

A sunburst graphic with many thin rays emanating from a central point, positioned behind the text.

THE
CHRISTIAN EEDES

CHARDONNAY REPORT

- 2011 -

DEPARTURE POINT

Neal Martin, critic-at-large for influential website eRobertParker.com, visited South Africa earlier this year as one of the international judges at the Old Mutual Trophy Wine Show and after officiating on the Chardonnay panel declared it “South Africa’s most consistent white grape variety... its greatest exponents produce world-class wines, I would suggest more Burgundy in style than Napa Valley.”

I have no doubt that local Chardonnay producers felt chuffed with Martin’s pronouncements but can he really claim to have a handle on the category after a very brief visit? After all, the wooded Chardonnay category at this year’s Veritas competition managed to take only one gold medal.

This prompted me to undertake an examination of the top end of local Chardonnay. But where to begin and end? My thinking was to put together a line-up of around 30 wines, partly consisting of examples which had fared well in recent local or international competition and partly from those producers I consider to be the best in their field even if not broadly celebrated. Ultimately, there were 50 wines (and yes, I am aware that there are still notable producers whose wines are missing).

I involved two trusted colleagues, namely Roland Peens of Wine Cellar, a Cape Town firm which brokers and cellars fine wine and James Pietersen, beverage manager for local restaurants Balducci’s and Belthazar and we tasted the wines blind, that is to say with no indication of producer or vintage.

KEY FINDINGS

No wonder Martin was impressed. The best local Chardonnay is classic stuff in the sense that they show the intensity of flavour and the intricacy of structure that elevates wine to greatness.

Whereas exceptionally rich and oaky Chardonnay has thankfully gone out of fashion, the best examples still retain fruit weight and texture but now without becoming clumsy (oak treatment in particular ever more sophisticated). The very best examples show not just fruit generosity but also savoury complexity, this typically achieved by winemaking techniques such as controlled oxidation, spontaneous yeast fermentations, and ageing on the lees. Real deftness of touch is required here, however, as too much of any of these and the resulting wine quickly goes from intellectually demanding to plain weird.

Some might insist that it to be truly great then South Africa’s best Chardonnay ought to express a sense of place and I’m not sure we’ve reached the point where any of our best producers have got terroir down to the point where it would be impossible to miss in a line-up of 50 wines (there were times in this tasting when Elgin was confused for Hemel-en-Aarde Valley and vice versa) but I think insisting on such a requirement is being pedantic. Beyond the Cote d’Or, where else does this apply?

Even so, some general remarks about regional typicity can be made. The warmer, more inland sites such as Paarl and Stellenbosch tend to have a generosity of fruit and a gloss and a glow about them while those from cooler, more maritime or elevated sites (Elgin and Hemel-en-Aarde Valley) achieve greater fruit purity and more arresting acidities.

One stylistic sub-group which is somewhat perplexing is those wines made to be particularly lean and dry, almost Sauvignon Blanc-esque. Arriving at such wines is not difficult – grapes are picked early and

the use of malolactic fermentation is restricted or prevented altogether. The theory is that such wines will have greater commercial appeal on account of being fresher, slimmer and less buttery than what the consumer typically expects but the danger is that such wines become neither one thing or the other. Wooded Chardonnay needs a minimum of “grunt” in order to rise above being merely generic dry white.

THE TOP 10

FIVE STARS

Ataraxia 2009

Walker Bay – Alc 13.5%

Complex nose showing attractive oxidation and some leesy character. The palate is rich and broad with great concentration and texture. Flavours of ripe citrus and a Burgundian nuttiness while a tangy acidity provides lift. Drink now – 2014.

Hamilton Russell Vineyards 2009

Hemel-en-Aarde Valley – Alc 13%

Hugely complex nose displaying citrus, honey, a leesy note as well as a hint of toasty oak. The palate has breadth and depth. Lots of pure primary fruit but also some more secondary flavours making for an intellectual drinking experience. Long, savoury finish. Drink now -2017.

Oak Valley Elgin 2010

Elgin – Alc 13%

Complex nose displaying citrus, stone fruit, oatmeal and some reduction. Rich, round and full bodied with great fruit concentration offset by a good line of acidity. Classically styled. Drink now – 2015.

Tokara Reserve Collection Stellenbosch 2010

Stellenbosch – Alc 14% SCREWCAP

Burnt matchstick, some yeasty character and toasty oak on the nose. The palate shows pure, concentrated lem-lime flavour, well judged oak and riveting acidity. Very primary at this stage but promises much. Drink 2013 – 2018.

Tokara Reserve Collection Walker Bay 2009

Walker Bay – Alc 14% SCREWCAP

Hint of reduction on otherwise shy nose. The palate is pure and focused with intense citrus, soft but sufficient acidity and deft use of oak. Very classy. Drink now – 2017.

