

STANDARD BANK CHENIN BLANC TOP 10 CHALLENGE – 2017 REPORT

- Chenin blanc in a global and South African context

Chenin blanc is the most-planted white grape in the large, French region of the Loire Valley, where it is known as Pineau de Loire. Here it is the grape making its way into bottles of wine labelled Vouvray, Montlouis, Anjou Blanc Sec, Saumur Blanc (where it's sometimes blended with a little Sauvignon Blanc or Chardonnay), Coteaux du Layon, Bonnezeaux, Quarts de Chaume, Jasnières and Savennières. It's also the main grape for Crémant de Loire.

Pineau de Loire is a very versatile grape, and wines range from ultra-dry to sweet. They are also often distinguished by its high, sometimes aggressively high, acidity, which is the reason it ages so well, but it's also what makes it a little too assertive in its youth. Time in bottle – and Loire cheniens can age for 30 years and more – tames the acidity, allows the wines to gain complexity and a honeyed, waxy character that charms most everyone who comes across them.

Despite this, wines from the Loire remain relatively under-appreciated and unfashionable. Some, however, recognise them for what they are – well-crafted, ageworthy wines compared to white Bordeaux, Chablis and white Burgundy, but at very competitive prices.

But in the New World, chenin is still today regarded as a workhorse rather than a thoroughbred, planted because it retains its acidity in hot climates, ripens late and gives reliable (and usually reliably large) yields in the vineyard.

Despite its unfashionability, the variety is grown in several countries including California, India, Argentina, Canada, New Zealand, Uruguay, Mexico and Brazil. In most cases, the wines it makes in these countries are not very interesting, or very good. There are several good dry cheniens in New Zealand (Collards and Millton are the star names) and California (Chalone).

It is widely agreed by wine writers and critics that the only New World country producing world-class chenin blanc, albeit of a very different style to the wines you'd encounter in the much cooler Loire Valley, is South Africa.

Chenin has a long history in South Africa, starting with Commander Jan Van Riebeeck introduced the first vines to the Cape in 1655. Early documents refer to three varieties – in our Afrikaans language they were called 'groendruif' (which we know is semillon) and 'Fransdruif' and 'steen'.

Early opinion suggested that 'steen' was of Germanic origin, supported by the evidence of a handwritten note, by Governor Simon van der Stel, on wine quality, that mentioned that wine made from steen was comparable to quality German Stein wines.

However, after an unsuccessful Germanic and eastward search for the origin of 'steen', researchers uncovered the variety franche (from which Fransdruif might originally have taken its name). This variety was also apparently known by the French, as Chenin Blanc - and approximately 30 other names. In 1963, the then Head of Viticulture at the University of Stellenbosch, Professor C.J Orffer, matched steen and chenin Blanc leaves and finally pronounced steen, chenin blanc.

Anecdotal evidence – because no records were kept – suggests that chenin underpinned the industry in the 1700s, 1800 and early 1900s. Since 1974, the first year that records were kept, chenin has officially been the most planted variety in South Africa. To put this into perspective, South Africa's 17 965 hectares of chenin is almost double the Loire's total chenin plantings, which sits at 9 500 hectares.

Furthermore, South Africa's total area under vine is currently 98 597 hectares, which means that chenin's 17 965 hectares equates to 18.2% of all grapes grown in South Africa. The next most

planted variety is cabernet sauvignon, accounting for 11.3% of the total. Shiraz accounts for 10.5%, while pinotage, which is indigenous to South Africa, represents 7.5%. (Red-wine varieties account for 45.4% of the national vineyard).

Most chenin in the early days of the South African colony would have been used to make vin ordinaire but, as time passed and the demand for brandy increased, the variety was increasingly planted for distillation and to extend the slightly sweet white blends that were all the rage and sold domestically.

Even so, chenin has a number of important firsts to its name. For example, South Africa's first wine mega brand was 'Lieberstein', a semi-sweet blend of chenin blanc and clairette blanche. This was launched by Stellenbosch Farmers Winery in 1959. It broke world records five years later in 1964 with 31-million litres sold. Chenin was also the variety used by Nederburg winemaker at the time, Gunter Brozel, to make South Africa's first Noble Late Harvest wine – called Edelkeur – in 1969.

However, chenin blanc as a serious single variety table wine didn't come into its own until 1996, when Ken Forrester and Martin Meinert launched their 'chenin project'. This gave birth to the Meinert Scholtzenhof Grande Chenin 2000, renamed Forrester Meinert Chenin, or FMC, in 2001.

