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THE **CHRISTIAN EEDES**

CHARDONNAY REPORT

- 2013 -

presented by



Private Investments

INTRODUCTION

The Chardonnay Report was started in 2011 to scrutinise the top-end of the category in South Africa on an annual basis. In undertaking the exercise, I wanted firstly to take a view on the overall level of quality but secondly start to explore issues of terroir – is provenance discernible, and moreover, might it start becoming something worth a real premium?

METHODOLOGY

Since inception, the tasting has been capped at 60 wines, partly consisting of examples which have fared well in recent local or international competitions and partly coming from those producers I consider to be the best in their field even if they have a somewhat low profile.

While other bigger tastings may have a useful talent spotting function, the intention here is very much to do good by what might be called the seeded players, the finite line-up in particular intended to avoid the perils of palate fatigue.

Even though a top 10 list is generated based on the tasting, the exercise is pitched more as an in-depth analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the category in question, all wines submitted receiving a rating and a detailed tasting note. This, in addition to the fact that producers are not asked to pay an entry fee, alleviates the “competition fatigue” that exists in many quarters.

The judging panel was chaired by myself and further consisted of two trusted colleagues: 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 is a former taster for Platter’s and Pietersen is a current one.

We tasted blind, the scoring being done according to the 20-point/5 Star system. After round one, 14 wines were deemed to be of particular merit and these went through to a second and final round. PKF were the tasting auditors.

KEY FINDINGS

Is great wine made in the vineyard or the winery? Most would argue that the vineyard (soil and climate) is more important but that it is impossible to discount human agency entirely. Kudos then to Hamilton Russell Vineyards in the Hemel-en-Aarde Valley and winemaker Hannes Storm who have had a wine in the top 10 of this report for three years running: the 2009 in 2011, the 2011 in 2012 and the 2012 this year.

The Mentors made from Elgin fruit from producer and wholesaler KWV has now appeared in the top 10 for two years running, while Miles Mossop of Tokara clearly has a good understanding of the variety:

both his Stellenbosch 2010 and Walker Bay 2009 were in the top 10 in 2011, the Walker Bay 2011 in 2012 and now the Stellenbosch 2012.

Drawing any definitive conclusions about the role of site remains difficult – Chardonnay happily responds to a wide range of production techniques (including fermentation and maturation in barrel, malolactic fermentation and stirring of the lees) and these tend to impose themselves on the end-result in significant ways. It might be said, however, that what seems to separate the excellent from the merely good is a purity of fruit, which shines through regardless of how elaborate the winemaker has been.

Stylistic variation has, in fact, never been wider. There seems to be a growing realisation that to compete at the top end of the market, playing it safe is not going to cut it. Consequently there are some really innovative, even wacky wines out there. Not wanting to bring too much formality to a category which is clearly enjoying plenty of creative flux, the panel nevertheless discerned three basic sub-groups:

- Pretty floral aromatics - lighter in body, very fresh acidity (no or only partial malolactic fermentation)
- Spontaneous ferment and/or oxidative winemaking – nutty and even more savoury notes in evidence
- Rich and ripe, heavily wooded – peach and tropical fruit plus a certain toastiness or vanilla in evidence.

Too far one way or the other, and the wines become problematic. Big, bold Chardonnay has largely been out of fashion in recent times (on account of being tiring to drink) and the trend was very much towards wines that were clean and crisp as winemakers chased “elegance”.

Chardonnay needs a minimum amount of heft, however, and there were some wines of the past few vintages which were rather too lean and tart. There now seems to be something of a shift back to making more mouth-filling, broad-flavoured wines.

But overdo it when going in this direction and the concerns of old manifest all over again: undue sweetness, high alcohol, high VA and milky or rancid notes due to imperfect malolactic fermentation. Reduction is an issue across the board – a hint of burnt matchstick can add to the drinking experience, more marked sulphurous notes less so.

After all is said and done, though, South Africa’s premium Chardonnays are a compelling proposition and moreover offer great quality relative to price. The top 10, ranging from R95 a bottle for the Fleur du Cap Unfiltered 2012 to R300 a bottle for the Rustenberg Five Soldiers 2011, will hold their own in just about any company. Burgundy remains the benchmark but then you can easily find yourself paying R700 a bottle for Premier Cru and far north for Grand Cru.

