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By WILL LYONS

South Africa's Winelands

The South African vignerons have high hopes for 2010. With a World Cup kicking off in June, interest in their wines is predicted to be at new levels as visitors from across Europe descend on the Western Cape. Su Birch, chief executive of the industry body Wines of South Africa, says they are expecting a 10% rise in sales as supermarkets across Europe prepare for a summer of South African promotional activity.

In wine circles there is a growing feeling that the time has come for the vineyards nestled around the towns of Stellenbosch, Franschhoek and Hermanus. In 1995, when South Africa last hosted and won a World Cup -- the Rugby World Cup -- the Winelands were still building their reputation. Just five years after the release of Nelson Mandela from prison, F.W. de Klerk's negotiations that moved the National Party out of power and the end of apartheid, the world opened its doors to a wine industry a little unsure of its identity. James Farquharson, a winemaker who has completed stints at one of the Cape's best known wine estates, Boschendal, said it was a hugely exciting time.

"I graduated in 1994," he told me. "And for the first time as a winemaker I could go anywhere and experience anything." He headed to France where he worked vintages in Bordeaux and the Rhône Valley, learning to pick early, not to over-oak and reduce the natural residual sugar of the grapes. The result is that his winemaking has a slightly European feel.

That search for identity has led many wine critics to describe South Africa's Winelands as a bridge between the restrained, delicate Old World character found in European vineyards and the upfront, fruity character found amid the hot plains of the New World. Indeed, it is often said that South Africa is the most Old World of the New World wine-producing regions. Certainly, the Cape possesses some of the oldest geology in the wine-growing world and three centuries of winemaking lineage, but today there is such a myriad of styles and flavors it is difficult to describe it in such broad brush terms.

I have visited the region twice in recent years and found a uniquely Old World philosophy in many of the Cape's most sought after wine estates such as Hamilton Russell, Kanonkop, Rustenberg and Vergelegen. This can be summed up in one word: subtlety. For white wine this means not overdoing the oak, producing less wild, tropical flavors that dominate the nose and opting for more mineral, understated, dry flavors.

Hamilton Russell's Pinot Noir is sensational with notes of dark cherry, black spice and an earthy savory character. More importantly, these sell at around £25 a bottle. By no means cheap but when compared to their counterparts in the Côte de Nuits in Burgundy they are trading at a near 50% discount.

On my visit to the Cape, Sauvignon Blanc has particularly impressed me. Among the many that stood out were Buitenverwachting, Klein Constantia, Rustenberg and Vergelegen, all of which produced a restrained, mineral, zippy character with notes of gooseberry and pear. Chenin Blanc, perhaps South Africa's most famous white grape varietal, keeps getting better and better. Mrs. Kirsten's Old Vineyards Chenin Blanc 2007 is sensational. It has an intense, nutty, walnut, creamy character that wouldn't look out of place in the vineyards around Savennières in France's Loire Valley.

While there is almost universal agreement that South Africa's white wines have reached new heights in terms of quality, in some quarters the reds have been criticized for being a little over ripe and baked, with a slight rubbery flavor. Personally, it is the Bordeaux blends that really caught my attention.

Kanonkop's Paul Sauer blend, Rustenburg's John X Merriman and Peter Barlow blends, and Vergelegen's Mill Race and straight Cabernet Sauvignon are all welcome in my cellar any day. It isn't an underestimation to put some of the past vintages on a par with anything produced in the Medoc.

If there is one gripe I have with South Africa's wines, it is the heavy alcohol levels which too often exceed 14.5%. With growing concern about public health, particularly alcohol abuse, I feel this could be a real problem. In the meantime, we will just have to moderate our intake.

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