The View from the Top: Happy 350th Birthday to South African Winemaking

"Today, praise be to God, wine was pressed for the first time from Cape grapes." Jan van Riebeeck, February 1659.

Wines from the Southern Hemisphere have a well-established reputation, both for quality and value. The wines of Australia and Chile have long been popular imports in the United States and the past several years has seen similar popularity for New Zealand and Argentina too. In fact, a rather hefty share of the wines that are most popular with BrightWines customers hail from the Southern Hemisphere; from "down under" as they say. Helping their popularity, the wines from these "down under" countries are relatively straightforward to understand. It is easy to fall in love with a well-priced, fruit-rich Shiraz from Australia or Malbec from Argentina. The jazzy whites from New Zealand have really caught a wave, and the wines of Chile have a long history with consumers and have really been on a hot streak lately as well.

But there is another, very significant, Southern Hemisphere wine-producing country that has escaped broader attention. Despite the occasional prediction from wine experts that we are perhaps overdue for a wave of interest in their wines, the wines of South Africa are still very much off-the-radar for many wine consumers. I have made a point to at least dedicate one major newsletter (and in-store tasting series) each year to South African wines. Recently this winter I have had the opportunity through a wide range of great South African wines; some from a new arrival in town that is the most exciting new South African brand of wines I have run across in a long time, but also a very broad range of top-quality South African wines that are being offered to me at some very impressive "feature" prices. So the timing must be right to focus in on this other down under and allow me to begin by offering a primer on the wines of South Africa.

South Africa's wine districts are centered around (and just inland from) the Cape of Good Hope, near Cape Town, on the south-western edge of South Africa. There are many who believe that South Africa's wine growing regions are among the very most picturesque in the world. The close proximity of the ocean acts as a moderating influence on the overall climate, also keeping things cooler by the coast while the further inland one travels, the warmer it gets. On the climatography scale, most of South African wine country would be classified as Region III which is the same as Napa Valley. The wine districts are also defined by valleys that are surrounded by the famous rocky blue-grey mountains that jut and soar above the vineyards; the most famous being Helderberg, Simonsberg, and Stellenbosch (names that we frequently see on wine labels too). Overall the climate, in European terms, is quite Mediterranean. South Africa even has it's own version of Le Mistral (the persistent summer wind of Provence) that is known as "The Cape Doctor". All of these factors combine to make the region around the Cape very well suited to growing wine, and there is a long history of South African winemaking to prove it; 350 years worth.

There was a time when South Africa produced some of the most famous wines in the world. Going back a couple of hundred years, the sweet Muscat-based dessert wines of Constantia were among the most prized wines of any. Today the wines of Constantia, a slim peninsula, are also a very important part of South African winemaking but have been replanted to focus more on dry wines made from more typical red and white. If historically Constantia is the most famous region for wine in South Africa, today that honor probably belongs jointly to Stellenbosch and Paarl. Stellenbosch is home to some of the most famous and most powerful and complex styles of South African wine. Stellenbosch is a lovely college town and can perhaps be called the Napa Valley of South African wine, and often the wineries there are higher-quality and smaller production and therefore more expensive wines. Paarl is more inland and therefore warmer, and produces as wide a variety as Stellenbosch but often focuses more on quantity over quality, and more value-priced wines too. Fine wines are also being made in previously more obscure regions like Wellington and Robertson as well as the historic Constantia. To help simplify the labeling, and probably to aid in exports, South Africa has adopted more updated wine labeling rules covering a geographically broad range of wines (for values and top-quality wines alike) so many South African wines we see today are being labeled simply as wine of origin "Western Cape" although in my experience the wines of Stellenbosch are still quite sure to label their wines as such.

The wine styles of South Africa include Pinotage, Cabernet, Merlot, Shiraz and many blends of these varieties for reds, and Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay and unique dry Chenin Blanc (nicknamed Steen) for whites. South Africa is still well-known for dessert Muscat, and also for authentic Port wines, and for off-dry whites too. The most planted white wine variety has always been Chenin Blanc, and it is commonly referred to as Steen in the local parlance. These range from off-dry to bone dry, and many can be some of the finest expressions of Chenin Blanc in the world. And fans of New Zealand and also Loire Valley Sauvignon Blanc styles will also find much to like about Sauvignon Blanc in South Africa. In fact, South Africa has experienced much of the same winery and vineyard modernization and investment that has been responsible for the rapid increase in quality and excitement over wines from other regions throughout the world. The results are evident in the quality of their wines. So consumers will find a wide variety of styles are available from across the wine regions, whether they be labeled as Stellenbosch or Paarl or Western Cape. The best red wines of Stellenbosch, and South Africa in general, are often made from Bordeaux varieties (Cabernet and Merlot) and often in Bordeaux style blends. South Africa also loves to grow Syrah (and they have the same tradition of pronouncing it Shiraz as the Aussies do). So the Shiraz and Bordeaux style blends of Cabernet and Merlot are quite recognizable to wine lovers, even if their South African style is not quite the same.

