

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 (998.93ha or 46% of the total vines used for wine over the age of 35 years). The potential is obvious and the Standard Bank Chenin Blanc Top 10 Challenge has been created to help unlock this.

Judging procedures

There were 124 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, 33 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

If the struggle for a panel tasting the Chenin Blanc category back in the 1990s was to find wines which went beyond vin ordinaire, this is emphatically no longer the case. What now faces the panel is the much more pleasant, but still difficult, task of deciding between wines which are all of very good intrinsic quality but differing hugely in style. It's more a case of which wines to leave out of the top 10, rather than which to include.

That said, it's been three years since the competition was launched and some front-runners are starting to emerge. The Dryland Collection Barrel Fermented from Paarl winery Perdeberg has appeared in the top 10 three times running, while the De Morgenzon Reserve, Leopard's Leap Culinaria Collection and Spier 21 Gables won both this year and last, the Kleine Zalze Family Reserve returning to the list having been there in 2014. Bellingham, whose The Bernard Series Old Vine 2015 won this year, also featured in 2014 with its The Old Orchard's 2013. (Rijks also a return winner from 2014)

The average price of the top 10 wines was R122.20 a bottle which seems fair, if not downright cheap, to pay for wines of such high quality. The average production, meanwhile, was some 25 000 bottles or 4 666 six-bottle cases. A case of supply exceeding demand keeping a lid on prices? It should be noted, however, that a minimum stock requirement of 750 bottles as a condition of entry would have precluded some of the more boutique producers. Another stat of interest: Out of the 124 entries, 56 (or 45%) were closed under screwcap with 46 of the remainder under natural cork, 20 under Diam (composite) and two under synthetic.

What were some of the discussion points among the judges? Once again, Chenin's great stylistic diversity was in evidence making judging exciting if challenging. It is often pointed out that this is something of a hindrance to the variety's commercial success, consumers not knowing what to expect when selecting something off the shelf, but then true wine lovers surely appreciate the intriguing and stimulating over the bland and generic. In any event, the panel commented again and again that basic quality was very good no matter the winemaking intention or style.

One particular issue was wines showing bitterness or some kind of phenolic character. This quality was more in evidence than ever, the result perhaps of winemakers experiment with techniques like skin contact, and it divided the panel. Were such wines too rustic as a result?

A small point to harp on, however. The panel generally felt that Chenin Blanc was going from strength to strength. Not just wines which were technically correct but wines showing true complexity, the result of imaginative and courageous winemaking.

Tasting notes below.

Tasting notes

Allée Bleue 2015

Price: R65

Total production: 7 500 bottles

93% Chenin Blanc, 7% Viognier from Franschoek and Walker Bay vineyards. Matured in 400-litre French oak barrels, 20% new. Citrus and white peach plus a hint of vanilla. Pure and focused with bright acidity before a savoury finish.

Bellingham The Bernard Series Old Vine 2015

Price: R160

Total production: 60 000 bottles

From Agter-Paarl, Bottelary and Durbanville vineyards, with an average age of 45 years. Matured for 12 months in French oak, 50% new. Stone fruit, spice as well as lots of yeasty complexity on the nose. Rich and broad on the palate, the finish long and savoury.

Boschendal Sommelier Selection 2015

Price: R85

Total production: 12 000 bottles

From old Agter Paarl, Bottelary and Somerset West vineyards. Largely unwooded, 15% fermented in oak. The nose shows a fynbos top note before pear, citrus, white peach and a hint of spice. Excellent fruit concentration and particularly bright acidity before a long and pithy finish.

DeMorgenzon Reserve 2015

Price: R225

Total production: 18 500 bottles

From Stellenbosch vines planted in 1972. Matured for 11 months in French oak, 25% new. Citrus, stone fruit and spice on the nose. Rich but impeccably balanced – possesses both depth and breadth, tangy acidity ensuring refreshment.

Kleine Zalze Family Reserve 2015

Price: R160

Total production: 16 374 bottles

From three different wards of Stellenbosch, vineyards approximately 35 years in age. Matured for eight months in old 400-litre French oak barrels. A very attractive nose showing honeysuckle plus plenty of stone fruit and spice. The palate shows particular richness and intensity, the acidity nicely coated and the finish long and savoury.

Kleine Zalze Vineyard Selection Barrel Fermented 2015

Price: R80

Total production: 66 613 bottles

From Stellenbosch vineyards ranging from 25 to 40 years old. Matured for six months in old 400-litre French oak barrels. Flowers, pear, citrus and white peach plus a little spice on the nose. Lovely fruit purity and zesty acidity making for a very well-balanced wine.

Leopard's Leap Culinaria Collection 2015

Price: R80

Total production: 6 000 bottles

From Voor-Paardeberg vineyards with an average age of 20 years. Matured in 500-litre French oak barrels, none new. A complex nose of potpourri, citrus and white peach plus an intriguing leesy note. The palate has a weightless intensity about it thanks to concentrated fruit and fresh acidity.

Perdeberg The Dry Land Collection Barrel Fermented 2015

Price: R77

Total production: 20 048 bottles

From two vineyards in the Agter Paarl area, one 26 years old and the other 32. Matured for 10 months in 500-litre French oak barrels, 20% new. A subtle but compelling nose showing flowers and dried herbs before pear, citrus and white peach. The palate shows great fruit purity and lovely freshness before an ultra-long finish.

Rijk's Private Cellar Barrel Fermented 2013

Price: R140

Total production: 10 500 bottles

WO Tulbagh. Grapes from 17-year-old trellised vines and seven-year-old bush vines. 20% fermented in tank, 80% fermented and matured for 11 months in 300-litre French and Hungarian oak, 40% of which was new. Citrus and peach plus a little spice on the nose. Rich and full on the palate, the texture pleasantly oily with lively acidity lending balance.

Spier 21 Gables 2015

Price: R150

Total production: 32 808 bottles

From Tygerberg vineyards with an average age of 43 years. Matured for 14 months in a combination of 300-, 400-, 500- and 2 500-litre French oak barrels, 60% new. The nose shows citrus and peach plus a hint of vanilla and spice. The palate has a real succulence to the fruit and a pleasantly creamy texture while fresh acidity lends balance – a wine of precision.