



STANDARD BANK CHENIN BLANC TOP 10 CHALLENGE – 2023 REPORT

- The Standard Bank Chenin Blanc Top 10 Challenge 2022 judging and procedures

The judging at the Standard Bank Chenin Blanc Top 10 Challenge 2023 was conducted according to standard tasting protocols detailing both the logistics and tasting procedures as before. This is not only for good governance but ensures consistency and is a guarantee that the same procedures will be followed each year, even though the panel of judges are rotated on a regular basis.

This year's judging panel comprised of five judges and 2 associates. The associates' scores were not considered but they are there to learn and to contribute to the discussion. The associate judging position is a crucial part in the guidance and mentorship of up-and-coming young judges to give them the opportunities to gain experience.

Panel members were:

Higgo Jacobs (Chair – Sommelier and industry expert)

Ginette de Fleuriot CWM (Judge – Wine Training Manager, Vinimark)

Jo Wessels (Judge - Sommelier Mary Jane Restaurant, Heidelberg. Current Best Sommelier of South Africa)

Malu Lambert (Judge - Wine Writer, malulambert.com)

Shawn Mathyse (Judge - Winemaker, Ken Forrester Wines)

Shane Mumba (Associate – Sommelier Nocturne Bar & Restaurant)

Noncgebo Langa (Associate – Winemaker, Delheim Estate)

The wines were tasted blind and randomly with no indication of vintage, cellar treatment or technical analysis by the five-person panel, scoring done according to the 20-point system. Judges were allowed to request vintage and technical details if they felt it would assist them better to understand a wine.

Healthy discussions were allowed around wines with notable score discrepancies among panellists, with judges encouraged to seriously consider contrasting points of view, but not pressured to move on scores.

Where bottle faults were suspected by any member of the panel, another bottle was called for. Faults (especially TCA) were relatively uncommon.

A strong and competitive 144 entries were considered for the first round of judging, slightly up from last year. This number was narrowed down, over 2 days of diligent tasting, to 27 potential Top Ten wines to be determined on the final (3rd) day – scoring above 16.5/20 average. There was a lovely symmetry to the results on the final day. New scores were assigned to wines in the final round of judging, and the Top 10 wines all scored above 16.5

on average in the second round of tasting, identifying a clear Top 10 winning list on panel averages.

In a new development, a list of the Top 20 scoring wines will be made available this year, to show the variety and tough competition at the top, and to give credit to these stunning wines that marginally miss out on the Top 10 awards cut every year.

- Key findings and commentary

Once again, the depth of quality in SA Chenin is the defining message of this challenge. More than ever, the cross section of quality in entries shows a diverse and confident category. I believe the nature of this challenge, with the only result being a place in the Top 10 (a one in 14 chance), is a strong contributor to the quality of entries received on an annual basis. Producers enter wines that they believe stand a chance to beat 130 other wines to rise to the top. They can't merely hope for a bronze medal coupled with a good value tag. South Africa is the benchmark for this variety on the global stage and as such we see greater competition, leading to greater innovation with each new release!

One of the most positive general observations is that of increase in concentration and intensity in the category, possibly due to increasing vine age (a common feature among top 10 listings); improvements in viticulture; and also a more ambitious average price sector for entries. The real positive is that this ambition (mostly) doesn't resonate in oak and sweetness in the wines, but rather fruit intensity and length. There are much less high RS, overtly toasty or leesy, or Botrytis character influenced wines going around than when this challenge started. This shape shift may be well documented, but it remains an impactful change. Bar a dwindling few, more showy, wooded expressions showed good integration of oak and fine lees work. This style was welcomed by the panel as a legitimate expression of Chenin and judged on merit.

Another development is that we saw less primary (estery) commercial simple sippers than expected (most probably a result of natural selection, as mentioned above). This decrease is filled by an increase in flinty, reductive, or mineral wines.

Reduction remains an interesting tool, and a recurring topic of panel discussion in judging Chenin. With an increase in more natural farming and fermentation methods, this topic is more pertinent than ever before. Recent regional collaboration with the Loire may also have had a subtle stylistic inspiration on our wines. Tight, nervy wines that take time to unfold from the glass are no longer a rarity.

A larger contingent of screw-cap closures is also relevant to this topic, and interesting to note that a whopping 6 wines in the Top 10 list have screw closures.

In the 27 wines that progressed to the final day's tasting, there was fair representation across major styles of Chenin Blanc and, significantly, elegant wines were identified and given a chance. Among these styles were Unwooded or alternative élevage; Reductive and woolly; Mineral and nervy; Savoury and creamy; Rich & oaky. The panel looked for balance and quality across the board.

If pushed for constructive criticism, we can isolate on the following:

- Lees work on most wines were good and complimentary, however when over-done the wines are malic, with a yoghurt character.
- A few wines were identified with exotic floral, perfumed characters. This can be best allocated to varieties like Muscat or Viognier used in small blending components. Understandably this may charm some consumers, but when obvious it is a detracting characteristic.
- As mentioned above, reduction can be intriguing and quite frankly fashionable, but producers should be wary of unattractive mercaptans and bruised fruit characters that don't blow off.
- The sweet-sour tension that comes naturally in Chenin can often be enhanced by volatile acidity. This is difficult to judge without analysis, and panels prefer to err on the side of caution.