FMC had profound impact on the industry. From its maiden vintage, it was one of the priciest whites on the market – and sold out. It was chenin with attitude: rich and bold, oaked in new French barrels and included a small portion of botrytis infected grapes which added viscosity and opulence, and interest. This icon played a significant role in putting serious South African chenin on the map. The 2001 vintage wowed influential international wine writers like Jancis Robinson and Oz Clark.

Today, chenin proudly takes its place as one of the things South Africa does really well, alongside chardonnay, white blends, red blends and method cap classique. In his recent 2016 South Africa report, Tim Atkin MW named a chenin blanc as his Overall White Wine of the Year, the 2015 David & Nadia 'Hoë-Steen' made from grapes in the Swartland.

And the current edition of Platter's SA Wine Guide includes 16 chenins – more than ever before – on its list of 5 star wines for that edition. One of those, the Stellenrust 51 Barrel Fermented 2015 was named as its White Wine of the Year.

Much excitement when it comes to chenin blanc in South Africa at the moment is to be found in wines made from old vines.

'Old vine' in a South African context is a moveable target but viticulturist Rosa Kruger's web site – www.iamold.co.za – shows chenin currently composes about 52% (1 362ha) of all vineyards 35 years and older in South Africa, as well as 17.5% of all the old vines under bush vine, that's 3 138 hectares of a total of 17 964 old vines under bush vine. Several of the vineyards that are providing the fruit for complex, concentrated, steely and almost ethereal wines are closer to 65 years old.

There's a misperception that most of the 'old vine goodies' are coming out of the Swartland but, in truth, old chenin vineyards can be found in the Breedekloof (oldest planted in 1962), Klein Karoo (1965 – but there's much older palomino and muscat here), Olifantsrivier (1960), Paarl (1952), Robertson (1948), Stellenbosch (1942), Swartland (1961) and Worcester (1974).

You could compare South African chenin's unique position in the global market as similar to that of Australian, and especially Barossa, shiraz. Here winemakers took the Rhône variety and truly made it their own. So, too, have South African winemakers embraced chenin and made it their own. There are many wines in the world which have no distinctive personality but just as the wines of classic old world wine regions have their unique stamp, so too do quality shiraz from Barossa and quality chenin from South Africa.

- The Standard Bank Chenin Blanc Top 10 Challenge 2017 judging and procedures

The potential for chenin blanc on many fronts is obvious and the Standard Bank Chenin Blanc Top 10 Challenge has been created to help unlock this.

There were 136 entries from 80 producers in this year's Challenge. This is up on the 124 received for the 2016 Challenge and the 126 for the 2014 Challenge but down on the 145 entries received for the 2015 Challenge. Of the 136 entries in the 2017 Challenge, 97 wines – or 71.3% - were wooded while the remaining 39 wines – or 28.7% - were obviously unwooded.

The wines 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 made the coveted list.

The judging panel comprised five judges – including one international judge – and an associate, whose score was not considered but who was there to learn and to contribute to the discussion. This year's panel members were:

- Cathy van Zyl MW (Chair)
- Richard Kershaw MW
- James Pietersen (Wine Cellar)
- Tinashe Nyamudoka (Test Kitchen)
- Lauren Buzzeo (Tasting Director/Senior Editor) Wine Enthusiast USA
- Associate Judge: Marlvn Gwese (Cape Grace)

This year, a protocol detailing both the logistics and tasting procedures was prepared ahead of the Challenge. This is not only good governance but ensures consistency and is a guarantee that the same procedures will be followed each year.

- Key findings and commentary

The judges' experience of the 2017 Challenge was very much in line with those of the panels of previous Challenges; quality is of such a standard that it is more a case of which wines to leave out of the top 10, rather than which to include.

However, unlike in 2014 when UK-based founder of Wineanorak.com, Jamie Goode (who officiated on the panel as international judge), expressed concern that winemakers were attempting to 'make the foot fit the slipper' when it came to matching fruit quality and ripeness to desired style, and in 2015 when it was felt that there was a tendency towards 'sacrificing the grape at the altar of winemaking technique', in 2017 the judges said that most of the wines had been crafted with an empathetic touch.

There were few, they said, where oak, for example, had been poorly used. Yes, there were some judges whose preference was for less oak influence than others, but all judges agreed that, of the style, those wines had been smartly handled. Similarly, those wines where the obvious intention was to create a fresh and fruity glassful delivered both, without dilution or over acidification.

Also, in 2016, one particular issue was wines showing bitterness or some kind of phenolic character. This quality was hardly mentioned in 2017 possibly indicating more familiarity on the part of winemakers with techniques they had previously been experimenting with, like skin contact.

