



# The International Wine Review

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## Report #55: Wines of South Africa: White Blends and Old Vines

### Introduction



100+ Year Old Vines in the Swartland

Winemaking continues to evolve in South Africa. Recently, we've observed especially rich offerings of white blends and wines made from old vines. This report explores these two trends and reviews exemplary wines. The white blends are a highly varied lot with some based on Sauvignon Blanc, others based on the country's workhorse vine, Chenin Blanc, and still others based on Rhone varieties. Winemakers are especially creative in the blends they assemble and in the way they make the wines. Vines made from old vines, aged 35-100+ years old, are also varied, although Chenin Blanc dominates. However, there are also very old vines of Cinsault, Grenache, Carignan and other varieties that are responsible for what we think are South Africa's most interesting and complex wines.

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South Africa has been making high quality wine from *vitis vinifera* for over four centuries. Indeed, the first governor of the Cape Colony, Jan van Riebeeck, requested that vine cuttings be sent from Europe in 1655, and the first pressing of Chenin Blanc and Muscat grapes occurred in 1659, a hundred years before Thomas Jefferson's unsuccessful experiment to grow *vitis vinifera* in Virginia. Later in the 17th century, the French Huguenots began arriving in the Cape, fleeing religious oppression in France, and brought their winemaking knowledge with them. They settled in Stellenbosch and Franschoek (French Corner) where many of their original estates still produce some of South Africa's best wine.

South Africa developed a global reputation for its wines; Napoleon was said to favor the delicate, sweet Vin de Constance, which was popular among European royalty. But apartheid, phylloxera, and production arrangements that rewarded volume over quality took their toll, and by the late 20th century when apartheid ended South Africa was poorly equipped to compete in the global market place. Fortunately, apartheid ended, marketing arrangements were reformed, and South Africa's excellent wine schools at Stellenbosch and Elsenburg continued to produced well-trained winemakers who now were able to go abroad and discover how the rest of the world farmed grapes and made wine.

# Introduction

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In the ensuing years, South African wine has continued to improve. In 2012 we wrote about many of those improvements in our Report #30 **The Wines of South Africa**. Since that report, we've traveled to South Africa annually to taste wines and meet with winemakers to assess new developments and new releases. We've written special reports on Chenin Blanc, on Value Wines, and on South Africa's excellent Sparkling Wines in addition to numerous articles on specific wineries and winemakers. As we've studied the South African wine scene we've been struck by two recent trends—the increase in the number and variety of white blends being produced and the discovery of old vineyards that are now being resuscitated. These are the topics of this current report: white blends and wines made from old vines. During our stay in the Western Cape earlier this year, we met several prominent winemakers, visited special old vineyards, and tasted a large number of white blends and old vine wines. In what follows, we discuss our findings, but, first, we provide a brief refresher on the wine growing regions of the Western Cape.

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