Looking at the results, it's clear that a combination of ageing vessels in tank, new oak, older barrels, amphora etc plays a role in adding nuance and complexity, and ultimately reaped strong results.

The Standard Bank Chenin Blanc Top 10 Challenge 2023 winners are (in alphabetical order):

- Alvi's Drift Albertus Viljoen Chenin Blanc 2022
- Antonij Rupert Cape of Good Hope Riebeeksrivier Chenin Blanc 2021
- Durbanville Hills Collectors Reserve The Cape Garden Chenin Blanc 2022
- Flagstone Paradigm Chenin Blanc Reserve 2020
- KWV The Mentors Chenin Blanc 2021
- Lievland Old Vine Chenin Blanc 2022
- Stellenrust B25 Chenin Blanc 2022
- Stellenrust B28 Chenin Blanc 2022
- Stellenrust Stellenbosch Manor Barrel fermented Chenin Blanc 2021
- Stellenrust Stellenbosch Manor Barrel fermented Chenin Blanc 2022

Finally, we need to comment on the incredible, yet healthy consistency in the top performers every year, especially considering that the panel rotates on a regular basis. Stellenrust deserves a special mention here. It is nothing short of remarkable, considering the judging process and number of entries, to achieve 6 top 20 positions and a whopping 4 in the Top 10, out of 9 wines entered. This also comes as no surprise, considering their consistent success at this challenge historically.

A heart-felt thank you to Standard Bank for promoting healthy competition and excellence in South Africa's champion category – Chenin Blanc.

TASTING NOTES: 2023 STANDARD BANK CHENIN BLANC TOP TEN CHALLENGE

Alvi's Drift Albertus Viljoen Chenin Blanc 2022

Leesy, savoury introduction to quince, baked yellow apple and salted lime aromas. A hint of melba and baking spices too. This is a well-made execution of the richer, older-era style of

Chenin, with batonnage and oak influence, and lovely fresh acidity laced through the wine. Savoury, saline finish.

Antonij Rupert Cape of Good Hope Riebeeksrivier Chenin Blanc 2021

Pure, crisp and flinty in style, showing greengage, melon, apple and lime on the nose. The palate is pure, linear, delicate and appetizing, with tight acidity and dry length. Subtle vanilla and butter notes add complexity. Understated and nuanced.

Durbanville Hills Collectors Reserve The Cape Garden Chenin Blanc 2022

Mineral, stony high notes over fresh lime and apple. An energized core of juicy fruit supports the reductive-styled palate that includes riverbed, wet wool and flint. Lovely elegance and interplay of savoury, salty with sweet fruit and dry texture. Youthful – will evolve well.

Flagstone Paradigm Chenin Blanc Reserve 2020

Rich yellow stone fruit flowing from the glass includes quince, peach and pear, with some citrus blossoms. The palate has mineral interest and a touch of savoury, leesy influence and vanilla from oak. Well-rounded, soft mouthfeel, yet also reigned in, showing lovely freshness for a 2020 vintage. Fine complexity and staying power.

KWV The Mentors Chenin Blanc 2021

Wet wool, bath salts and lemon and lime. Good richness and purity of fruit includes tangy apricot, grapefruit and peach stone at the core. Classic varietal character. Fresh, youthful, and vibrant with well-integrated oaking. Lanolin and dry minerals on the savoury tail.

Lievlund Old Vine Chenin Blanc 2022

Light, fresh, primary fruit-driven style with green apple, spring flowers and fresh citrus, with an alluring undertone of flint and crushed rock. Good tension, brightness and zippy, mouthwatering appeal. Subtle oaking and superb all-round balance.

Stellenrust B28 (Fairtrade) Chenin Blanc 2022

Rich and opulent Chenin with exotic peach, apricot, vanilla and brioche aromas, possibly compounded by a hint of botrytis and well-measured oak. A refreshing acidity lifts the palate, cutting through the lemon cream confectionery flavours, and enticing another sip. A full and concentrated offering.

Stellenrust Next Level Chenin Blanc 2022

Interesting and captivating expression drives oily, oxidative, buttery aromas through ginger, baking spices and dried apricot on the nose, leading to lanolin, oyster shell and wool on the palate that is linear and toned. Superb tension, harmony and length.

Stellenrust Stellenbosch Manor Barrel-fermented Chenin Blanc 2021

Lovely rich, spicy notes from both fruit and oak, including ginger, tangerine, and roasted vanilla. Good marriage of oak and mineral reductive flavours on a vibrant palate that has an intense, ripe-fruited core, but also finesse. A very good example of an ambitious, barrel-fermented style.

Stellenrust Stellenbosch Manor Barrel-fermented Chenin Blanc 2022

Ripe peaches, fig, apple crumble, honeysuckle and dried apricots. The rich, sunny fruit and confectioned cream are offset by bright acidity and absorbed in the bold, layered structure of the wine, full of life and complexity. Fleshy and grippy, with a smoky, umami, lingering finish.