So what makes a South African wine distinctive? Well that is one of my favorite things about these wines, they are indeed quite distinctive! Here is how I would sort of "flavor-map" them: a good quality South African often reminds me of a hypothetical cross between a traditional European style wine (especially from either Bordeaux or the Rhone or some parts of Italy) with the more fruit-rich wines of the new world like
Australia or Chile. South African wines are warm climate wines, which tends to result in riper fruit and better natural alcohol percentages, which gives the wines a fruiter/richer profile somewhat in common with California or other Southern Hemisphere wines. However, the wines of South Africa are higher in acidity than California or Australia (or than France even) which gives them some similarity to Italian wines. South African wines often have an earthiness which is reminiscent of French wines, but even that comes off uniquely South African; with mineral undertones or even a minty/eucalyptus/espresso side to the earthiness. The acidity and earthiness in their wines are a natural result of the soil composition of much of the wine growing districts in the Cape. The combination of all these elements give the wines of South Africa a distinctive flavor-profile that is almost unlike any other in the world of wine. Perhaps this explains why South Africa has always had a "love it or hate it" sort of reputation, but I am also convinced that once we get more comfortable with South African wine it is much easier to love it. Naturally, more and more modern or internationally-styled wines from South Africa are being introduced as the industry moves forward. Some of them are quite tasty and do a good job of crossing over between classic South Africa style and modern wines. (hint: I have found a great example of this to offer here at BrightWines) As always though, the purist in me wants to encourage wineries and customers to embrace the classic styles of South African wines and to understand the hows and whys of the unique flavors that South Africa offers.

The most uniquely South African of all their red wines, showcasing all the distinctiveness I was describing above, is Pinotage. A South African specialty, Pinotage is a genetic cross of Pinot Noir with Cinsault, but tastes like neither one. The name comes from Pinot Noir and their old nickname for Cinsault wines, Hermitage. A good Pinotage reminds me a bit of a Barbera or Mourvedre (with acidity to match Barbera) but with more candied red and blue fruit flavors with a strong undertone of earth and eucalyptus or mint/fennel/herb. An overly fruity Pinotage might have a banana flavor, and an overly earthy/spicy one might remind you of bicycle tires. In other words a good Pinotage might be hard to describe, but unforgettable once you've had it. In an effort to keep Pinotage an important part of South African winemaking, there have been some impressive efforts to keep the variety vital. The A.B.S.A. Top Ten competition is one of the worlds most competitive and respected peer-reviewed wine awards, and is given each year to the 10 best Pinotage out of hundreds that are tasted. And more recently the introduction of a very popular new blended red wine, the Cape Blend, which requires Pinotage to be part of a Meritage-like blend has also been well-received and offers many great wine choices at both value and luxury prices. I have some lovely examples of these available as part of my current offer in fact!

So without further ado, here is that listing of wonderful South African wines I have available in the shop right now.

** Bright Lights: BrightWines South African wine selections**
The wines featured today are all in-stock and with just a couple of notable exceptions on some of the top wines (which are rather limited availability at the prices and ratings they have) most of the value-priced wines in this newsletter will form the basis of my "everyday" South Africa stock for at least a while.

** Dave's Top Picks: a NEW first-time import wine label that is a fantastic introduction to modern South African wine **
About a month ago, I was pleased to be one of the first in MN to taste a range of wines from a NEW label being imported by a local company (Etica, fair trade wines) that was just about ready to kick off. I was very impressed by the quality of the wines, the modern screw-capped packaging, and was also very impressed at how deftly these wines balanced themselves between the traditional South African flavor profile and a more internationally in-demand style. These three wines, a Pinotage, a "Cape Blend" of Cabernet/Merlot/Pinotage, and a nice dry (in the Steen style) Chenin Blanc are all delicious modern South African wines made in a fair-trade agreement with the winegrowers and winery of Citrusdal Winery in Olifants River. For true fans of old-school South African wines these might taste a bit too “Australian” for you, but for those who are new to South Africa these wines are as good a starting point as I have ever tasted! They are wonderful values! Check them out:

**OLIFANT GROVE 2007 PINOTAGE @ $10.99 per bottle**
The best modern/fruit-rich style of Pinotage in a value-price range that I have ever tasted. This wine is sure to make plenty of converts. Imported by a MN company, Etica (fair-trade wines) and made in the Olifants River region of Citrusdal in the wine of origin Western Cape by Citrusdal winery. NEW and sure to become a favorite around here I think. Mix/match case price is $9.99 per bottle.