This year, as in 2016, the majority of wines were closed by screwcap – 46.3% and 45% respectively. Natural cork was the next closure of choice sealing 37% of entries in 2016 but only 26.5% of entries in 2017. Natural corks' loss in 2017 seems to have benefited both Diam and synthetic closures which

both saw increases in use from 2016 to 2017 – 16.4% to 19.85% in the case of Diam and 1.6% to 7.35% in that of synthetic.

The lowest priced wine on the Top 10 Challenge list for 2017 will set the consumer back just R80, while the most expensive rings the till at R350. The average price of the top 10 wines was R??? a bottle which, as highlighted by the chair of previous Challenges, Christian Eedes, seems fair, if not downright cheap, to pay for wines of such high quality.

The publication of the 2017 Top 10 Challenge list brings the total number of producers to have made an appearance over the four-year history to 22. The list features one wine that is putting in its 4th appearance, a remarkable achievement. There is also a producer that has made the list every year, but with different wines, and for the first time, one producer with two vintages of the same wine on the list. And, five producers make their debut appearance.

One of the characteristics of this year's Top 10 Challenge 2017 wines is that, while two come from young 14 year old vines, the other eight come from vines that are older than 20 years. Of these, seven come from vineyards older than 30 years of age, and five from vineyards 40 years and older. While this doesn't as strongly communicate the link between old vines and quality as the 2016 list (for which all vines came from 'old vines'), it does sing from the same hymnbook.

Further, grapes for the 2017 Top 10 Challenge wines come from widespread vineyards including Cederberg, Stellenbosch, Paarl, Darling, Durbanville, Perdeberg, Swartland and Tygerberg.

Also interesting is the relatively narrow band of residual sugars in the wines, as well as the low average: 4.53g/l to 2.6g/l with an average of 3.65g/l, which bucks the trend towards 'enhancing appeal with a little sweetness'. Total acidities ranging from 5.8g/l to 7.3g/l, with an average of 6.42g/l. The average alcohol was 13.85%.

The one question that must be asked following the announcement of the 2017 list is 'Where are the unwooded wines?' Of the 28 individual wines that have made it to in the four years of the Challenge's history, only one has been unwooded. Is this because South Africa's oaked and lightly oaked versions are so much better than the unwooded versions? Is it because the unwooded wines get lost in the randomised line up? Is it because the judges are seduced by sweetness (from oak, residual sugar and alcohol)? Whatever the reason, is the fact that only 10 unwooded chenin blanc has been awarded Top 10 status a message that the Chenin Blanc Association wants to send to the market of buyers and consumers?

The 2017 list and tasting notes follow.

- [The Standard Bank Chenin Blanc Top 10 Challenge list for 2017](#)

Cederberg Private Cellar Five Generations Chenin Blanc 2015 (debut)
DeMorgenzon Reserve Chenin Blanc 2016
Fleur du Cap Unfiltered Chenin Blanc 2016 (debut)
Nederburg Heritage Heroes The Anchorman Chenin Blanc 2016 (debut)
Perdeberg Winery The Dry Land Collection Courageous Barrel Fermented Chenin Blanc 2016 (4th appearance)
Spice Route Chenin Blanc 2016 (debut)
Spier Wines 21 Gables Chenin Blanc 2016
Stellenrust 52 Barrel Fermented Chenin Blanc 2016 (different vintage, see immediately below)
Stellenrust 51 Barrel Fermented Chenin Blanc 2015
Windmeul Kelder Chenin Blanc Reserve 2016 (debut)

- [Analysis of the Top 10 Challenge list over the four year history](#)

Only one wine features in the Top 10 four years in a row:

Perdeberg The Dry Land Collection Courageous Barrel Fermented Chenin Blanc

Two producers feature in the Top 10 fours years in a row:

Perdeberg with The Dry Land Collection Courageous Barrel Fermented Chenin Blanc
Spier with 21 Gables (2015, 2016, 2017) and Private Collection for Woolworths (2014)

Four appearances in the Top 10 Challenge:

Perdeberg (2014, 2015, 2016, 2017)
Spier (2014, 2015, 2016, 2017)
Stellenrust (2014, 2015, 2 x 2017)

Three appearances in the Top 10 Challenge:

Kleine Zalze (2014, 2 x 2016)
DeMorgenzon (2015, 2016, 2017)

Two appearances in the Top 10 Challenge:

Bellingham (2014, 2016)
Leopard's Leap (2015, 2016)
Rijk's (2014, 2016)
KVV (2014, 2015)
Simonsig (2014, 2015)

One appearance in the Top 10 Challenge:

Cederberg (2017)
Fleur du Cap (2017)
Nederburg (2017)
Spice Route (2017)
Windmeul (2017)
Allee Blue (2016)
Boschendal (2016)
Aetermitas (2015)
Boutinot (2015)
L'Avenir (2015)
Remhoogte (2014)
Villiera (2014)

- Tasting notes

**Cederberg Private Cellar Five Generations Chenin Blanc 2015
R220, David Nieuwoudt**

Alc 13.5%
RS 3.7g/l
TA 6.5g/l
pH 3.5
Oak Barrel fermented, aged 11 months – 33% new
Vines 14 years old
WO Cederberg

Highly perfumed with well integrated oak, green and bruised apple aromas and flavours. 10% viognier adds subtle florality and weight to fresh and vibrant glassful. Very expressive with pure, taut mineral and saline edge.