TOP 10



FIVE STARS

Groot Constantia 2012

Price: R155

Constantia. Blossom, lemon, vanilla and just a hint of reduction on the nose. Good core of fruit, oak adding heft, bright acidity and a saline finish. All of a piece. Drink now – 2017.

Paul Cluver 2012

Price: R125

Elgin. Blossom, lime and lemon and attractive oak spice. Pure and focused – lovely tension between concentrated fruit and a riveting line of acidity. Rich but not weighty, a very classy offering. Drink now – 2017.



FOUR AND A HALF STARS

Hamilton Russell Vineyards 2012

Price: R290

Hemel-en-Aarde Valley. Lemon, some burnt matchstick and subtle oak on the nose. Rich but balanced with great fruit expression and coated acidity. The finish is long and savoury. Drink now – 2017.

Haskell Anvil 2012

Price: To be released in March 2014

Stellenbosch. A complex nose with a floral top note, lime and lemon, plus some burnt matchstick. Excellent fruit expression, a lovely line of acidity and well-judged oak. Great purity and refinement. Drink now – 2017.

Tokara Reserve Collection Stellenbosch 2012

Price: R130

Stellenbosch. Lemon, blue orange and peach, plus a hint of vanilla. Also some leesy character. Big, bold and rather exotic in style – very intensely flavoured and thick textured but balanced by bright acidity. Drink now – 2017.

KWV The Mentors 2012

Price: R160

Elgin. Lime and lemons plus plenty of oak-derived notes such as vanilla, caramel and spice. Weighty but rewarding – good fruit concentration, nicely coated acidity. Drink now – 2017.



FOUR STARS

Boschendal Reserve Collection 2012

Price: To be released January 2014.

Stellenbosch. Plenty of ripe fruit – lemon, grapefruit, even melon. Also subtle oak-derived vanilla and some intriguing savoury notes. Rich and thick textured with soft but sufficient acidity. Drink now – 2017.

Crystallum The Agnes 2012

Price: R160

Hemel-en-Aarde Valley, Hemel-en-Aarde Ridge and Greyton. Citrus and stone fruit plus some funky leesy character. Broad and oxidative in style with a relatively thick texture and moderate acidity. Interestingly quirky. Drink now – 2017.

Fleur du Cap Unfiltered 2012

Price: R95

Stellenbosch, Somerset West, Robertson. Lemons and oranges, subtle oak plus an intriguing maritime note. Rich and full but well balanced thanks to tangy acidity. Drink now – 2017.

Rustenberg Five Soldiers 2011

Price: R300

Stellenbosch. Lemon and orange, vanilla and caramel on the nose. Sweet-fruited and rich with both breadth and depth. Smooth textured before a pithy finish. Drink now – 2016.



FOUR STARS

Ataraxia 2011

Lime and lemon, toasty oak, plus some waxy, earthy notes. Rich but balanced by snappy acidity. Layers of flavour before a nicely austere finish. Drink now – 2017.

Bartinney 2012

A textbook example with lemon and peach, attractive oak plus a subtle yeasty note. Full but balanced before a pithy finish. Drink now – 2017.

Bouchard Finlayson Kaaimansgat Limited Edition 2011

A powerful wine showing marmalade and peach, some honey and toasty oak. Sweet, rich and round balanced by tangy acidity. Already quite developed. Drink now – 2014.

Callender Peak 2012

Good fruit expression (lime, pear and white peach), bright acidity and well-judged oak. Provides a pleasant sweet and sour sensation. Drink now – 2017.

De Wetshof Bateleur 2011

Floral perfume, citrus and some attractive oak. Full but balanced with clean, pure fruit and a good line of acidity. Refined and still very primary. Drink now – 2016.

Eikendal 2012

Floral perfume and lime on the nose. Juicy, pure fruit upfront before some leesy complexity while the acidity is fresh and the oak well managed. A particularly elegant example. Drink now – 2017.

Glen Carlou 2012

Lemon, orange and peach, some waxiness and a touch of spice. Rich and full with balance provided by tangy acidity. Drink now – 2017.

