



Introduction

Chenin Blanc is South Africa's most widely planted variety, there's general consensus it deserves classic status and there's a disproportionately large amount of old vines (in 2014, 36% of what was in the ground was over 20 years compared to 29% for white varieties in general and just 9% for reds). The potential is obvious and the Standard Bank Chenin Blanc Top 10 Challenge has been created to help unlock this.

Judging procedures

There were 145 entries in total for this year's competition. These were tasted blind (with no indication of vintage, cellar treatment or technical analysis) by the five-person panel, scoring done according to the 20-point system.

After the first round of judging was concluded, 39 wines were considered to show particular merit and went through to a second round where the panel could give them more detailed examination. The 10 best scoring wines at this point became the winners.

Key findings

Overall quality was very good. Chenin Blanc is now such a high-calibre category that it is quite possible to conceive of two or three other equally plausible line-ups of winners in addition to the official top 10.

That said, there were a still number of wines entered which seemed intended for early drinking rather than cellaring and contemplation. These were typically unwooded and at best showed pure fruit and plenty of freshness if not very much complexity but at worst traded off yeast selections to achieve particular fermentations aromas while being excessively light on the palate, the result being that they came across very much as generic "dry white".

Regarding the more serious examples, winemakers seem to have fallen in love with how malleable the variety is with it responding to a wide range of approaches in the vineyard and cellar. It provides different but equally legitimate flavours at different levels of ripeness, it takes oak well, it can handle oxidative treatment.

But how much technique is too much technique? The panel detected quite a few wines that seemed very polished to the point of lacking character – sometimes a tiny imperfection is what lifts a wine from good to great and makes it memorable.

Conversely, there were other wines which were perhaps not polished enough becoming too stylistically extreme and occasionally just plain weird. "Don't sacrifice the grape at the altar of winemaking technique" was panel member and MW Cathy van Zyl's memorable observation.

The wines which the panel tended to reward therefore showed pure fruit but also complexity and balance. Some weight and power were considered acceptable as long as certain threshold was not exceeded. The mood around the category is generally extremely positive, as it should be, but achieving even greater finesse and nuance is where further advances will be made.

What else can be learnt from the top 10? Firstly, whereas some varieties have come to be very closely associated with one particular district (Cabernet Sauvignon and Stellenbosch, for instance), Chenin Blanc seems to belong everywhere with wines from Durbanville, Paarl, Piekenierskloof, Swartland and indeed Stellenbosch represented.

Secondly, there can no longer be any doubt of the role that old vines play in the excellence of Chenin Blanc with all the wines coming off vineyards older than 20 years. Long may they stay in the ground.

Finally, it would seem that Chenin producers are a progressive bunch: Out of the 145 entries, 83 (or 57%) were closed under screwcap with 34 of the remainder under natural cork, 25 under Diam (composite) and three under synthetic.

Tasting notes below.

Top 10

Aeternitas Wines 2010

Price: R120

From a 49-year-old Swartland vineyard. Citrus and peach plus an intriguing leesy quality on the nose. Powerful palate providing a sweet 'n sour sensation. Super-concentrated fruit and bright acidity before a long, pithy finish.

Boutinot Tea Leaf 2014

Price: R74

From a Piekenierskloof vineyard, 40 years plus in age and surrounded by Rooibos. Pear, peach, spice and a yeasty undertone. Rich and broad with tangy acidity and a gently savoury finish. Very flavoursome.

DeMorgenzon Reserve 2014

Price: R210

From a vineyard on the Stellenbosch property planted in 1972. Citrus, pear peach, a little wet wool plus subtle notes of spice and dried herbs on the nose. The palate is very well balanced with pure fruit, bright acidity and nicely judged oak. Long, saline finish.

KWV Cathedral Cellar 2014

Price: R85

54% from a Paarl vineyard approximately 25 years old, 33.2% from a Swartland vineyard 36 years old and 12.8% from a Stellenbosch, approximately 30 years old. Citrus, pear and white peach plus just a hint of secondary character. Pure and focused on the palate,

L'Avenir Single Block 2014

Price: R195

From a vineyard on the Stellenbosch property planted in 1972. The nose shows a floral top note before pear and peach plus a hint of spice and some yeasty complexity. Lovely succulent fruit plus good freshness on the palate before a savoury finish.

Leopard's Leap Wines Culinaria Collection 2014

Price: R70

From 90% Chenin some 30 to 40 years old and 10% Grenache Blanc, both Voor Paardeberg. Peach, spice and a little nuttiness on the nose. Sweet fruit offset by bright acidity. Rich and broad with great texture and detail.

Perdeberg Winery The Dry Land Collection Barrel Fermented 2014

Price: R77

From two vineyards in the Agter-Paarl, one 26 years old and the other 32 years old. A floral top note before pear, peach and a hint of spice on the nose. The palate meanwhile shows excellent fruit concentration and driving acidity.

Simonsig Chenin Avec Chêne 2014

Price: R115

From the Stellenbosch property's oldest Chenin Blanc vineyard planted in 1986. A striking wine showing peach and apricot, honey and spice. Rich and intense but balanced by fresh acidity, the finish long and savoury. Plenty of character.

Spier 21 Gables 2014

Price: R139

From a Durbanville vineyard, 40 years plus in age. The nose shows a top note of honeysuckle before citrus and peach plus vanilla. Good fruit weight and bright acidity on the palate. Appears rich and round in the mouth.

Stellenrust 49 Barrel Fermented 2013

Price: R130

From a 49-year-old vineyard in Bottelary, Stellenbosch. Citrus, peach, honey and some intriguing waxy, leesy notes. A punchy style with good depth of flavour and a pleasantly thick texture. Shows some development so probably best to drink soon.