



STANDARD BANK CHENIN BLANC TOP 10 CHALLENGE 2014

TASTING REPORT

Introduction

Chenin Blanc is South Africa's most widely planted variety, there's general consensus that it is a "first division" grape and there's a disproportionately large amount of old vines (in 2013, 36% of what was in the ground was over 20 years compared to 28.1% for white varieties and general and just 8.4% 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 126 entries in total. 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, 32 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

South African Chenin Blanc has reached a point where the basic quality is not in question but stylistic issues very much are. The variety is capable of a wide array of legitimate but divergent expressions and it's no easy matter deciding why one particular wine should have precedence over another.

If you pick Chenin early, use reductive winemaking techniques and avoid oak, then you'll arrive at something with probably more fruit than your average Sauvignon Blanc. These wines are typically very approachable but ultimately a bit straightforward – it is unlikely if not impossible that they will be in the running for the highest honours.

How to crank up the complexity? A variety of techniques were in evidence including picking later but also more oxidative winemaking and the use of oak – these add interest up to a point but what is that point?

Riper grapes mean bigger, bolder wines with more intense flavours but sometimes at the expense of finesse. Oxidative techniques certainly can add some interest but can obscure fruit too much and lend excessive savoury character and oak, as with all wines, can add dimension but can also be the over-riding characteristic if not applied judiciously.

UK-based wine critic and founder of Wineanorak.com Jamie Goode who officiated on the panel advised that winemakers should not attempt to “make the foot fit the slipper”. For him, there were more than a few wines where winemakers were seeking elegance based on some “fantasy” of how Loire wines come across. “It seems that winemakers are chasing freshness in a reaction against bigness,” he said.

Goode felt that sometimes winemakers were forcing a particular style onto their wines rather than being true to site. “Many of the best wines show a good degree of richness. In South Africa, growing conditions are often quite warm and winemakers should not be denying this but working with it,” was a further comment.

As has so often been stated, however, the South African winelands are anything but uniform with huge variations in soil, aspect and micro-climate across often very short distances. This, coupled with increasingly confident and imaginative winemaking, means that Chenin Blanc will always manifest a plethora of styles, drinking well from bargain basement to top-end as this year’s top 10 once again shows.

Tasting notes

Bellingham The Old Orchard's 2013

Cellar door price: R95

70% from an Agter Paarl vineyard, 30% Paarl, both 45 years plus in age. Citrus, pear and peach on the nose. Rich and ripe – relatively thick textured with nicely coated acidity. Subtle spicy quality to the finish.

Kleine Zalze Family Reserve 2013

Cellar door price: R141

From three different vineyards in Stellenbosch, all 40 years plus in age. The nose has a honeysuckle top-note before citrus and peach. Really vivid fruit expression and lively acidity while the finish is long and savoury. Very stylish.

KWV The Mentors 2012

Cellar door price: R160

From a combination of 22-year-old Agter Paarl vineyards and 33-year-old Swartland vineyards. Citrus, peach and pear plus subtle oak spice. Concentrated and pure on the palate with lemon-like acidity before a savoury finish.

Perdeberg The Dry Land Collection Barrel Fermented 2013

Cellar door price: R73

From two Agter Paarl vineyards, one 21 years of age and the other 30. Pear, peach, a touch of honey and some leesy complexity. A powerful but well balanced wine – bright acidity to offset dense fruit.

Remhoogte Honeybunch Reserve 2013

Cellar door price: R150

From a 27-year-old Stellenbosch vineyard. Pear and peach plus hints of vanilla and spice on the nose. Rich and honeyed on the palate but a good line of acidity ensures balance.

Rijk's Cellars Private Cellar 2009

Cellar door price: R130

From Tulbagh vineyards, one planted in 1997 and the other in 2005. Citrus, peach, some waxiness and oak spice on the nose. Also some pleasant development. Big, sweet and thick textured on the palate but lots going on – a blockbuster.

Simonsig Chenin Avec Chêne 2010

Cellar door price: R110

From a 27-year-old Stellenbosch vineyard. Hugely complex on the nose with notes of citrus, apricot and peach plus some nuttiness, spice and rancio character. Rich and broad on the palate but not listless – really well executed.

Spier Woolworths Private Collection 2013

Woolworths price: R109.95

70% from a Fistantekraal, Durbanville vineyard and 30% Stellenbosch, both 40 years plus in age. Pear and peach but also a floral note plus some vanilla on the nose. Big, bold and sweet-fruited on the palate with gentle acidity – totally seductive.

Stellenrust 2014

Cellar door price: R44

From 31- and 34-year-old Stellenbosch vineyards. Blossom, citrus and peach on the nose while the palate shows pure, clean fruit and lovely fresh acidity. Really flavourful.

Villiera Traditional Barrel Fermented 2014

Cellar door price: R94.50

From a 27-year-old Stellenbosch vineyard. Citrus and peach plus some leesy complexity. Good fruit concentration and fresh acidity before a savoury finish. Shows real finesse and balance.