

THE RISCURA

WHITE
HOT

WINE AWARDS

INTRODUCTION

The rise of the category that is Sauvignon Blanc-Semillon blends within the South African context might be said to have begun with the 2001 vintage from Vergelegen (other producers had tried before but failed to get any traction in the market place). As such, it is a fairly new phenomenon and while the wines have caused great excitement among the cognoscenti, they have arguably not attracted the popular following they deserve. The RisCura White Hot Wine Awards aims to change that.

METHODOLOGY

The competition was open to all producers in the country, conditions of participation being that wines submitted had to be 1) current release or soon to be released (no museum class entries) and 2) specifically labelled as blends (no wines labelled as “Sauvignon Blanc” but containing a fraction of Semillon permitted).

The judging panel was chaired by myself and further consisted of 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. Both are highly experienced, Peens a former taster for Platter’s and Pietersen an existing one. Judging was done blind using the 20-point/Five Star system and PKF were tasting auditors.

KEY FINDINGS

Why have Sauvignon Blanc-Semillon blends remained a niche category until now? Part of the reason must surely be that at first glance such wines present in a similar fashion to single-variety Sauvignon Blanc and yet tend to sell at a premium – why pay extra for your everyday dry white is what many consumers must surely ask themselves.

As ever with blending, however, the ideal is to arrive at a whole which is greater than the sum of its parts. Most of the charm of Sauvignon Blanc lies in its primary fruit flavours and very often it is not particularly complex or age-worthy. What Semillon brings to the party is extra weight and depth plus it also extends the flavour spectrum. In addition, because it is naturally relatively low in acidity, it balances out the sometimes seering acidity of Sauvignon Blanc. Add into the mix that such wines are frequently at least partially wooded whereas most Sauvignon Blanc is not and you have another point of difference.

All very nice in theory but what’s happening in practice? After judging the 41 wines submitted from 30 producers, the panel was super-impressed. Here was a line-up of wines that was far more complex, subtle and rewarding than your average Sauvignon Blanc.

“It’s taking consumers to the next level,” was Pietersen’s comment. “Even better than I thought,” said Peens. “Really good balance and an amazing array of aromas and flavours.” Top chef and associate judge Franck Dangereux was also thrilled by what was on offer. “I’m blown away. These wines have so much nuance. They make me want to eat.”

So what was getting the judges so excited? The complexity on offer can’t be emphasised too much. There are lighter style wines typically showing notes of lime, blossom, fynbos and sea-breeze and then there are richer, rounder wines with notes of grapefruit, peach, honey, even black currant.

The panel was on its guard against both excessive pyrazine character (the flavour compound responsible for “green-ness”) and mercaptan (a sulphur-related “sweatiness”) but these were not very much in evidence – it is as if producers embarking on making a Sauvignon Blanc-Semillon blend accept that for now it only appeals to the initiated few and therefore are extra careful when it comes to what they put in the bottle. Perhaps of greater concern was that some appeared over-wooded and others prematurely advanced but on the whole this was a very satisfying tasting, this category surely one of the strongest in the country.

TOP THREE

FOUR AND A HALF STARS

Celestina 2012

Price: R95

WO Cape Agulhas

Abv 13.19%, RS 2.9g/l, TA 6.7g/l, pH 3.28

60% Sauvignon Blanc, 40% Semillon. Fermented and matured for 11 months in a combination of 300-litre and 500-litre French oak barrels, none new.

Tasting note: Subtle and complex – lime and white peach before some peppery bite on the finish. Good concentration and texture offset by bright acidity – great poise. Drink now to 2017.

FIVE STARS

Steenberg Magna Carta 2011

Price: R495 (due for release March 2014)

WO Constantia

Abv 13.5%, RS 2.5g/l, TA 7.2g/l, pH 3.1

60% Sauvignon Blanc, 40% Semillon. Semillon fermented and matured for two months in 500-litre and 600-litre French oak barrels, 45% new. After blending, the wine went back into barrel for a further seven months, 41% new.

