

Harvest 2009: A Strong Year for the Cape

South Africa's wine regions enjoy a cool, dry season, producing quality across the board

By James Molesworth

Posted: Tuesday, June 02, 2009

Though normally prone to excitement following a just-completed harvest, South Africa's Cape winemakers were especially ecstatic following this year's crop.

The 2009 growing season saw only light, well-timed rains and a cooler than usual summer following the Cape's typical midseason heat wave in early February. The Stellenbosch and Paarl growing districts, which form the heart of the Cape's wine industry and where blue-chip varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon rule, seem to have come through with flying colors.

"The hot days were the biggest challenge, but the effect was easily remediated with judicious irrigation," said Mike Dobrovic, co-owner and winemaker of Mulderbosch, located in Stellenbosch. "Most years the sugars would have run away and acids would have dropped. However, this did not happen with most vineyards, so there was ample time to [harvest] at optimum ripeness."

With the moderate temperatures stretching into harvest time, growers reported picking one to two weeks later than usual on average, with both whites and reds maintaining their acidity and freshness.

"There's very good natural acids and fruit flavors on the whites. The Chard and Sauvignon Blanc show real class and longevity," said David Finlayson, former Glen Carlou winemaker, who now handles his own Stellenbosch-based Edgebaston label fulltime. "Great phenolics on the reds. They will be big, but elegant, with smooth tannins."

A spate of wildfires that moved perilously close to some of the Cape's top wineries did cause some minor smoke taint, though conscientious growers kept potentially damaged grapes separate.

"There is no doubt this will go down as one of the most eventful harvests ever," said David Trafford, whose de Trafford winery saw fires move past his vineyards and house. "It may also turn out to be one of the very best, too."

Winemakers throughout the warmer, inland growing areas echoed the accolades for 2009. "The 2009 vintage reminds me of the fantastic '97," said Marc Kent, owner and head winemaker at Boekenhoutskloof, located in Franschhoek. "The [young-vine] Syrah was phenomenal, the tiniest berries I've seen to date. We harvested our botrytis Sémillon and the infection was total. I am completely stoked."

In the emerging Swartland region, where red and white Rhône varieties are finding a home alongside old bush vines of Chenin Blanc, quality also reigned in 2009. "We managed to pick at lower alcohol levels with good phenolic ripeness," said Eben Sadie of Sadie Family. "It is early but I am happy."

In cooler coastal areas, where Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir excel, growers were equally enthused. "Very few problems in the vineyards," said Kevin Grant of Ataraxia Mountain, located in the Hemel-en-Aarde ward of the Walker Bay district. "The vintage produced fabulous quality fruit. There isn't a cultivar that underperformed."

Most growers did report higher than usual yields, some up to 40 percent more than in heat-influenced years such as 2007. But the long growing season led to even ripening across the varietal spectrum, a rarity on the Cape, which has a wide array of grapes as well as cool and warm microclimates.

"We brought in a fair amount of fruit from prime vineyard locations around [the Cape] and quality has been fantastic across the board," says Duncan Savage, winemaker at Cape Point Vineyards.

