

# Branding Chenin blanc as a South African specialty

According to Lauren Buzzeo, the managing editor of the US-based publication Wine Enthusiast read worldwide, South Africa stands the strongest chance of making an impact in the US by linking its wine marketing message with a single varietal in the way New Zealand has done with Sauvignon blanc and Argentina, with Malbec. Buzzeo has been covering South Africa for the magazine since 2010 as its tasting director and senior editor.



Lauren Buzzeo

She was in the country in early July to judge in the 2017 Standard Bank/Chenin Blanc Top 10 Challenge along with five other, South African-based panel members, including two Masters of Wine. "To associate Chenin blanc with South Africa in the minds of US consumers is a way to begin the conversation. It's easier for them to first get their heads around South Africa as a producer of this amazingly refreshing wine that's so food-friendly than to tell them the country's strongest suit is its ability to make wine in a huge variety of different styles.

"Instead of staking your claim by saying you can do everything," she urged producers to "highlight what you do best. If you brand Chenin blanc as a South African specialty, you stand a better chance of connecting with wine-lovers, of providing them with something to attach to, an entrée into understanding the wines of the country. Because, sadly, South Africa is not yet widely known or understood in the American market."

The US is currently the world's biggest wine market by value and has been since 2013.

## Be wary of under-pricing wines

"As awareness and demand grow, there will be a mainstream place for bright, lively, approachable South African Chenins characterised by ripe stone fruit and citrus flavours - not too sweet - and pristine acidity - wines that can comfortably retail between \$10 and \$20.

That said, producers of South African Chenins should be wary of under-pricing their wines. To over-deliver on quality in relation to price is to run the risk of implying the wines are not worthy and that they don't deserve to be taken seriously. We need to see mid- to top-level bottlings priced higher, \$25 and above, to demonstrate a pride and confidence in their world-class stature."

## **From workhorse to glamour grape**

South Africa has more Chenin blanc plantings than any other country in the world, with 18,5% of the country's 95,775 hectares planted to the varietal. Not only is it the most widely cultivated local grape but local plantings represent more than those established anywhere else in the world combined.

A popular choice for South African brandy producers for much of the 20th century, it has been transformed from workhorse to glamour grape under the Chenin Blanc Association, chaired by well-known producer Ken Forrester, who has played a major role in rehabilitating its image. Today, many of the country's foremost winemakers choose Chenin for their flagship offerings, winning widespread international recognition for these wines.

Thought to have originated in the Loire region of France, Chenin blanc is a very versatile grape that features in an array of dry, fruitier and noble late harvest wines.

Buzzeo believes South African Chenins tend to be more fruit-forward than their French counterparts: "Not flashy, but more immediately accessible than those from the Loire, that have a more austere and saline character."

## **SA's elegant wines**

She is not suggesting that all South Africa's marketing focus should be on Chenin, though. "I'm really excited by the quality of South African Chardonnays and also Pinotages. It's a new day for Pinotage - time to move on from those negative perceptions of acetone and burnt rubber flavours. There's a new generation of wine consumers keen to taste interesting and unusual wines. They aren't aware of the baggage around Pinotage and are ready and willing to taste the refined and elegant wines of today."

She also praised South African Cabernets.

## **Thrilled by Standard Bank/Chenin Blanc Top 10 candidates**

Commenting on the wines entered for this year's Standard Bank/Chenin Blanc Top 10 Challenge, she said they reflected an ongoing improvement and innovation. "I was thrilled by many of these wines. There's an amazing *gees* (spirit) and ability to push boundaries. These Chenins are an expression of what makes South Africa such an appealing country.

"I love the people, the wine, the food, the stories, the architecture and the fact that there is such a strong focus on eco-sustainability. Now, with social media, you have the chance to talk not just in words but in the most beautiful pictures, which is something that American consumers absolutely need more of to better understand the complete beauty of this country.

"There is something I'd like to see more of, and that's greater evidence of diversity in prominent winemaking positions. There are many encouraging initiatives and that makes me very optimistic."

*The winners of the 2017 Standard Bank/Chenin Blanc Top 10 Challenge will be announced on 23 August.*

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