Tasting note: Attention grabbing aromatics - citrus blossom, peach and tangerine plus a hint of vanilla on the nose. Powerful but well-knit palate – dense core of fruit and a great line of acidity. Really persistent finish. Drink now to 2019.

FIVE STARS

Tokara Director's Reserve White 2011

Price: R185

WO Stellenbosch

Abv 14.33%, RS 2.6g/l, TA 7.3g/l, pH 3.27

71% Sauvignon Blanc, 29% Semillon. Fermented and matured for nine months, Sauvignon Blanc in 400-litre barrels, Semillon in 225-litre barrels, 26% new altogether.

Tasting note: Peach, blackcurrant and attractive oak spice on the nose and palate. A sumptuous wine with great flavour intensity and tangy acidity. Drink now to 2019.

REST OF LINE-UP

FOUR AND A HALF STARS

Buitenverwachting Maximus 2011

Very expressive – floral perfume, peach, vanilla and spice. Also the first signs of some development. Rich and full on the palate with nicely coated acidity. Drink now to 2016.

Cape Point Vineyards Isliedh 2012

Made in slightly leaner style but wonderfully wide flavour spectrum – from herbal through lime and peach to blackcurrant. Sweet-fruited on entry but has a nice briny finish. Drink now to 2020.

Chamonix Reserve 2012

An elegant, precise wine with notes of citrus blossom, lime, pear and peach plus a hint of vanilla. Medium bodied but flavourful and fresh. Drink now to 2020.

Constantia Glen Two 2012

Peach and tangerine, subtle oak plus an intriguing reductive note. Lots of depth and good balance – pure fruit with a great line of acidity. Drink now to 2017.

Highlands Road Sine Cera 2012

Subtle herbal quality plus some honey on a generally shy nose. Rich, ripe and thick textured on the palate with nicely coated acidity. Some spicy bite on the finish. Drink now to 2015.

Vrede en Lust Barrique 2012

Stone fruit, spice and vanilla on the nose. Sweet fruited with good depth and relatively soft acidity. Drink now to 2015.

FOUR STARS

Bloemendal White Blend 2013

A subtle nose showing floral perfume, tangerine and attractive oak. Good palate weight with nicely coated acidity before a savoury finish. Drink 2014 to 2018.

Constantia Uitsig 2012

Lime, peach and tangerine, hint of vanilla. Plenty of fruit concentration matched by a driving acidity. Some peppery bite on the finish. Drink now to 2017.

Ghost Corner The Bowline 2012

Lime, white peach and some attractive herbal notes. Weightless intensity on the palate and plenty of zip thanks to bright acidity. Drink now to 2020.

Nederburg Private Bin D252 2012

Lime through peach plus waxy, leesy notes. Lighter, more understated style with bright acidity before a long, dry finish. Drink now to 2017.

Nitida Coronata Integration 2012

Very expressive – top-notes of fynbos and floral perfume plus lime and peach. Good fruit expression and wonderful balance thanks to lively acidity. Really pure and focused. Drink now to 2020.

Nitida Woolworths Reserve 2012

Lime plus some herbal and maritime notes on the nose. Quite delicate on the palate with bright acidity before a dry finish. Drink now to 2017.

Spier Creative Block 2 2012

Lime and peach plus a hint of reduction on the nose. Sweet fruited and concentrated, thick but not unctuous. Some white pepper on the finish. Very approachable. Drink now to 2015.

Vergelegen GVB 2011

Lime, peach and tangerine plus attractive oak. Good palate weight and a really driving acidity. Quite closed now and way off its best. Drink 2015 to 2019.

Zonnebloem Limited Edition 2012

A delicate wine showing citrus blossom and lime notes. Clean and fresh before a pithy finish. Drink now to 2015.

