



# THELEMA



## THELEMA: CONSISTENT QUALITY FROM MOUNTAIN VINEYARDS

Written by Don Winkler, April 2010

Thelema Mountain Vineyards is famous for rich Cabernet Sauvignon with a distinctive mint note. Thomas Webb recently arranged a vertical tasting of Cabernet for us at the vineyard with winemaker Rudi Schultz, who shares winemaking duties with proprietor and cellar master Gyles Webb, who gained experience making wine at Heitz in California in the 1980s before starting his own winery.



Thelema is a 157 ha family estate just 6 km from Stellenbosch on the slopes of the Simonsberg Mountain. With mostly south-facing vineyards at altitudes ranging from 370 to 640 m, it is one of the coolest and highest altitude growing sites in the Stellenbosch region. It is a beautiful place, both for growing grapes and for admiring the stunning views of the Drakenstein and Jonkershoek mountains. In 2000, Thelema added the cool-climate Sutherland estate located in Elgin to its properties. The U.S. importer is Cape Classics of New York.

### CABERNET SAUVIGNON

Cabernet is what Thelema does best, and despite the arrival in recent years of several high-priced, flashy competitors, Thelema Cabernet is still the benchmark for South Africa. We tasted three vintages—2007, 2001, and 1997—at the winery, but over the years we've tasted many other vintages. Irrespective of vintage and age, there is a consistent house style that is very attractive—stylish and sleek with firm, ripe tannins and great balance with rich cassis, cocoa, and, of course, notes of mint. The mint comes from the eucalyptus oil that blows onto the vines from the row of trees visible at the back of the vineyard. Beginning in 2004 Thelema began bottling Cabernet from the eucalyptus-affected block separately. Both the regular and “mint” bottlings are firmly tannic, and, as our tasting shows, the wines can easily age for well over a decade.

#### **Thelema 2007 Cabernet Sauvignon Stellenbosch (\$41) 91+**

One expects richness and complexity from a Thelema Cabernet, and the just-released 2007 vintage doesn't disappoint. Dark ruby in color, cedar fruit, cassis and dark plum show on the nose. There's beautiful purity of fruit on the palate with chalky, ripe tannins and a lovely long finish with dark chocolate notes. The grapes are destalked, hand-sorted, and the wine spends 18 months in 40% new oak. A superb wine!

#### **Thelema 2007 Cabernet Sauvignon The Mint Stellenbosch (\$41) 91+**

From a vineyard planted in 1985 with a border of eucalyptus trees that lends an attractive eucalyptus oil/mint note to the wine. There's dark fruit, chocolate, cedar, and mint herbs on the nose and a roundly textured palate. Spends 18 months in French oak, 40% new, and it's beautifully integrated. Very attractive and perfect for lamb!

### **Thelema 2001 Cabernet Sauvignon Stellenbosch**

This is a dark garnet ruby wine from a good, even vintage. It shows earthy complexity, cedar and plum fruit on the nose and a lush palate of rich black and red fruit. Ready to drink now, but the tannins are still firm. There's a hint of mint to the wine but both the chocolate and mint notes are more subdued than with the new, 2007 vintage.

### **Thelema 1997 Cabernet Sauvignon Stellenbosch**

This wine tastes exactly as one would expect of a decade old Cabernet. Medium dark garnet ruby in color, it shows aromas of leather, cedar, and tobacco. The palate shows excellent weight and dark plum fruit in addition to earth and leather. The tannins are still firm, and the finish is long and flavorful.

### **Other Thelema Wines:**

#### **Thelema 2009 Sutherland Sauvignon Blanc Elgin (\$15) 88**

The Sutherland Sauvignon Blanc sourced from Elgin fruit just 7 km from the ocean on southeast facing slopes is a nicely balanced wine with light grapefruit citrus and minerals and a touch of green grass. Made from young vines, so the complexity and interest of this wine is likely to increase in future vintages.

#### **Thelema 2009 Sauvignon Blanc Stellenbosch (\$20) 89**

Made from somewhat older "weerstasie" clone vines, about 20 years old, there are aromas of orchard fruit with a light herbal touch. Moderate acidity and extended skin contact contribute to a broad palate that will combine well with a wide variety of foods. Delicious and very good value.

#### **Thelema 2008 Sutherland Chardonnay Elgin (\$15) 89**

This is a very pleasing, full-bodied Chardonnay with a nice round mouthfeel, excellent acidity, and light oak flavors nicely blended into the fruit. About 25 percent of the wine undergoes natural malo (not inoculated), and about 25% is aged in new French oak for about 10 months. This vintage is only the second crop from this vineyard, so we can expect even better things in the future.

#### **Thelema 2008 Chardonnay Stellenbosch (\$25) 90**

This medium straw colored wine shows light toasty oak, lees, and notes of tropical fruit on the nose. As with the Sutherland, about 25% of the wine goes through malo, depending on the vintage. Very nicely integrated overall with good acidity, light smoke and butterscotch notes on the palate. Spends 10 months in French oak, 30% new.

#### **Thelema 2006 Shiraz Stellenbosch (\$36) 91**

This is one of South Africa's best and most complex Syrah-based wines. There's fresh plum, earth and meat notes on the nose with real purity of red and black fruit and ripe tannins on the palate. Finishes very long with pure red fruit. The grapes come from the cooler spots on the slopes of the mountain. Sees 18 months in 40% new French oak.

#### **Thelema 2008 Merlot Stellenbosch (\$29) 90**

This bottled but not yet released Merlot should be available in the US sometime in the summer of this year. The nose shows spice and dark cherry fruit with notes of herbs and eucalyptus. The attack is soft and lush, and the finish shows ripe, chalky tannins. This is a lovely wine! From clone 192 vines planted in 1988. Spends 18 months in 40% new French oak.