



**MERLOT
REPORT
2018**

Compiled by Winemag.co.za

JUDGING PROCEDURES

The judging panel was chaired by myself and further consisted of two trusted colleagues, namely Roland Peens and James Pietersen, both of Wine Cellar, a Cape Town firm which brokers and cellars fine wine. We tasted blind, ratings done according to the 100-point system. Final scores were awarded on the basis of discussion that involved retasting where necessary rather than relying solely on arithmetic averaging.

Christian Eedes,
Editor, Winemag.co.za

KEY FINDINGS

This is the second annual category report on the category that is Merlot and the good news is that the overall standard was significantly higher than a year ago – there were 67 entries this year which was exactly the same as last year but whereas the average score then was a middling 86.4 on the 100-point quality scale, it was 87.9 this time around.

What to put this down to? Again, the outstanding vintage that was 2015 has something to do with it – 27 of the wines were from this year and 16 of these rated 89 points or higher. More specifically, five of the eight wines to rate 90-plus were 2015 while it should be remembered that four of the five top wines from last year's report were also.

The observation was made last year that it seems that Merlot is very often positioned as an easier version of Cabernet Sauvignon, which is to say a red wine offering the classic nobility of a Bordeaux grape but without the austere tannins. In lesser vintages, the result can be wines which appear a little simple but in a vintage like 2015 which allowed optimal ripening then the lusciousness which we all want from the variety is finally achieved.

It could be argued that “optimal ripeness” is a relative concept when it comes to any variety but in the case of Merlot, it does seem to be less forgiving than just about anything else grown under local conditions. At the one end of the spectrum, there were wines which were too light and lean with sour acidities and astringent tannins while at the other, there were wines tending to jammy, sweet and lacking verve.

Inevitably, there was debate about what level of pyrazine to tolerate. The presence of these compounds can give wines an excessively vegetative character but where concentrations are not too high, it adds aromatic lift and refreshment on the palate – it is impossible to argue that the top-scoring Mount Bullet 2015 from Shannon Vineyards in Elgin is utterly free of pyrazines but here they suit the wine very well. In contrast, some of the wines from Constantia and Durbanville often appeared excessively green and producers in these maritime areas seem to face a particular challenge when it comes to working with the variety.

Then, of course, there are those producers going to extreme lengths to avoid any pyrazine character in order to arrive at the most sumptuous wine possible. Pick too ripe, however, and the resulting wines often appear to lack clear fruit definition – “squishy” being a word that the panel used on more than one occasion. An apparent sweetness on some wines was also noted and the panel wondered if this was an unfortunate by-product of late-picking/high alcohols or done deliberately in order to pander to lowest common denominator tastes.

Oak management also seems to be more problematic than it is with Cabernet Sauvignon – oak obviously has a contribution to make in terms of both a wine's aromatic and flavour profile but this should not be too overt lest it become vulgar. You sense that some examples lack the necessary fruit power to handle a particularly ambitious maturation regime.

To reiterate what was said above, however, it does seem that Merlot is finally on a bit of a roll. Most of the wines provide sound everyday drinking at a reasonable price – Durbanville Hills 2017 rating 89 and selling for R72 a bottle as well as Jason's Hill 2016, 88 and R89 a bottle, offering particularly good quality relative to price. Then, there are the specialists such as Meerlust and Shannon who are starting to flirt with greatness but for these, of course, you are required to pay a little more.

As a footnote, we once again included a ringer from Pomerol, this being the Chateau Nenin 2014, a property owned by Jean-Hubert and Michel Delon, the proprietors of Château Léoville-Las-Cases. We rated this 92, the same score as it received from Robert Parker's Wine Advocate and Wine Spectator, and we are confident that we are not over- or under-rating the local examples.

The prize for best wine overall was a Tarransaud Tonnellerie 225-litre barrel worth R14 720 sponsored by local agent Chene South Africa.

TASTING NOTES

92

Shannon Mount Bullet 2015 – **BEST OVERALL**

Price: R405

Total production: 5 851 bottles

Abv: 14%

From a 3ha block planted to five different clones. Matured for 20 months in French oak, 20% new. Black berries, some appealing herbal character, earth and attractive oak on the nose. Extraordinary depth of fruit, lovely freshness and a long, savoury finish. Concentrated without being weighty and supremely well balanced.

92

Chateau Nenin Grand Vin Pomerol 2014

Wine Cellar Price: R955

Total production:

Abv: 13.5%

68% Merlot, 32% Cabernet Franc. Top notes of violets and fresh herbs before black berries, vanilla and pencil shavings. The palate possesses a great core for fruit, fresh acidity and firm but fine tannins. Layered and long.

91

Fleur Du Cap Series Privée 2015

Price: R169

Total production: 7 547 bottles

Abv: 14.3%

Grapes from a Stellenbosch Kloof vineyard planted in 2000 and another in Devon Valley planted in 2003. Matured for 18 months in French and American oak, 40% new. Red and black berries plus attractive oak on the nose. The palate shows succulent fruit and fresh acidity. Luscious and smooth textured, this is seductive stuff.

90

Dornier 2016

Price: R136.50

Total production: 5 912 bottles

Abv: 14.72%

Matured for 12 months in French oak, 10% new. Striking dark fruit aromas plus attractive oak on the nose. The palate is plush and smooth textured – plenty of sweet fruit and supple tannins.