Zorgvliet Simoné 2009

Powerful, oak-driven style – some floral fragrance, peach and spice on the nose. Rich and full but balanced by a high acidity, the finish long and savoury. Drink now to 2014.

Zorgvliet Simoné 2010

Some honeysuckle and vanilla on the nose. Sweet, rich and full on the palate with notes of peach and white pepper. Drink now to 2015.

Zorgvliet Simoné 2011

Subtle green melon, sea breeze and vanilla. Rich and broad, relatively thick textured before a savoury finish. Drink now to 2016.

Zorgvliet Simoné 2012

Stone fruit, prominent oak and some leesy character. Relatively thick textured with nicely sour acidity. Drink 2014 – 2017.

THREE AND A HALF STARS

Creation 2012

Asparagus plus a slightly sweaty note on the nose. Rich and thick textured but could do with more focus. Drink now to 2015.

Creation 2013

Currently closed on the nose while the palate is round, rich and ripe with moderate acidity. Drink 2014 to 2016.

Gabriëlskloof Magdalena 2011

Peach and tangerine but also some green notes. Noticeable oak, lively acidity. Starting to show some evolution. Drink now.

Highlands Road Sine Cera 2011

Peach, white pepper and some quite funky bruised apple and leesy notes. Rich and flavoursome with tangy acidity. Drink now.

Morgenster White 2012

Fynbos and floral perfume, peach plus attractive oak. Not unattractive but very understated – no great fruit weight and moderate acidity. Drink now to 2015.

Newton Johnson Resonance 2012

Lime, some maritime character plus a hint of reduction. Pure fruited but rather lean with racy acidity. Drink now to 2015.

Vrede en Lust Barrique 2011

Subtle peach and honey plus some waxy complexity. Rich and broad with moderate acidity. Drink now.

THREE STARS

Delaire Graff Reserve 2011

Citrus blossom and lime on the nose. Made in a leaner style and currently very tight but no doubt a very precise, elegant wine. Drink now to 2019.

Flagstone Treaty Tree Reserve 2011

Old style –pyrazine dominated with notes of lime and green bean. Lean and rather angular but will have appeal in some quarters. Drink now.

Gabriëlskloof Magdalena 2012

A powerful, rather showy wine showing aromas and flavours of green bean and vanilla. Rich and broad, smooth in texture but also possessing a massive acidity. Drink now to 2014.

Le Geminus 2010

Lime, fynbos and subtle oak in evidence but also some developed notes starting to appear. Rich and thick textured offset by a lively acidity. Drink now to 2015.

Le Geminus 2011

Peach, some subtle pyrazine notes and some oak spice. Good fruit definition and tangy acidity. Sweet on entry but bone-dry finish. Drink now to 2016.

Oak Valley Mountain Reserve 2009

Green bean through peach, vanilla and oak spice. Rich and smooth textured, tangy acidity but starting to tire. Drink now.

Spier Creative Block 2 2013

Lime plus both some herbal (pyrazine) and sweaty (mercaptan) notes. Good concentration and bright acidity but lacks a bit of refinement. Drink now.

Virgin Earth 2012

Leaner style with lime, bright acidity and a savoury finish. Drink now.

TWO AND A HALF STARS

Elgin Vintners The Century 2011

Appears unduly advanced – some peach and white pepper but also green pea and some honeyed, nutty notes. Rich and a bit listless. Drink up.

Groot Constantia Gouverneurs Reserve 2012

Intensely flavoured with notes of peach, vanilla and spice but appears awkward. Noticeable reduction (“burnt matchstick”) and tart acidity. Drink now to 2015.

Strandveld Adamastor 2011

Plenty of pyrazine character – bell pepper, green bean and gravel road dustiness – in evidence. Some richness on the palate but really quite old fashioned. Drink now.

TWO STARS

Bizoe Henriëtte 2011

Appears very far advanced. Vague notes of dried peach and apricot, honey, mild spice but not much left. Broad and smooth textured and a bit listless. Drink up.