

# SOUTH AFRICAN CHENIN BLANC

## Don't call it Steen any longer



JIM CLARKE

From the start, the deck was stacked against exports of even the best South African Chenin. With the notable exception of classic bottlings from the Loire Valley, the grape hadn't earned much respect. New World growers loved its high yields and its knack for retaining acidity even in warm conditions, but the results were never associated with quality. In the 1970s and '80s, California's off-dry Chenin

After the end of apartheid and its attendant international sanctions in 1994, South Africa's wine industry eagerly entered overseas markets with its two specialties, the white Steen and the red Pinotage. The latter—a hybrid developed in Stellenbosch and therefore the closest thing the country had to an indigenous grape—made a strong, if often controversial, impression. Steen, on the other hand, didn't have much impact at all, except perhaps as exam fodder for sommeliers: "The South African cultivar Steen is better known internationally by what name?" Answer: "Chenin Blanc."

ins often appeared in cheap jugs. If there was any upside, it was that most of this plonk was labeled "Chablis" rather than "Chenin Blanc."

Chenin's history in South Africa is a bit more nuanced. Granted, in the second half of the 20th century, the nation's producers made their fair share of bland, off-dry wines as well as brandies, but the original plantings went back to the 17th century. In addition, those apartheid-era embargoes had isolated the Cape from trends that led growers in other New World countries to rip out Chenin in favor of Chardonnay. Today, the Cape has not only the world's most extensive plantings of the grape (spanning triple the acre-

Photo courtesy of Vins d'Orrance

## SPECIAL REPORT



*Chenin Blanc vines at Vins d'Orrance in Claremont (left); view of Helderberg Mountain from Ken Forrester Vineyards in Stellenbosch (above).*

age of the Loire Valley) but a substantial number of ancient vines. Eben Sadie of The Sadie Family Wines, for example, makes Mev Kirsten—part of his new range of single-vineyard releases—from Chenin Blanc vines established in 1905; other bottlings in the series, a few of which will soon reach the United States, come from 89-year-old plantings.

### The Problem with Versatility

With the end of sanctions, South African viticulture developed rapidly. The past decade has seen the release of a growing number of high-quality, exciting Chenin Blancs made in a wide range of styles. Because the grape retains acidity so well, it can be used to produce anything from crisp, mineral wines to fuller, more

tropical examples that can withstand oak aging, not to mention sweet dessert wines. That versatility presents a marketing dilemma for exporters, however, since it prevents Chenin from becoming identified with the country the way, say, Sauvignon Blanc is with New Zealand.

Ken Forrester, chairman of the Chenin Blanc Association of South Africa (and producer of several different Chenins for his own winery), says the organization considered devising a sweetness scale similar to the International Riesling Foundation's Taste Profile. The group has shelved the idea for now, instead creating six stylistic categories that it encourages producers to use on their back labels. "Fresh and fruity," "rich and ripe (unwooded)," and "rich and ripe (wooded)" styles are all dry, with less than 9 grams per liter of residual sugar; "rich and ripe (slightly sweet)" wines contain 9-30 grams per liter; "sweet" wines have more than 30 grams

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*Eben Sadie among old Chenin Blanc vines at The Sadie Family Wines in Paardeberg.*



per liter; and “sparkling” Chenins may be made by either the traditional or the Charmat method.

## A Difference in Style

The higher-acid, lighter-bodied, off-dry styles for which Loire vintners are known are uncommon in South Africa these days. Most of the Cape’s Chenin Blanc-producing areas—primarily Stellenbosch, Paarl, and the Swartland—are warmer than their Loire Valley counterparts, which may explain the difference. But according to Bruwer Raats, owner-winemaker of

Raats Family Wines, Stellenbosch in particular offers ideal conditions for cultivation of the grape. Favoring blocks from the region’s decomposed-granite soils in warmer years and from sandstone soils in cooler vintages, he looks for a specific profile in his wines: “Chenin should have an [upside-down] pear shape and be focused at the end. Many have that fullness at the beginning, but don’t manage the finish. People are picking too ripe, trying too hard—making their wines

too obvious, too big,” he says, echoing the recent knock against California Chardonnay. “You lose the elegance. They offer instant gratification, but look what that got Australia. I’d like to see a bit more finesse.”

