shortage of quality chenin fruit for our avante-garde producers to source for their increasingly edgy cuvées. Small batch production, hand-crafted winemaking, and something of a chenin fashion tsunami have all contributed to this boom - which in turn has seen a marked increase in the average on-shelf bottle price.

This doesn't mean you're compelled to over-pay: at a recent tasting I scored the 2018 Protea Chenin a more than respectable 88 points. It sells for the princely sum of R60. Both of the Marras chenins retail at under R100. Cross the R100 per bottle threshold and you're still getting excellent value - it's just that the wines are no longer "cheap and cheerful." At around R120 per bottle (and 90 points tasted blind) the 2017 Kleine Zalze is pitch-perfect and harmonious, with a little bit of everything - nutty, succulent, hints of dried apricots, made slightly creamy by thoughtful oakling.

The Glen Carlou Swartland 2018 - which also scored 90 points - delivers a weighty yet still nuanced wine for under R150. The same money buys the same score in the Delaire Graff - which is also produced from Swartland fruit. The chief point of difference lies in the minerality and intensity of the Delaire Graff - stonier and less plush. Also at a score 90 is the Cederberg Five Generations 2016 - which I see has also finished in the Top 10 of the Standard Bank Chenin Challenge.

In fact, a quick review of the laureates of this annual competition shows that most of the results could have been easily predicted: Dawid Nieuwoudt at Cederberg has been making intense and very pure chenins for at least 20 years. He shares the podium this year with Carl van der Merwe at DeMorgenzon, whose 2017 Reserve was a Standard Bank winner, as well as a gold medallist at the 2018 Old Mutual Trophy Wine Show. Jean Daneel is there with his Signature 2016. At least 20 years ago he won the Wine Magazine Chenin Challenge. His expertise and commitment played a key role in the early stages of the Chenin renaissance.

The Spier 21 Gables Chenin 2017 is also amongst the Standard Bank's Top 10. The 2015 was judged best wine on show at Veritas last year, the 2016 won the Chenin trophy at the Old Mutual this year. It's hardly a surprise to see it among the top 10 winners. I was very pleased to see Tertius Boshoff's Stellenrust "53" Barrel Fermented in the same august company: it is consistently one of the country's best white wines. In fact, there are no real surprises in this line-up - and the presence of the Leopard's Leap Cullinaria (a bargain at R90) should not be seen as a judging glitch, but a tribute instead to the extraordinary value inherent in Cape chenin, and in the Cullinaria range.