**DeMorgenzon Reserve Chenin Blanc 2016
R350, Carl van der Merwe**

Alc 14.14%
RS 3.6g/l
TA 5.8g/l
pH 3.31
Oak Barrel fermented, aged 11 months – 25% new
Vines 45 years old
WO Stellenbosch

Overtly aromatic, rich and intense, with creamy oak notes and whiff jasmine overlaying generous citrus and tropical fruits. Buttery palate, cut with bright lemon acidity; long opulent but not unrefreshing finish.

Fleur du Cap Unfiltered Chenin Blanc 2016
R130, Elmari Botes

Alc 14.48%
RS 3.56g/l
TA 6.7g/l
pH 3.11
Oak Barrel fermented + stainless steel portion, aged 8 months
Vines 30 years old, 20 years old
WO Western Cape

White blossoms, toasted red apple, spiced orange tea and light chai complexity. Satisfying weight, well integrated oak, long spicy end.

Nederburg Heritage Heroes The Anchorman Chenin Blanc 2016
R150, Natasha Boks

Alc 13.4g/l
RS 4.49g/l
TA 6.15g/l
pH 3.37
Oak Barrel fermented + stainless steel portion, aged 9 months
Vines 30+ years
WO Western Cape

Smokey, toasty characters in the background, rich baked apple in the fore with spiced orange – a really engaging nose. Wonderfully balanced acidity, well integrated oak and great length.

Perdeberg Winery The Dry Land Collection Courageous Barrel Fermented Chenin Blanc 2016
R86, Albertus Louw

Alc 14.12
RS 2.6g/l
TA 6.3g/l
pH 3.44
Oak Barrel fermented, aged 10 months
Vines 33 years old, 27 years old
WO Paarl

Delicate floral, peach and earth aromatics with some wax and melon rind; lovely balance and deft touch oak; while rich in texture the finish is still lively and fresh.

Spice Route Chenin Blanc 2016
R110, Charl du Plessis

Alc 14%
RS 2.6g/l
TA 5.9g/l
pH 3.42
Oak Stainless steel fermentation + small portion fermented & aged 9 months – older oak
Vines 39 years old
WO Swartland

A rich, bold wine with generous yet smart use of oak, ripe fruit basket including peaches and apricots, pears and papaya. Flavourful, with nice depth and intensity; enlivened by a fine acidity.

Spier Wines 21 Gables Chenin Blanc 2016
R185, Jacques Erasmus

Alc 14.38%
RS 4.53g/l
TA 6.17g/l
pH 3.33
Oak Barrel fermented, aged 14 months – 60% new
Vines 43 years old
WO Coastal (Tygerberg)

Engaging bouquet nose with lemon, spice, earth and pepper, subtle yeasty notes. Also beeswax, honeycomb and toasted apples. Satisfying weight, long stonefruit and chai finish.

Stellenrust 52 Barrel Fermented Chenin Blanc 2016
R200, Tertius Boshoff

Alc 13.6%
RS 3.8g/l
TA 7.2g/l
pH: 3.25
Oak Barrel fermented, aged 9 months
Vines 52 years old
WO Stellenbosch

Mulled orange rind and mulled spices, ginger and melon. Stonefruit and white peach, lifting acidity. Toasty and waxy palate with nudge of tannin on the finish.

Stellenrust 51 Barrel Fermented Chenin Blanc 2015
R???, Tertius Boshoff

Alc 13.4%
RS 3.9g/l
TA 7.3g/l
pH: 3.31
Oak Barrel fermented, aged 9 months
Vines 51 years old
WO Stellenbosch

Crammed with aromas and flavours of chenin and oak. Red apple, spice, orange tea and straw. Silky texture and layered palate complexity. Long finish.

Windmeul Kelder Chenin Blanc Reserve 2016
R80, Abraham van Heerden

Alc 13.5%
RS 3.7g/l
TA 6.2g/l
Oak Barrel fermented, aged 16 months
Vines 14 years old
WO Coastal

Pretty and nuanced with apple skin, orange blossom and clementines. Fine fruit purity, satisfying weight and enlivening acidity.