



POUR WITHOUT PREJUDICE: SOUTH AFRICA

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"So, what do you think of South Africa?" a winemaker enquires. Having spent a fortnight visiting most of its wine regions and tasting countless wines, it is not the first time that I have been asked this question. I pause for a moment, thinking of an appropriate word that encapsulates my feelings.

"Visceral," I reply. "South Africa is visceral." Though I only visited the Western Cape, I returned with the impression of a compelling country of extremes and contradictions. Gentle hills lie in the shadows of sky-scraping mountains that tumble into oceans, whilst no-go townships of poverty lap against luxurious mansions patrolled by teams of security guards. Aesthetically, the Western Cape is an idyllic landscape that is counterbalanced by a palpable "edginess" in the atmosphere. You never know exactly what lies round the corner and that is precisely what makes this country intoxicating. This is a dynamic country coalescing after the tumultuous years of Apartheid, a country reborn and figuring out in which direction it should head. And in the middle of this maelstrom is a wine industry asking itself the same questions, in particular, where South African wine stands on the global stage in 2011?

The aim of this report is to suggest where South Africa is going right (and trust me, it is going right in far more places than I anticipated) and where it is going wrong. I hope to convince both the uninitiated and the sceptics of the heights that their greatest wines are achieving and the potential for the future. Perhaps most importantly in these straightened times, I hope you will be convinced that a vast number of South African wines offer exceptional quality for the price.

For a background to South Africa's wine industry in terms of its structure and its "Wines of Origin" structure I would direct you to the chapter that I authored for the 7th Wine Buyers Guide or the information-packed Wines of South Africa website. One point I would like to highlight is that South Africa is in reality, an Old World wine producing country. Winemaking has been part of South Africa since Jan van Riebeeck ordered grapes to be pressed in 1659, and during the 18th century the wines of Constantia were coveted around the world, when much of Bordeaux was marshland. Unlike New Zealand, where there was negligible viticulture prior to the 1980's apart from fortified wine, South Africa has always fostered a wine industry that has endured good times and bad. However, it is only really since the dismantling of Apartheid that their wines have been invited onto the global stage and subsequently made up for years in the wilderness. Between 1996 and 2009 exports nearly quadrupled and in 2009, around 49% of production was exported. Yet their wines have not quite achieved the esteem as other New World countries, as evinced by friends' sarcastic "condolences" when I told them I was covering South Africa. That stigma prevails. But if they continue to produce the quality of wine that is on offer, then it should be only a matter of time before they gain a wider, appreciative audience.

VITICULTURE

Let me start by commenting upon South Africa's vineyards. The latest figures from "Wines of South Africa" state that there are 604 wine producers whose vineyards occupy 101,259-hectares, a figure that has remained constant for around five years. Of South Africa's total vine plantings, 56.2% is devoted to white varieties and 43.8% red. On the negative side, producers have historically tended to plant unsuitable clones and inappropriate varieties vis-à-vis soil type, and many winemakers that I spoke to attributed this to the rush towards winemaking and especially red varieties after 1994. Under-ripeness is a perverse problem: the summer burst of heat sending sugar

levels rocketing and necessitating early picking before physiological ripeness, hence one cause of the “sweet-green” flavours that have tarnished the image of its wines and unfairly painted all South African winemakers with the same brush.

We must broach the subject of endemic leaf-roll virus. Its effects were evident as I drove past vineyards painted dull, reddish-brown, when there ought to have been bright autumnal hues. Its effects are particularly felt during difficult growing seasons when it can prevent grapes from achieving full maturity, ostensibly accentuating the lows of a bad vintage. Much like phylloxera, it afflicts even the most prestigious vineyards and likewise the only way to tackle this is by drastic whole-scale replanting and intense chemical treatment of the soils, a measure financially unfeasible or morally untenable to many growers.

