

My recent review of some of the country's best and most interesting white wines - all of high quality, all true (though often diverse) expressions of the cultivar - indicated that chardonnay would need a column all on its own. South Africa's best examples are world-class and plentiful in number. Unlike viognier, where, despite extensive plantings, it's a challenge to find a wine worth recommending or riesling, where there are now only a handful of growers, chardonnay has an ample presence and offers a cornucopia of vinous treasures.

Quality chardonnay material is a relatively recent addition to the national vineyard. After an abortive start in the 1970s (some of what was smuggled into the country turned out to be Auxerrois), the variety only achieved commercial volumes in the 1980s. This coincided with our winemakers discovering small barrel vinification. The lethal combination of fruit from young vines, poor quality barrels foisted upon naïve producers by devious suppliers and sheer technical inexperience did considerable harm to the reputation of the cultivar.

For most of the 1990s Chardonnay was a hard sell. Consumers remembered over-paying for wines which were thin, tart and very oaky - and blamed their unhappiness on the variety rather than the circumstances which produced it. However, the impact this had on sales may have served the cultivar's interests in the long term. Producers who believed in its potential, or who were so invested in their vineyards that they had no choice, worked ceaselessly to make better and more saleable offerings.

By the first decade of this century, and based on wines she had judged at the Old Mutual Trophy Winer Show, Jancis Robinson praised the quality and age-worthiness of some Cape chardonnays. Commercial prospects were picking up. The market started to embrace the variety (or at least forgave it the sins of an earlier generation of producers). Plantings were extended, mainly into the cooler climate regions of Elgin, Hemel-en-Aarde and the Cape South Coast, and dedicated specialists rose to the challenge.

Fast forward to 2018 and wine drinkers are spoilt for choice. There's decent Chardonnay being produced at Plettenberg Bay (Newstead Lund), Riversdale (Baleia Bay), in pretty much every coastal appellation from Elim to Cape Point, and inland in Stellenbosch, Paarl, Franschhoek and Tulbagh. Richard Kershaw MW has been marrying sites to clones, revealing nuances that compare with the patchwork of Burgundy's single vineyards. At a blind tasting held recently in Amsterdam, the 2016 vintage of the Kershaw Clonal Selection Bokkeveld Shales emerged first in a line-up from around the world - including Meursault and Premier Cru Puligny. However, be warned: they are not priced for the faint of heart: if you can get any of them (and you can bet the Bokkeveld Shales 2016 is sold out) expect to pay upwards of R800.

If you're looking for Chardonnays that are still available, make your way to Ataraxia in the Hemel-en-Aarde Valley: Kevin Grant's wines are equally pure and equally age-worthy. You might also try to lay your hands on the 2017 Hamilton Russell: delicious to drink now but likely to improve immeasurably in the next five years. Also from that part of the world, La Vierge, the two Crystallum cuvées and the Newton Johnson Family Vineyards chardonnays are worth tracking down. From nearby Elgin, add Paul Cluver, Pasarene, Boschendal and Oak Valley to your list.

The Glenelly Estate Chardonnay 2016 (which has collected gold medals at Veritas, the Trophy Wine Show, the Decanter Awards and the Six Nations Challenge) is also worthy of space in your cellar. Its fine lime-citrus notes melded with faint almond nuances from

the oaking make it a flag-bearer, together with DeMorgenzon, Meerlust, Jordan, Rustenberg, Tokara and Mulderbosch, for Stellenbosch's claims to Chardonnay pre-eminence. From Paarl the Glen Carlou Quartz Stone is a serious wine with a long-established track record. Near-neighbour Babylonstoren now adds its weight to the claims of the Paarl-Simonsberg. Pretty much wherever you look, there's brilliant Cape chardonnay selling for a fraction of their international price/value ratio.