90

Fleur Du Cap Unfiltered 2014

Price: R169

Total production: 13 865 bottles

Abv: 14.18%

Grapes from two Stellenbosch Kloof vineyards planted in 2000. Matured for 18 months in French oak, 40% new. Red and black berries, a touch of mint and pencil shavings on the nose. The palate is rich and full with juicy fruit, moderate acidity and a smooth texture.

90

Meerlust 2015

Price: R300

Total production: 95 000 bottles

Abv: 14.11%

85% Merlot, 8% Cabernet Franc and 7% Petit Verdot. Matured for 16 months in French oak, 50% new. Dark berries, some undergrowth, vanilla and spice on the nose. Good fruit expression, fresh acidity and nicely grippy tannins. Elegant and currently quite closed.

90

Plaisir de Merle 2015

Price: R209

Total production: 33 600

Abv:13.98%

Matured in 33% new, 38% second-fill and 29% third-fill French oak barrels for periods ranging from 12 to 16 months. Some floral perfume, red and black fruit, mint plus a slight malty quality on the nose. The palate is rich and broad with layers of flavour making for a particularly approachable drop.

90

Rainbow's End 2016

Price: R150

Total production:

Abv: 14.5%

Matured for 12 months in French oak, a third each new, second- and third-fill. A relatively complex nose of black berries, an attractive herbal edge and slight olive-like quality plus attractive oak. The palate is very flavoursome with pure fruit and fresh acidity before a savoury finish.

90

Whalehaven 2015

Price: R180

Total production: 7 111 bottles

Abv: 14.5%

Matured for 14 months in French oak, 33% new. A top note of violets before black berries, oyster shell and attractive oak. Super-dense fruit, fresh acidity with firm but fine tannins and a nice savoury edge to the finish.

COMPLETE SCORES A – Z

Name	Wine of Origin	Score
Almenkerk 2014	Elgin	87
Almenkerk 2015	Elgin	89
Asara Vineyard Collection 2015	Stellenbosch	89
Bein 2015	Stellenbosch	89
Bein 2016	Stellenbosch	85
Bein Little 2017	Stellenbosch	89
Bein Reserve 2016	Stellenbosch	88
Big Flower 2014	Stellenbosch	89
Big Flower 2015	Stellenbosch	89
Boschendal Appellation Series Elgin 2015	Elgin	89
Canto 2015	Durbanville	86
Creation Reserve 2015	Walker Bay	89
Creation Reserve 2016	Walker Bay	88
D'Aria 2016	Cape Town	87
De Grendel 2016	Durbanville	88
Delaire Graff 2015	Banghoek	86
Dieu Donné 2016	Franschhoek	87
Doolhof Single Vineyard 2016	Limietberg	86
Dombeya 2015	Stellenbosch	87
Dornier 2016	Stellenbosch	90
Durbanville Hills 2017	Durbanville- Cape Town	89
Durbanville Hills The Collectors Reserve The Lighthouse 2016	Durbanville- Cape Town	88
Durbanville Hills Rhinofields 2015	Durbanville- Cape Town	89
Eagles' Nest 2014	Constantia	86
Ernie Els 2015	Stellenbosch	87
Fleur Du Cap Essence Du Cap 2016	Western Cape	86
Fleur Du Cap Series Privée 2015	Stellenbosch	91
Fleur Du Cap Unfiltered 2014	Stellenbosch	90
Glenelly Glass Collection 2016	Stellenbosch	88
GlenWood 2017	Franschhoek	86
Groenland Premium 2016	Bottelary- Stellenbosch	87
Groot Constantia 2016	Constantia	88
Groote Post 2013	Darling	87
Groote Post 2015	Darling	87
Holden Manz Reserve 2015	Franschhoek	86
Jason's Hill 2016	Breedekloof	88
Jordan Black Magic 2015	Stellenbosch	89
Ken Forrester Reserve Pat's Garden 2015	Stellenbosch	88
Klein Roosboom Nicol 2016	Durbanville	87

Lourensford Limited Release 2016	Stellenbosch	89
Maastricht 2016	Cape Town	87
Marklew 2016	Simonsberg-Stellenbosch	86
Meerlust 2015	Stellenbosch	90
Morgenster 2015	Stellenbosch	89
Nederburg The Winemasters 2016	Western Cape	88
Neethlingshof 2016	Stellenbosch	88
Nitida 2016	Cape Town	85
Nenin 2014	Pomerol	92
O'Connell's 2017	Western Cape	86
Org de Rac 2016	Swartland	87
Org de Rac Reserve 2015	Swartland	89
Overgaauw 2016	Stellenbosch	87
Plaisir de Merle 2015	Paarl	90
Pro Amico Merlot 2014	Stellenbosch	87
Remhoogte Aspect 2015	Simonsberg-Stellenbosch	89
Rainbow's End 2016	Banghoek-Stellenbosch	90
Rickety Bridge 2016	Coastal Region	86
Shannon 2016	Elgin	89
Shannon Mount Bullet 2015	Elgin	92
Steenberg 2015	Constantia	86
Thelema 2015	Stellenbosch	88
Uva Mira The Mira 2015	Stellenbosch	87
Villiera Monro 2016	Stellenbosch	85
Welbedacht Barrique Select 2016	Wellington	86
Whalehaven 2014	Coastal Region	87
Whalehaven 2015	Coastal Region	90
Zevenwacht 2015	Stellenbosch	87
Zorgvliet 2016	Banghoek	89