Now, consider the positives. Fortunately, many vineyard managers and winemakers are reorganizing their vineyards to address these issues. In particular, there is now more research into soil profiles and mapping them to more suitable grape varieties. To counter the summer heat, winemakers are eking out high altitude, cooler mesoclimates that extend the growing season and engender greater complexity. With this comes greater focus upon expressing terroir, whether it is the weathered shale of Swartland or the granitic foothills of Simonsberg Mountains. This is a more mature approach than “buffing up” wines in the winery that seemed prevalent during the 1990’s. South Africa is rich with interesting and often untapped terroirs. Hopefully the process of exploiting their potential is only just beginning.

Leaf-roll virus is a complex issue. The prevailing thought appears to have been: “We just have to live with it.” One or two viticulturalists actually welcomed leaf-roll as effectively countervailing over-ripeness, a useful weapon to mitigate against global warming. Ignoring the issue is not going to make it go away and whilst leaf-roll does not preclude a producer from creating excellent wines every vintage, it detracts from the perception of South Africa as a world-class wine-producing country. But at least producers have moved on from a state of denial. My feeling is that it would need a co-ordinated, industry-supported program to really get on top of the problem, but I cannot see that happening in the immediate future.

Conversing with winemakers, it is clear that much has been learnt empirically over the last decade in terms of vineyard husbandry, and over the last couple of years they have begun adapting vineyards accordingly. It is the “little feet in the vineyard” philosophy that is being embraced, spending time amongst the vines and making pre-emptive moves to maintain healthy vines rather than treating any problems afterwards. As a consequence, wines are becoming cleaner and demonstrate more complexity than the vintages of yore, whilst those niggling “green” notes are less prevalent. Essentially, South African wine would now seem to contain more “thought” under its cork.

GRAPE VARIETIES

In terms of grape varieties, at present South Africa is stronger in terms of its white grape varieties rather than reds, though the latter are improving rapidly. Whilst many of the cheaper Sauvignon Blanc varieties once had nasty methoxypyrazine characters (a trait some consumers actively seek, which might have prompted the damaging flavouring scandal a few years back) I found that recent vintages err towards freshness and vigour, with attractive subtle tropical notes akin to Marlborough Sauvignon. There are some extraordinary complex expressions of the variety from the likes of Cape Point and Cederberg Private Cellar that eke out the intellectual side of Sauvignon Blanc. What appears to work supremely well are the Sauvignon/Semillon blends, the latter lending another layer of complexity to the often one-dimensional Sauvignon.

Many tout Chenin Blanc, which currently represents 18% of total plantings, as South Africa’s trump card. Although some wines flirted with blandness, most likely through over-cropping, a top-class Chenin Blanc can be a magical experience, surfeit with complexity, nuance and personality. The great news is that you do not have to pay through the nose for some of the best wines and in fact several outstanding Chenin Blanc wines can be found between \$15.00 and \$20.00, sometimes even less.

Then there is Chardonnay, which currently represents 8% of total plantings. Let me be facetious and remind South African winemakers that a) Chardonnay is comparatively easy to cultivate b) a great Chardonnay tastes delicious and therefore c) it is comparatively easy to sell. Ignore all this “Anything But Chardonnay” clamour! A blind tasting of nearly 100 South African Chardonnay proved that this is

South Africa's most consistent white grape variety and like Chenin Blanc, its greatest exponents produce world-class wines, I would suggest more Burgundy in style than Napa Valley. The biggest change here is patently less reliance upon new oak. The big, buttery, creamy styles of a decade ago are being replaced by crisp, terroir-driven, mineral-rich Chardonnays that are both more intellectual and delicious. Bring it on!

With respect to red grape varieties my main overall criticism is a lack of crispness and definition on the finish. There is a tendency to load the fruit onto the front palate, yet the finishes are too frequently smudged, alcoholic or are carried by excessive residual sugar. These wines soon begin to pall, the second glass less inviting than the first and the result is twofold: they are difficult to match with cuisine and it becomes a chore to finish the bottle (as attested on numerous occasions when I tested bottles over longer periods at home.) Fortunately this generic style was more prevalent during the 1990's and the red wines are beginning to show intensity rather than power, contain far more freshness and that elusive sense of tension that compels you to re-fill that glass.

