

South African Wines

In April, South Africans will hold their first true general elections in its history. South Africa is a wealthy, industrialized nation and despite its history of racial injustice and factional violence, it has, more than any African nation, the best odds at peace, prosperity, and social justice in the coming century.

With the end of apartheid, and the move to full democracy, international trade barriers that helped to enact this change, are being lifted, worldwide. This means that South African wines will be available in many parts of the world for the first time in many years.

This may bring down the price of entry level varietal wines significantly, for though South Africa only produces about as much wine as Rumania, about 8 million hectoliters, the reputation of South African wines are very high indeed, and we should see fierce competition.

South African wine production is almost twice that of Australia, and its history of wine production dates all the way back to 1659, when it was a Dutch colony. Constantia, a rich dessert wine made from the Muscat of Alexandria, was famous the world over during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Like California, South Africa's wine regions are blessed with very reliable, moderate climates. Poor growing seasons are very rare.

There are two main wine regions in the country, the cooler, moister, Coastal Belt, northeast of Cape Town, and the Little Karoo, further eastward, past the rain shadow of the Drakenstien mountains. As with California, the coastal regions produce the finest table wines, and the Little Karoo, like the San Joaquin Valley of California, is a great, overly-fertile, irrigated, inland region best suited for dessert wine production.

The main sub-appellations of the Coastal Belt are: Constantia and Durbanville, Stellenboch, Paarl, and Tulbagh. All of these regions are moderate in climate, have good soils and topography, and produce South Africa's finest table wines.

The main noble grape varieties used in this Coastal Belt are, starting with the reds: Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Carignan, Merlot, Shiraz, Hermitage (Cinsault), Gamay Noir, Pinotage (a cross of Pinot Noir and Cinsault!), Pinot Noir, and even Zinfandel.

The main noble white varieties include: the ubiquitous and versatile Steen (Chenin Blanc), Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Kerner, and the Semillon or Greengrape. Oddly, or perhaps thankfully, Chardonnay is not grown in great quantity, though this is quickly changing.

In 1973 South Africa enacted a system akin to Appellation Controlee laws called Wines of Origin. Wines with the W.O. seal on their capsule, or W.O.S., of Superior Origin are to be sought after. This system has been successful in encouraging the existence of many smaller, quality producers. These wineries are pretty well up to date in their winemaking equipment and techniques, as well as their use of oak cooperage and sound viticulture.

I recommend taking Hugh Johnson's Pocket Encyclopedia of Wine along with to purchase South African wines, as you will need to familiarize yourself with the regions and their best producers.

This writer has admittedly no experience of tasting South African wines, but I look forward with great anticipation to experiencing them in April, when these wines become available here in British Columbia. I also look forward to toast to the success and potentially bright future of the new South African nation.

- Tom Davis, Vancouver, Canada