Glen Carlou Quartz Stone 2011

Very expressive showing citrus, stone fruit, caramel and some waxy, leesy notes. Rich and full, thick textured, layers of flavour. A powerful wine but not without balance. Drink now – 2016.

Grand Vin de Glenelly 2012

Citrus, prominent oak and some leesy character. Rich and ripe with good fruit concentration and bright acidity before a savoury finish. Drink now – 2017.

Hartenberg The Eleanor 2011

Lime, some leesy complexity and a pleasant nuttiness. Precisely made – medium- to full-bodied with a great line of acidity and a pithy finish. Drink now – 2016.

Jordan Barrel Fermented 2012

A focused, carefully crafted wine with intense citrus and subtle oak providing a lemon cream quality. Also some leesy complexity and tangy acidity. Drink now – 2017.

Jordan Nine Yards 2012

In the usual full-bore style with orange and peach, plenty of oak and an overt leesy character. Sweet and rich but balanced by bright acidity. Drink now – 2017.

Kershaw Elgin Clonal Selection 2012

Subtle oak, some reduction on a generally shy nose. Pure and focused – concentrated lime and bright acidity before a long, dry finish. Really needs time to unwind. Drink 2014 – 2017.

Lourensford Winemaker's Selection 2012

A floral top note, lemon and attractive oak on the nose, while the palate is rich and thick textured with good complexity, including some interesting savoury character. Drink now – 2017.

Mulderbosch Barrel Fermented 2012

Lemon and lime, well managed oak and some intriguing savoury notes. Sweet-fruited but balanced by zesty acidity. A sophisticated, multi-layered offering. Drink now – 2017.

Newton Johnson Family Vineyards 2012

Very pretty nose of blossom, citrus and vanilla. Concentrated fruit, racy acidity and well managed oak. Pure and precise. Drink now – 2017.

Newton Johnson Southend 2012

Citrus, peach and tropical fruit, plus some leesy notes. Rich and full with an appealing sweet and sour character. A fully ripe style done well. Drink now – 2015.

StellenRust Barrel Fermented 2012

A nicely understated wine with lime and lemon, subtle vanilla and some leesy complexity. Medium bodied with bright acidity and a long finish. Drink now – 2017.

Sterhuis Barrel Selection 2011

Lemon and orange, toasty oak, some burnt matchstick. Big and bold with super-concentrated fruit – sweet upfront but balanced by tangy acidity. A real blockbuster. Drink now – 2016.

Vins d'Orrance Cuvée Anaïs 2011

Very leesy (wet wool, cheesy) on the nose. Rich and round on the palate with good fruit concentration and bright acidity. Complex and layered but starting to peak. Drink now – 2014.

Vriesenhof 2012

Oxidative style with lemon and lunchbox orange plus some yeasty complexity. Rich and dense with tangy acidity. Drink now – 2015.

Yardstick 2011

Subtle floral perfume, citrus, attractive oak and some leesy complexity. Good fruit concentration and bright acidity before a savoury finish. Somewhat old fashioned but really satisfying. Drink now – 2016.



THREE AND A HALF STARS

Bouchard Finlayson Kaaimansgat – Crocodile's Lair 2012

Vanilla, honey and a yeasty note on the nose. Sweet fruited with notes of lemon and orange, moderate acidity and well integrated oak. Drink now – 2015.

Crystallum Clay Shales 2012

Oxidative style showing orange, toasty oak, some nuttiness and spice. Rich and broad with moderate acidity. Drink now – 2015.

Delaire Graff 2012

Shy nose with a lemon cream quality on the palate. Relatively thick textured with moderate acidity. Well assembled but rather straightforward. Drink now – 2015.

Edgebaston - Finlayson Family Wines 2012

Appears a little reduced on the nose but the palate shows juicy lime and lemon plus some intriguing savoury character. Medium bodied and understated. Drink now – 2015.

Iona Elgin 2012

Peach and tropical fruit, attractive vanilla and a subtle yeasty note. Rich and broad, moderate acidity. Drink now – 2015.

