

South African Wine Facts: New World Flavors Meet Old World Elegance

"South Africa's wine industry continues to move forward at impressive speed, with more bottlings and better overall quality each year... The Cape's best winemakers have thoroughly embraced Syrah and Chenin Blanc as their lead varietals, with a supporting cast of Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay... South African wines are distinctly South African, drawing their unique personality from the Cape's terroirs... With numerous small labels and a range of varieties showcasing the country's diverse terroir, this is the time to start exploring South African wine."

- Wine Spectator 4/30/08

History

South Africa has a winemaking history that spans over 350 years. The French Huguenots and Dutch settlers brought vines from their homelands and established vineyards to provide wine to the Dutch East India Company merchant ships. 1659 marked the Cape's first recorded vintage.

After enduring years of control by the KWV cooperative, then struggling beneath global trade sanctions, South Africa began a new era of winemaking following the fall of apartheid in the early 1990s. The quality revolution that has swept the Cape wine industry in the past decade and a half has been nothing short of astounding. Critics and consumers around the globe have enthusiastically embraced the wines of South Africa, and demand continues to grow at record-setting pace.

Geography, Climate, & Soils

Located at the tip of the African Continent, the Cape Winelands are nestled between the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. The Cape's mild Mediterranean climate, tempered by cooling ocean breezes, is most favorable for quality wine production. The area is dotted with breathtaking mountains which create many diverse microclimates. The soils are some of the oldest, most complex, and most diverse found in any winegrowing area of the world.

Varietals

South Africa produces all the classic global varietals, including Chenin Blanc, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Riesling, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinot Noir, Syrah, and Cabernet Franc. The unique Pinotage varietal, a cross between Pinot Noir and Cinsault, was developed in the Cape in 1925 by Abraham Perold, Stellenbosch's first professor of viticulture. Chenin Blanc is the most widely planted grape in South Africa, and the only grape with significant old vines plantings; Cabernet Sauvignon is the most widely planted red variety, but the gap is closing as Syrah plantings continue to grow.

Regions

There are more than 60 official appellations in South Africa, with 5 regions, 22 districts and 55 wards. Stellenbosch and Constantia are two of the best known wine-growing areas. Stellenbosch, home to some of South Africa's most heralded estates, boasts a long history of quality wine production. Breezes off False Bay help to moderate temperatures in this very mountainous region, located east of Cape Town. While Stellenbosch produces excellent examples of all of the "classic" varietals, it is perhaps best known for its reds. The area is also recognized as the educational and research center of the Winelands.

Constantia, located on the southern slopes of the Table Mountain range, just south of Cape Town, is sometimes called South Africa's "cradle of winemaking," as it was here that the Cape's most important vineyards were planted in the late 1600s. The cool climate of this coastal region is ideal for white wine production, and Constantia is best known for its elegant, minerally whites as well as its legendary dessert wine.

Volume

Today, South Africa is the world's 9th largest producer of wine, although the country is projected to surpass Germany to move into eighth place in the near future. The country's 600 private cellars and 4,500 grape growers produce a total of 885 million liters of wine annually. South African wine imports into the US continue to grow dramatically; they set a new high in 2007 and topped 1 million cases for the third straight year.