Cabernet Sauvignon is the most widely planted red variety at 12% of total plantings. However, the Bordeaux blends tend to be inconsistent at the lower end with far too many wines reliant on oak that is often clumsily handled or blatantly covering up for sub-standard fruit. However, there were examples that showed you could find wonderful Cabernet-based blends for as little as ten dollars. The Merlot varieties tend to be average and in my opinion, the climate is not suited for this sensitive grape variety that can easily tip over into over-ripeness. Similarly, Pinot Noir is a fickle grape variety that should be the sole reserve of those with a particularly cool climate, for example, up in the cooler Hemel-en-Aarde valley. There, the likes of Hamilton Russell and Newton Johnson can produce outstanding Pinot Noir that give many Burgundy growers a run for their money. Pinot Noir demands obsessive winemakers who are prepared to commit to the capricious varietal, who are prepared to take risks. I think the new generation of winemakers who have spent more time overseas really get to grips with the variety and understand what makes a great Pinot Noir.

The greatest potential in my opinion, comes from the Rhône based blends, from Shiraz, Grenache and to a lesser extent, Mourvèdre. One can see the climactic parallels between the Rhône Valley and areas of South Africa such as Swartland. The top wines from the likes of Eben Sadie, Adi Badenhorst, Alex Starey and Mark Kent, to name but a few, are magnificent. There has been a tendency to pursue the more muscular style of Shiraz, but speaking to a number of winemakers, many expressed their intention to "dial down" the levels of alcohol and experiment with larger vessels rather than small French barriques to create more sophisticated, elegant styles of wine. That is one of South Africa's most exciting prospects. My only caveat is that Rhône blends can be difficult to sell to markets when the Rhône itself has so much to offer (notwithstanding Australia and California.)

Then there is Pinotage, South Africa's pride and joy that covers 7% of total plantings. To many cognoscenti it is a laughing stock, a variety unable to make good quality, long-lasting wine. I must admit that my views of Pinotage completely changed during my tastings, for although there remains a trough of wretched wines, there is no doubt that Pinotage can make extremely competent wine when placed in the right hands. I would not go far as to say that I can envisage a Pinotage that would be considered "profound" but you never know. It often seems to leave one foot in its primary stage of evolution and does not repay cellaring as much as other varieties. Certainly winemakers seem to have got a better handle of Pinotage, especially in terms of when to pick. All they need to do now is make the world think differently, which is easier said than done. What they have to do is convince people to treat Pinotage seriously.

Moving into the winery, I will broach the subject of blending first. Some of the blending decisions are woefully misguided with an occasional tendency to assimilate a diverse array of grape varieties that include everything but the kitchen sink. The varieties tend to cancel each other out; the wine and the consumer left confused as to what they are actually drinking. And to be honest, I am not completely bought by South Africa's "Cape Blends" i.e. adding Pinotage to other red grape varieties, because it often does not feel "in synch" with the other varieties, perhaps in terms of its evolution. I found that it sometimes detracted from a potential great Bordeaux or Rhône blend or indeed, a great monovarietal Pinotage.

My main criticism is one that I have already touched upon: the excessive use of oak. Charred woody aromas and flavours have prevailed, denuding wines of freshness and obliterating any sense of terroir. Entry-level wines were often found to have obvious wood chip flavours

from the use of cheap wooden staves and “dirtiness” imparted by sub-standard, unclean barrels. Flagship blends tend to be matured in a high level of new oak by rote, as if consumers would rebuke a top cuvée that has not been dunked in French barriques for 24 or 36-months. Therefore one or two producers may be surprised to read that I found their prudently made mid-range wines more appealing than their ostentatious super-cuvée. Fortunately it is clear that winemakers are responding, not by drastically reducing the level of new oak, but by pausing to consider the oak regime in relation to the wine from one year to the next.