Julien Schaal Mountain Vineyards 2012

Plenty of upfront fruit – citrus through peach – plus subtle vanilla. Full bodied with moderate acidity. Lacks a bit of nuance. Drink now – 2015.

Koelfontein 2011

A modern take on the variety showing ripe citrus, pronounced leesy notes and vanilla. Sweet, rich and broad with soft acidity. Drink now – 2014.

Oak Valley Elgin 2012

Rather exotic with lime, lemon, grapefruit, peach and even some red fruit in evidence. Tangy acidity and well managed oak. Drink now – 2015.

Radford Dale 2012

Slight leesy note plus some nutty character on the nose. Lime fruit and bright acidity before a savoury finish. Divisive – some will surely find it excessively oxidative, others will like its complex secondary character. Drink now – 2015.

Sterhuis Barrel Selection 2012

Orange and grapefruit, some tropical fruit, toasty oak plus some funky leesy notes. Thick textured with moderate acidity and some heat on the finish. Drink now – 2015.

Thelema 2012

Concentrated citrus plus slight leesy note to go with plenty of oak. Appealing but perhaps a bit short of finesse. Drink now – 2015.

Tokara Reserve Collection Walker Bay 2012

Lime and lemon plus subtle vanilla and quite prominent reduction. Leaner style with bright acidity and a very dry finish. Drink 2014 – 2017.

Uva Mira Single Vineyard 2012

An exotic offering with citrus, peach and tropical fruit, plenty of oak plus leesy complexity. Sweet, rich and full but balanced by tangy acidity. Somewhat atypical. Drink now – 2015.

Van Loveren Christina van Loveren Limited Release 2012

Very primary on the nose with notes of blossom, peach and pear. Light bodied, clean and fresh. No great complexity but very appealing. Drink now – 2015.

Warwick White Lady 2012

Lemon through peach, a hint of vanilla and pronounced leesy character. Full but balanced – appealing if somewhat unexceptional. Drink now – 2015.



THREE STARS

Almenkerk 2012

Lemon and orange, a slight waxy note plus a hint of volatile acidity. Overtly sweet and thick textured, offset somewhat by tangy acidity. Drink now.

Alvi's Drift AD 2012

White and yellow peach plus overt oak. Big and rich, a bit lacking in fruit and freshness. Drink now.

Bouchard Finlayson Missionvale 2011

Ripe citrus, vanilla, a pronounced yeasty character and some nuttiness. Rich and round with moderate acidity. Already quite far advanced. Drink now – 2014.

Chamonix Reserve 2012

Prominent oak but also citrus and some intriguing leesy character on the nose and palate. Thick textured with high acidity. Needs time to settle down. Drink 2015 – 2017.

De Wetshof The Site 2012

Lighter style with good fruit expression – pear, lime and grapefruit. Juicy and approachable – oak hardly noticeable, acidity perhaps a little hard. Drink now – 2015.

Hartenberg The Eleanor 2010

Reductive note mars otherwise good fruit expression including lime, lemon and peach. The oak is well managed and the acidity fresh. Drink now – 2015.

Meerlust 2011

Appealing but somewhat foursquare with concentrated citrus, bright acidity and well managed oak. Drink now – 2014.

Sumaridge 2011

Candied orange and intense leesy, waxy notes. Rich and thick textured with a savoury finish. Seems quite far advanced already. Drink now.

Vergelegen Reserve 2012

Reductive notes on otherwise shy nose. Lime and some leesy character. Lean and savoury with acidity bordering on sour. Drink now – 2015.



TWO AND A HALF STARS

Durbanville Hills Rhinofields 2011

Rich, broad and lactic with a definite milky quality about it. Lacks some focus and freshness. Drink now.

GlenWood Grand Duc 2011

A heavy-handed offering showing some citrus but dominated by oak. Sweet on entry, thick textured and a bit dull. Drink now.

Groote Post Reserve 2012

Unusual wine showing peach and apricot, some almond plus a pronounced leesy character. Rich and broad, seems rather too developed and a bit flat. Drink now.

Waterford Single Vineyard 2012

Vague floral note on the nose. The palate has an indefinite lemon cream quality but is rather dilute with soft acidity. Drink now.