FOUR AND A HALF STARS

Glen Carlou 2010

Paarl – Alc 14% SCREWCAP

Oak and some yeasty character on the nose. The palate is big and rich but balanced by bright acidity. Ripe citrus and peach flavour – very expressive. Drink now – 2013.

Glen Carlou Quartz Stone 2009

Paarl – Alc 13.5%

Honey, attractive oak and some leesy character on the nose. Also suspicion of botrytis. Concentrated

ripe fruit and prominent oak on the nose. Layers of flavour and a smooth texture. Big but entirely composed. Drink now – 2014.

Julien Schaal Mountain Vineyards 2010

Elgin – Alc 13.5%

Expressive nose showing citrus, white peach and oak. The palate is rich, full and relatively smooth textured. Great fruit expression offset by soft but sufficient acidity – a seductive package. Drink now – 2013.

Laborie Limited Collection 2010

Western Cape – Alc 14%

Citrus blossom, lime and touch of oatmeal on the nose . The palate has a weightless intensity thanks to pure, well delineated fruit and zippy acidity. Long, pithy finish. Drink now – 2015.

Mulderbosch Barrel Fermented 2009

Stellenbosch – Alc 13%

Attractive oak, slight reductive pong on the nose. Huge intensity of fruit on the palate. Oak is well integrated, bright acidity lends verve. Appears very primary currently – should mature with benefit. Drink late 2012 – 2014.

THE REST:

FOUR AND A HALF STARS

Paul Cluver 2010

Citrus, oatmeal and acceptable reduction on the nose. Rich and broad on the palate with good fruit expression and tangy acidity. Great intensity without sacrificing poise. Drink now – 2015.

Rijk's Private Cellar Reserve 2007

Exotic aromas of citrus, peach, honey and nuts. The palate is rich and full with a smooth texture. Lots of savoury secondary character. Extraordinary palate weight but fresh acidity lends balance. Drink now.

Sterhuis Barrel Selection 2009

Attractive oak and a hint of reduction on the nose. Wonderful citrus fruit expression – juicy, rich and weighty while lively acidity lends balance. Focused and long. Drink now – 2014.

FOUR STARS

Bouchard Finlayson Kaaimansgat 2010

Citrus and attractive vanilla on the nose and palate. Clean, pure fruit and moderate acidity. Well put together but somewhat short on complexity. Drink now – 2013.

Bouchard Finlayson Missionvale 2009

Slightly reductive on the nose. The palate shows good fruit weight, lots of oak and moderate acidity. Well balanced and understated. Drink now – 2012.

Crystallum Clay Shales 2009

Hint of blossom, ripe citrus as well as some reduction on the nose. Very concentrated and smooth textured on the palate. Big and rich with tangy acidity. Drink now – 2012.

De Wetshof Bateleur 2009

Lime fruit and pear on the nose. Good fruit concentration, subtle oak and some leesy character. Great balance and long, pithy finish. Drink now – 2014.

De Wetshof Finesse 2010

Blossom, green apple and citrus on the nose. Leaner style with good fruit concentration and fresh acidity. Very primary – should age well. Drink now – 2013.

De Wetshof "The Site" 2009

Citrus and upfront vanilla on the nose. Big and bold, rich and textured on the palate. Flavours of citrus and stone fruit. Deft use of oak, soft acidity. Drink now – 2012.

Edgebaston - Finlayson Family Wines 2010

The nose shows leesy, reductive notes. Range of flavour from greener to fully ripe citrus. Good texture, bright acidity. Drink now – 2013.

Fleur du Cap Unfiltered 2010

Citrus and some reduction on the nose. Good fruit concentration, fresh acidity and noticeable oak on the palate. Currently appears very youthful. Drink 2012 – 2015.

Graham Beck Lonehill 2008

Citrus and some leesy notes on the nose and palate. Medium to full bodied. Appears quite secondary now with lots of savoury flavour, creamy texture. Moderate acidity. Drink now.

Groot Constantia Gouverneurs 2009

Shy nose. Rich and broad on the palate with lots of attractive oak and soft acidity. Ripe citrus flavour, buttery texture. Extravagant style. Drink now – 2012.

Hamilton Russell Vineyards 2010

Some burnt matchstick as well as toasty oak on the nose. Juicy, rich and full on the palate. Layers of flavour but fruit appears a little too ripe, acidity a touch soft. Drink now – 2013.

Hartenberg 2009

Subtle earthiness to otherwise shy nose. Pure, intense lem-lime fruit but relatively medium bodied with moderate acidity. Drink now – 2012.

Hartenberg The Eleanor 2008

A precise wine showing classic aromas and flavours of citrus and toasty oak. Medium to full-bodied, well balanced and still very primary. Drink now – 2013.