Although Raats is particularly critical of “14.5% wines from the Swartland, with no acidity left,” that region is home to many of the Cape’s up-and-coming producers—including Sadie, who notes that “the Swartland has the highest number of old vines per capita in South Africa; they’re all on slopes, and there’s no irrigation and little disease pressure.” Such conditions also make bulk production unprofitable; as Sadie puts it, “this area is great—it keeps the Excel-spreadsheet people out.”

Sadie belongs to an association called Swartland Independent Producers (SIP), whose members are dedicated to expressing a sense of place through their wines. Any bottling bearing their logo—whether Chenin Blanc or another variety—must be aged in no more than 25%-new oak. Sadie himself has eschewed oak entirely, favoring concrete eggs. Swartland winemakers also seem to be retreating from the high alcohol levels that Raats decries; at Cape Wine 2012, most of their wines had less than 14%, sacrificing nothing in concentration but gaining freshness and elegance (see also Notebook, p. 12).

## The Promise of Blending

Many Swartland vintners are now blending Chenin Blanc with Rhône varieties or even

*Tasting room (left) and Ken Forrester (right) at Ken Forrester Vineyards.*



*Photo by Jim Clarke (top); photos courtesy of Ken Forrester Vineyards (bottom)*



## SPECIAL REPORT



Chenin Blanc bush vine at Raats Family Wines in Stellenbosch.



Bruwer Raats of Raats Family Wines.

Chardonnay. Some, like A.A. Badenhorst Family Wines, combine their lots only after fermentation; others, like Sadie, rely on field blends—as in his 'T Voetpad, which contains Chenin Blanc, Sémillon Blanc, Sémillon Gris, and Muscat. Rall Wines' Donovan Rall, another SIP member, describes his own White thus: “The most important and biggest component in the blend is the Paardeberg Chenin. The vines are all between 30 and 40 years old; their age, combined with the granite soils, gives the blend its incredibly intense fruit and mineral backbone. The Chardonnay component, picked earlier, brings freshness, and its almost quartz-like

soil adds a chalkiness that also contributes to the mineral aspect of the complete wine. By picking the Chardonnay early, I can afford for the Verdelho and Viognier components to be picked fully ripe, thus providing texture and mouthfeel. They also add some ripe stone-fruit and orange-peel flavors to the more citrus-driven flavors of the Chenin and Chardonnay.” Concludes Rall, “By far the most exciting and talked-about wines out of South Africa over the past few years are white Cape blends; considering what they have achieved internationally in such a short time, I strongly believe that they will soon be our signature.”

Raats, by contrast, believes the focus should remain on single-varietal wines, at least for now:

*Panorama of Swartland from the Badenhorst vineyards in Paardeberg.*



Broadbent Selections marketing director Catherine Miles with Adi Badenhorst of A.A. Badenhorst Family Wines.



Photos courtesy of Raats Family Wines (top); photos by Bartholomew Broadbent (bottom left) and Jim Clarke (bottom right)

## OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

### A.A. Badenhorst White, Swartland

2008 \$42

Some serious blending here: 29% Chenin Blanc; 14% each Chardonnay, Grenache Blanc, Roussanne, Verdelho, and Viognier; and 1% Sauvignon Blanc. Plenteous stone fruits and orange blossoms appear on the nose; exotic spices emerge on the palate. The wine is big but not ungainly, with enough acidity to balance a slight phenolic touch that keeps the finish dry and long.