**OLIFANT GROVE 2006 Cabernet/Merlot @ $10.99 per bottle**
This wine qualifies for the Cape Blend concept with its inclusion of 15% Pinotage along with the classic Bordeaux blend of 60% Cabernet Sauvignon and 25% Merlot. Oak aged and fruit rich, this is another winner from Etica. Mix/match case price is $9.99 per bottle.

**OLIFANT GROVE 2008 Chenin Blanc @ $9.99 per bottle**
Dry and tangy, this Chenin Blanc is a classic South African “Steen” with mineral and pineapple tones, a nice change of pace from Sauvignon Blanc. Note the fresh 2008 vintage too! Mix/match case price is $8.99 per bottle.
**Wonderful South African wines in-stock at BrightWines, from Bright Buys to Affordable Luxury**

This is probably the BEST range of South African wine I have ever featured! I will list them in price order, for simplicity.

**AVONDALE 2006 SAUVIGNON BLANC (Coastal Region) @ $8.99 per bottle**

This Paarl winery makes a lively and fresh Sauvignon Blanc, think New Zealand meets Loire but at a value price. Screwcapped with a new label since the last time I featured Avondale wines. Mix/match case price is only $7.99 per bottle.

**AVONDALE 2006 PINOTAGE (Paarl) @ $8.99 per bottle**

For fans of a value-priced but more traditional style of Pinotage, with spice and smoke in the aromas and mineraly and berry fruit tones in the palate. Avondale has been a BrightWines favorite over the years, and this wine is no exception. Mix/match case price is only $7.99 per bottle. (limited)

**ZEVENWACHT 2001 Cabernet Sauvignon (STELLENBOSCH) @ $9.99 per bottle**

Tastes like a nice Bordeaux petite chateau and on a special end-of-vintage deal direct from the importer. This is a great value in a very traditional, dry and earthy but smooth red that is drinking quite well since the 2001 vintage was a truly great vintage in Stellenbosch! Mix/match case price is only $8.99 per bottle.

**OVERGAUW 2006 SAUVIGNON BLANC (Stellenbosch) @ $9.99 per bottle**

Textbook South Africa Sauvignon with mineral/citrus flavors and a New Zealand meets a white Bordeaux sort of feel to it. Overgaauw is one of the premier wineries in South Africa and this Sauvignon Blanc is the best value-priced wine. Mix/match case price is only $9.17 per bottle, $110 per case.

**AVONDALE 2003 "Julia" Cab/Shiraz (Coastal Region) @ $9.99 per bottle**  **a Dave-fave**

This Cabernet - Shiraz blend is smooth and classy. The wine tastes like a one-third each blend of an Aussie Shiraz with a petite chateau Bordeaux with a South African. BrightWines customers have always enjoyed the wines of Avondale (from Paarl) every time I offer them and this blend does not disappoint. Mix/match case price is only $8.99 per bottle.

"A Few Good Men" SHIRAZ (Coastal Region, Swartland) @ 10.99 per bottle

A lovely South African Shiraz with the textbook Rhone-meets-Australia sort of style. These are the last few cases from the supplier on this previous BrightWines favorite so act soon. Mix/match case price is only $9.99 per bottle.

**ZEVENWACHT 2003 The Tin Mine red (Stellenbosch) @ $10.99 per bottle**

Traditionally styled red blend of Cabernet, Merlot and Shiraz. This wine has the higher acidity and mineral component that makes it such a nice dinner wine when compared to the more easy-going profile of the other value-priced red blends on this list. Well-knit and dry, and from Stellenbosch, all at a great price! Mix/match case price is only $9.99 per bottle.

**BUSHCAMP "Sundowner" 2007 CHENIN BLANC (Paarl) @ $10.99 per bottle**

By Paul and Hugo de Villiers, this wine has a fun outdoors/camping label and is a very tasty off-dry version of Chenin Blanc, soft and fruity but with enough crispness to refreshing. Probably more likely to sell well during summer, but a too good to skip over. Mix/match case price is only $9.99 per bottle.

**HERON'S NEST 2007 CABERNET-PINOTAGE (Stellenbosch) @ $10.99 per bottle**

This "basket pressed" 65% Cabernet and 35% Pinotage is made by Clos Malverne, a very nice mid-range Stellenbosch producer. More herbal (and mineral) tones than some of the other blends on this list, so a nice option for fans of that style of wine or for red meat dishes with lots of herb. Mix/match case price is only $9.99 per bottle.