Haskell Anvil 2010

Very perfumed on the nose. The palate is lean with lime fruit and racy acidity. Delicate and pretty but lacking great complexity. Drink now – 2013.

Iona Elgin 2009

Lime, citrus blossom and hint of oak on the nose. The palate shows good fruit concentration and a great line of acidity. Lean and racy. Drink now – 2014.

Jordan Nine Yards 2009

Citrus, peach, vanilla and some secondary character on the nose and palate. Sweet, ripe fruit on entry before savoury finish. Big and rich but complex and composed. Drink now – 2014.

KWV Cathedral Cellar 2010

The nose is shy but the palate shows hugely concentrated lime fruit and smooth texture offset by bright acidity. Plush and polished but lacks true distinction. Drink now – 2013.

KWV The Mentors 2010

Citrus blossom, lime and hint of oak on the nose. Concentrated, pure fruit with a good line of acidity. Made in a leaner, new wave style. Drink now – 2013.

Newton Johnson Domaine 2010

Oxidative on the nose with notes of blue orange, stone fruit, honey and spice. Rich and full on the palate with plenty of ripe fruit and soft, tangy acidity. Drink now -2013.

Rustenberg Five Soldiers 2009

Closed on the nose while the palate shows citrus and toasty oak. Tightly wound, well balanced but understated at best, straightforward at worst. Drink now – 2012.

Simonsig Aurum 2007

Deep yellow in colour. Complex nose showing citrus as well as nuttiness and savoury leesy character. The palate is broad and textured with plenty of toasty oak but also bright acidity. Some will find it over the top. Drink now.

Spier Private Collection 2009

Shy nose. Full-bodied, rich and round on the palate. Impression of sweetness and appears slightly warm on finish but admirable for its intense citrus, creamy texture. Drink now – 2012.

Warwick Estate 2010

Vanilla and spice on the nose. Rich, full on the palate with moderate acidity. Flavours of ripe citrus and peach. Gives impression of slight sweetness. Drink now -2013.

THREE AND A HALF STARS

Chamonix Reserve 2010

Ripe citrus and peach aromas and flavours. Good depth but has peculiar sweet 'n sour quality. Ripe fruit on entry before tart acidity. Drink now – 2013.

Journey's End 2010

Tropical fruit and prominent oak on the nose. Rich and full with soft acidity. A little unfocused, appears sweet. Drink now – 2013.

Journey's End Destination 2010

Caramel and nutty notes on the nose. Rich and round on the palate with ripe citrus and stone fruit flavours - flashy but lacks substance, finishes short. Drink now – 2013.

Mulderbosch 2009

Leesy note and attractive oak on the nose. Remarkably primary on the palate with lush lime fruit and bright acidity. Modern in the best sense. Drink 2012 – 2015.

Mulderbosch 2010

Oak, some yeasty character and hint of reduction on the nose. Intense ripe citrus on the palate plays off against tangy acidity and discreet oak. Drink now – 2013.

Mulderbosch Barrel Fermented 2010

Peculiar nose showing citrus and peach but also spice, overt yeasty character and reduction. Good fruit weight and very fresh acidity. Probably needs time to come into its own. Drink late 2012 – 2013.

Nederburg Private Bin D270 2010

Blossom and stone fruit on the nose. The palate is clean and pure with moderate acidity. Lacks excitement. Drink now – 2013.

Van Loveren Christina van Loveren Limited Release 2010

Citrus blossom and lime on the nose. Leaner, more elegant style with pure fruit and bright acidity. Arguably lacks palate weight. Drink now – 2013.

Vergelegen Reserve 2010

Pronounced reduction (“gunpowder”) on the nose. Flavours of green apple, citrus and spice. Creamy texture, bright acidity. Unusual but not without appeal. Drink now – 2013.

Waterford Estate Single Vineyard 2010

Unusual nose showing floral perfume, peach and tropical fruit. Rich and broad on the palate with relatively soft acidity. Drink now – 2013.

THREE STARS

GlenWood Vigneron's Selection 2010

Aromas and flavours of ripe citrus, peach, tropical fruit and vanilla. Sweet, rich and full. Moderate acidity, oak overdone. Drink now – 2012.

Rijk's Private Cellar 2007

Overtly reductive on the nose. Sweet, ripe citrus balanced by tangy acidity. Not unattractive but lacks some focus, purity. Drink now.

Springfield Méthode Ancienne 2009

Oxidative in character. Unusual in terms of aromas and flavours, displaying everything from lime to ripe stone fruit and yellow apples. Rich and full although tart acidity lends a counterpoint. Pronounced oak will trouble some. Drink now.

Uva Mira Single Vineyard 2010

A-typical but very expressive. Blue orange but also herbal notes on the nose. The palate is rich and full and smooth textured while fresh acidity lends verve. Approach with caution. Drink now – 2013.