### De Trafford Straw Wine, Stellenbosch

2005 \$50

Sweet and concentrated, this dessert wine is made using traditional *vin de paille* methods—a rarity in the Cape. Though fairly rich with dried apricot, fig, and honey, it exemplifies Chenin's ability to retain acidity through a clean, elegant finish.

### Ken Forrester The FMC, Stellenbosch

2010 \$65

Forrester's Chenin Blancs range from the crisp and light Petit to the T Noble Harvest dessert wine; The FMC (which stands for Forrester Meinert Chenin, after Forrester and fellow winemaker Martin Meinert, but actually has a more profane origin) is his flagship. Harvested in three passes—the last typically including some botrytized grapes—it delivers lashings of tropical fruit, apricot, and honey along with softer touches of oak-driven vanilla. The earlier-harvested grapes supply enough acidity to keep the wine's opulent, full body from getting flabby.

### Land of Hope Chenin Blanc Reserve, Stellenbosch

2011 \$25

An abundance of fruity aromas, notably lemon and pineapple, belie the mineral palate of this wine. Despite an 11-month stint in 20%-new barriques, it displays no oak notes, and the mouthfeel is elegant and long. Land of Hope is one of several Chenin Blanc producers in The Winery of Good Hope's portfolio (look also for Radford Dale and Black Rock); its profits go into an educational trust for disadvantaged employees and their families.

### Raats Chenin Blanc Original, Stellenbosch

2011 \$15

The lighter of Raats's two Chenins, this unwooded bottling offers a mix of white and citrus fruits—lemon, melon, and yellow plum—accompanied by flinty minerality and mild spiciness. Firm and crisp, with a juicy finish, it refreshes the palate without losing complexity.

### Rall White, Swartland

2010 \$NA

Donovan Rall makes wine for Vuurberg in Stellenbosch as well as his own boutique label. This full-bodied blend of Chenin Blanc, Chardonnay, Verdelho, and Viognier presents a mineral nose that opens up to display notes of apricot, marzipan, and clove. It's a good example of the move toward elegance by many Swartland vintners.

### Scali Blanc, Western Cape

2009 \$28

Made with grapes from the Western Cape, the Swartland, and Paarl, this blend of 60% Chenin Blanc and 10% each Chardonnay, Roussanne, Sauvignon Blanc, and Viognier is full, firm, and dry. Notes of peach, fig, and passion fruit are offset by a slightly oxidative hint of marzipan.

### The Sadie Family Palladius, Swartland

2010 \$55

Comprising 10 varieties from five vineyards within the Paardeberg area, the 2010 Palladius is fresher than some earlier vintages, perhaps reflecting Sadie's move from oak barrels to concrete eggs. Offering scents of marzipan, orange blossom, beeswax, honey, and apricot, it's just a touch fuller than medium bodied and densely flavored, with subtle fruit tannins emerging on the finish.

### The Sadie Family Skurfberg, Swartland

2011 \$50

The only Chenin among Sadie's Old Vine Series that's currently imported here is made from 89-year-old bush vines. It's medium bodied and intensely mineral yet elegant, with aromas of Asian pear and yellow plum and a long, vibrant finish.

### Tormentoso Chenin Blanc Old Vine, Paarl

2012 \$13

This value-priced bottling from Stellenbosch's MAN Vintners, made from 30-year-old vines and partially fermented in barrel, is clean and moderately full, with a generous nose of tropical and citrus fruits.

### Vins d'Orrance Chenin Blanc Kama, Western Cape

2010 \$33

Aged in third-use barrels, the medium-bodied Kama is aromatically generous, with notes of pineapple, melon, and citrus, yet restrained on the persistent palate.



Rall Wines in Riebeeek-Kasteel (left); Donovan Rall in the cellar (below).