**LE RICHE 2003 CABERNET-MERLOT (Stellenbosch) @ $11.99 per bottle**  ** Parker-rated, $20 retail **

Hot price but very limited availability on this lovely Stellenbosch blend. 88 points from Robert Parker's Wine Advocate, at $20 retail! "A blend of 65% Cabernet Sauvignon and 35% Merlot, the 2003 Cabernet Sauvignon / Merlot bursts from the glass with candied red as well as black fruits. Its highly expressive, fruit-forward personality is medium-bodied, supple, and displays oodles of sweet blackberry as well as black cherry fruit." Mix/match case price is only $10.79 per bottle.

**OVERGAUW 2003 CABERNET SAUVIGNON (Stellenbosch) @ $15.99 per bottle**  **a Dave-fave**

With this much eucalyptus/iodine/smoke on the nose you might expect a very rough-and-tumble sort of wine. Not so! This is very smooth and very classy despite the powerful exotic profile it sports. For fans of the exotic aromas that South Africa can offer, unadulterated by oaky richness, this wine is dry, full-bodied, very smooth and reminiscent of a nice Bordeaux. Mix/match case price is only $14.99 per bottle (this is special-feature price, normally a $20+ wine)
GRANGEHURST 2001 "Nikela" Cape Blend (Stellenbosch) @ $19.99 per bottle
Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinotage and Merlot. This big and powerful Stellenbosch is from one of the best vintages recently in South Africa and is just now beginning to show its stripes! Believe it or not, the 2000 vintage (a lesser vintage) of this same wine rated 92 points from Robert Parker's Wine Advocate, at $30 retail. Here are the tasting notes on that 92-point 2000 vintage, just as a teaser of what this 2001 vintage has to offer: "The 2000 Nikela is brilliant! A blend of 50% Cabernet Sauvignon, 29% Pinotage, and 11% Merlot, it displays a delightful nose of candied red cherries immersed in spices. Concentrated layers of chocolate-laced black cherries, raspberries, and other assorted red fruits are intermingled with spices in this medium to full-bodied wine’s character. Lush, almost sweet tannin can be found in its long, seamless finish." (no press yet on the 2001) Mix/match case price is only $17.99 per bottle

LA CAVE 2004 PINOTAGE (Wellington) @ $19.99 per bottle ** ABSA "Top 10" Pinotage for this vintage **
This winery has won the ABSA Top 10 Pinotage award previously too and is one of the few to do so multiple times. This 2004 is quite simply one of the BEST Pinotage you can buy! Not much else to say except this is great wine, both for fans of Pinotage and for fans of great wines. Sorry, no further case discount at this price. This is a limited offer.

LE RICHE 2002 reserve Cabernet Sauvignon (Stellenbosch) @ $24.99 per bottle ** 89 pts Parker, at $35 retail **
89 points at $35 retail by Robert Parker's Wine Advocate: "Loads of wonderfully ripe black fruits are interspersed with roasting spices in the aromatics of the 2002 Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve. This broad, deep, medium-bodied wine is crammed with flavors reminiscent of candied dark berries, asphalt, mint, and spices. Its long, seamless finish exhibits copious quantities of fine, supple tannin. Projected maturity: now-2012." Mix/match case price of $22.49 per bottle, very limited.

Peter Andrew 2003 Ingenium reserve (Stellenbosch) @ $29.99 per bottle ** 90 pts W.E. at $52 retail **
Very limited, only 5 total 6pks available at $29.99 per bottle. "This is a beautiful Bordeaux blend, offering the kind of classic poise and exotic flair that South Africans are so good at delivering. On the nose, soft mint, chocolate, cedar and black currant beckon, and on the palate, spice and minerality mingle with the earthier elements. The structure is good, and there’s ample complexity, but the wine is still approachable. 90 points. $52 retail." Wine Enthusiast

David Frost 2002 "Par Excellence" (Paarl) @ $33.33 per bottle ** 90 pts W.S. at $46 retail **
As if to prove that Paarl can make wonderful Bordeaux blends just like Stellenbosch can; only 500 cases made and rated 90 pts W.S. this delicious Bordeaux blend is a "Suave, modern style, with ripe, succulent black currant, plum and blackberry fruit caressed by sweet toast and cocoa notes. Long, fruit-filled finish picks up a nice hint of dried herb. Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot. 90 points. $46 retail." Wine Spectator. Very limited, but mix/match case price of $29.99 per bottle.

If you have read all the way down to here, you must be either a fan of South Africa or very curious to learn and for that I very much THANK YOU. To help commemorate 350 years of winemaking in South Africa, one of my suppliers has given me a stack of magazines and brochures to pass out to my customers and I will have those available at the tastings tonight and tomorrow (rsvp if you want to attend). Remember, most of these wines in today's newsletter are in decent supply so I hope to have a good selection of South Africa in stock for a while. However, some of the highly-rated and limited production wines might sell out relatively soon. Have a great weekend, and be sure to check out some South African wine the next time you stop into BrightWines! --Dave

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