SELLING SOUTH AFRICA

In terms of banging the drum, the marketing body “Wines of South Africa” do the best they can with an extremely limited budget. Winemakers need to be proactive. Everyone is talking about Swartland not just because of the wines (though that is fundamental) but because its “movers and shakers” are boarding planes and generating interest themselves. Other regions should take their lead and convince consumers who intend to spend money on a quality New World wine, either at a retailer or a restaurant, exactly why they should choose South Africa? Relying solely upon the quality of the wine is not enough in a market when so many competitors are vying for attention.

THE FUTURE

South Africa stands at a crossroads. Whilst the wines have improved in recent years, at the same time I heard accounts of wineries finding it difficult to maintain cash flow. Overseas markets continue to be difficult to penetrate and there is a domestic population, a majority of whom have no culture or enthusiasm for wine. Per-capita consumption of wine in South Africa actually fell by 4.8% in 2009. The so-called “Cappuccino” blends (a hybrid of wine and coffee) are designed to appeal to those making their first tentative steps into wine. I tasted a few during this report but few were worthy of recommendation. The question is whether they are an effective stepping-stone towards wider acceptance of wine or a genre that blemishes the global perception of South Africa as a top-quality wine-producing country?

In terms of the market in the United States, it was patently obvious that whilst South Africa has made significant in-roads in the UK, on the other side of the Atlantic, the wines can be frustratingly difficult to sell. To put that into figures, in 2009 the UK imported just over 95 million bottles of South African wine but in the US that figure is just 8.5 million. Part of that reason can be put down to the stigma against its wines and the only way to counter that is to coerce importers, sommeliers and consumers to taste for themselves. The second reason is that the quality at the bottom end is at times, dreadful, and dissuades consumers from nurturing a long-term interest in South African wine. It is imperative for wines around the ten-dollar mark to reach a certain quality; otherwise it is simply a disincentive for consumers to trade up.

However, I remain cautiously optimistic that South Africa is going to progress. It is not going to be easy and competition is tough. But most pleasing was to meet the younger generation of winemakers who have patently caught the wine bug and are not hidebound by the practices of the previous generation. They are the ones seeking more marginal terroirs and pockets of old vines, experimenting with grape varieties, keeping it simple but creating wines full of personality and full of stories that attract consumers. That is the key for the future and in a sense, this new generation is already beginning to exit the slipstream. The stalwarts of the South African wine industry will have to raise their game if not now, then later. Give it another decade and I bet you that South African’s “icons” will be different from those of today.

The 600+ tasting notes are from a number of sources. Many were tasted from samples poured blind at my home (which incidentally, made me rue South Africa’s aversion to alternative closures such as screwcap, even for some basic entry-level whites.) In addition, I undertook two private tastings at the offices of “Wines of South Africa.” It was crucial that I spent time in the country itself; therefore I tagged on several days’ tasting after serving as International Judge at the Old Mutual Trophy Wine Show. This competition was a perfect way to dive headfirst into current South African wine scene and obtain a snapshot of the general quality, before venturing further. Subsequent visits and conversations with winemakers offered an invaluable insight into South Africa winemaking. Trying to cover a whole country was futile given the limitations of my time, so I have focused on wines currently distributed in the USA from entry-level

brands to its icons. I have also listed wines that are not currently imported to the USA but represent outstanding value or those where I feel quality ought to be recognized. In particular, I sought out some of the younger, independent winemakers who are making some of the most exciting wines that push the envelope such as Peter-Allan Finlayson (Crystallum), Craig Hawkins (Lammershoek and his own label, Testalonga) and Brian MacRoberts (Sadie Family and his own label, Tobias) to name but three.

I am aware that this is just the start. I am aware that there are many producers whose wines are missing. But an initial report was long overdue and offers something to build upon in this constantly changing country. For the consumer, there is a gamut of rich pickings to be found. Just pour without prejudice.

—Neal Martin