Photos courtesy of Rall Wines



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### KEY PRODUCERS

#### **A.A. Badenhorst Family Wines**

Kalmoesfontein  
P.O. Box 1177  
Paardeberg, Malmesbury  
7299  
+27-082-373-5038  
[aabadenhorst.com](http://aabadenhorst.com)  
Importer: Broadbent Selections  
[www.broadbent.com](http://www.broadbent.com)

#### **De Trafford**

P.O. Box 495  
Stellenbosch 7599  
+27-218-801611  
[detrafford.co.za](http://detrafford.co.za)  
Importer: Boutique Wine Collection  
[www.boutiquewines.info](http://www.boutiquewines.info)

#### **Ken Forrester Vineyards**

R44 and Winery Road  
P.O. Box 1253  
Stellenbosch 7599  
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[www.kenforresterwines.com](http://www.kenforresterwines.com)  
Importer: Cape Classics  
[www.capeclassics.com](http://www.capeclassics.com)

#### **Land of Hope**

The Winery of Good Hope  
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[www.landofhope.co.za](http://www.landofhope.co.za)  
Importer: World Premiere Wines  
[www.worldpremierewines.com](http://www.worldpremierewines.com)

#### **Raats Family Wines**

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P.O. Box 2068  
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[www.raats.co.za](http://www.raats.co.za)  
Importer: Cape Classics  
[www.capeclassics.com](http://www.capeclassics.com)

#### **Rall Wines**

Vuurberg Farm,  
Helshoogte Pass  
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[www.rallwines.co.za](http://www.rallwines.co.za)  
Not yet imported

#### **Scali Wines**

Schoone Ord, Voor  
Paardeberg  
P.O. Box 7143  
Paarl 7620  
+27-218-698340  
[www.scali.co.za](http://www.scali.co.za)

Importer: Boutique Wine Collection  
[www.boutiquewines.info](http://www.boutiquewines.info)

#### **The Sadie Family Wines**

Aprilskloof Road  
P.O. Box 1019  
Paardeberg, Malmesbury  
7299  
+27-761-517131  
[www.thesadiefamily.com](http://www.thesadiefamily.com)  
Importer: Broadbent Selections  
[www.broadbent.com](http://www.broadbent.com)

#### **Tormentoso Wines**

MAN Vintners  
P.O. Box 389  
Stellenbosch 7599  
+27-218-617759  
[www.tormentosowines.co.za](http://www.tormentosowines.co.za)  
Importer: Vineyard Brands  
[www.vineyardbrands.com](http://www.vineyardbrands.com)

#### **Vins d'Orrance**

P.O. Box 23923  
Claremont 7735  
+27-216-837479  
[www.vinsdorrance.co.za](http://www.vinsdorrance.co.za)  
Importer: Broadbent Selections  
[www.broadbent.com](http://www.broadbent.com)



De Trafford's David Trafford with Chenin Blanc grapes in Stellenbosch (top); De Trafford Chenin Blanc paired with fish, peppers, and radishes (above); executive vice president Molly Choi of U.S. importer Cape Classics (bottom left).



Photos courtesy of Cape Classics (left), De Trafford (right)



"We're never going to find proper recognition for our blends until we establish the quality of our Chenin Blanc. It must become like Malbec from Argentina—we must gain fame for it first." Chenin Blanc, rather than Pinotage, may prove to be the Cape version of California Zinfandel. Indeed, the rediscovery of old plots and field blends in vineyards that survived only because of their role in the production of low-end sweet wines is a phenomenon familiar to Zinfandel fans. And if baby boomers tended to avoid Zinfandel after outgrowing "white Zin" and to dismiss Chenin that was sold as downmarket "Chablis," millennials may approach both varieties without preconceptions.

"My ultimate goal is to have [Chenin Blanc] rival Pinot Grigio, where consumers ask for it varietally," says Molly Choi, executive vice president of Cape Classics, the U.S. importer for Ken Forrester, Raats Family, and several other producers. Until then, she's prepared to enumerate its selling points: "Something that has always worked well is referring to it as 'Pinot Grigio with muscles, in a hula skirt.' It's similarly approachable and quaffable, but it has more tropical elements and oomph. Between us, it's way more interesting." 🍷

