

There's a curious bit of geography (and geology) around the Simonsberg. If you drive from Stellenbosch towards Paarl you travel in an easterly direction tracking the north side of the mountain. Along the way you pass number of prestigious properties: Kanonkop, Uitkyk, Delheim. As you carry along the road it curves slightly and at a point you cross into Paarl appellation - though you are still on the north side of the Simonsberg. Between Klapmuts and Simondium (the latter being almost the gateway to the Franschhoek area of origin) there are several equally well-known estates - Glen Carlou, Backsberg and Plaisir de Merle.

Whatever motivated the demarcation commission to determine that at a point along that road the properties formed part of Paarl and not Stellenbosch is of less relevance than the simple consequences of that decision: Stellenbosch fruit commands a higher price than grapes harvested from the Paarl area of origin. Since much of the Paarl appellation lies to the north and east of the town (closer to much warmer Wellington) this is understandable. You are entitled to expect more nuanced wine from grapes grown close to the town of Stellenbosch. It's not certain however that this particular stretch of the Paarl-Simonsberg has been fairly treated by this decision. If it could claim, "Franschhoek" or "Stellenbosch" on the label it would be more valuable than simply "Paarl" and in truth it yields wines that are less like the rest of Paarl.

The work of the demarcation commission is a thankless task. Someone will always be on the wrong side of a boundary. The Klapmuts-Simondium stretch yields fabulous fruit, but it's not like what comes off Thelema or Rustenberg (both indisputably Stellenbosch). It's closer to what is harvested from Stellenbosch-Simonsberg with its equally northern aspect. You could just as easily argue that Stellenbosch-Simonsberg and the equally northerly Bottelary - both of which are significantly warmer than Stellenbosch-Helderberg (which is closer to the sea) - should not be entitled to the Stellenbosch appellation (assuming that cooler defined Stellenbosch and warmer defined Paarl). No demarcation commission would have proposed excluding these two wards (especially in the old South Africa). It was precisely the estates which fell into the Bottelary and Stellenbosch-Simonsberg zones which gave Stellenbosch its deserved reputation as the source of the country's best red wines.

So Paarl-Simonsberg is an anomaly. As the crow flies (and it would have to be a high-flying crow, since the Simonsberg is well over 1000m at that point) Plaisir de Merle is probably 5 kms from Rustenberg. Pretty much the same distance separates Backsberg's vineyards from those of Kanonkop. So there's an arbitrage opportunity for wine buyers smart enough to focus on wines which are produced from grapes grown in Paarl-Simonsberg vineyards. The obvious estate to focus on is Plaisir de Merle, source of much of the fruit which goes into Distell's premium wines - such as the Nederburg Auction selection.

Fortunately for those wishing to pursue this opportunity, Plaisir de Merle bottles a limited selection of its production under its own label - and has been doing so for the past twenty-five years. Winemaker Niel Bester has been in charge of the cellar since its inception. For his first decade on the job, he had, as his technical advisor, the late Paul Pontallier, *directeur* of Chateau Margaux from the early 1980s until his death two years ago.

You would assume from this that the best buys from Plaisir would be the reds - and it is true that the Cabernet (current release 2014) has real fruit intensity, and beautifully rounded tannins. The Petit Plaisir (a lighter, spicier, shiraz dominated blend) is great drinking value at just over R100 per bottle. However, the standout wine for me was the 2017 Chardonnay. Made from grapes grown way up the slopes of the Simonsberg, there's freshness, texture and persistence to the wine, as well as an elusive sense of weight and weightlessness. You can't get better value than that out of R130.