



KEY FINDINGS

Merlot is South Africa's eighth most widely planted variety with 5 411ha in the ground at the end of 2018, the equivalent of 5.8% of the national vineyard and its importance to the industry is therefore not to be under-estimated.

Entries for the third annual Merlot Report were down to 53 from 67 in 2017 but overall quality was much the same, the average score on the 100-point scale being 87.8 compared to 87.9 last year while 12 wines rated 90-plus compared to eight last year.

What is fascinating about this year's top performers is that while Stellenbosch fares predictably well with six wines in the top 12, there's a broad spread of other areas including two from Constantia and one each from Darling, Elgin, Franschhoek and Hemel en Aarde Ridge (Walker Bay).

Regarding vintage, five of the top wines were from 2016, four from 2017 and three from 2015 (last year saw five of the top eight from 2015, three from 2016 and one from 2014).

When Merlot is at its best, it makes luscious, smooth textured wines and many of the 90-plus wines display precisely this character (Shannon Mount Bullet, Dornier and Groot Constantia being prime examples) while there is another manifestation of the variety that also seems to work well, such wines being particularly fragrant and lighter in body, Eagles' Nest and Jordan Black Magic good references in this regard.

The panel did remark that the category doesn't seem to have much depth, a few very good examples and then a great deal of quite average wine. It is known to be finicky in the vineyard, even more so than Pinot Noir according to some growers, and this is no doubt puts a cap on quality. However, it has always been a consumer favourite (presumably on account of its reputation for being smooth textured) and there is a sense that some producers are quite happy to capitalise on this by making wines in an easy but ultimately quite simple style.

As ever, there were some wines which were compromised by being too green/herbal/minty and others that were overdone, typically the fruit picked very late, such examples prone to some degree of oxidation. The best, however, showed careful judgement both in terms of viticulture and winemaking and hence had admirable structural integrity.

The prize for best wine overall was a Tarransaud Tonnellerie 225-litre barrel worth R14 100 sponsored by local agent Chene South Africa.

JUDGING PROCEDURES

The judging panel was chaired by me and further consisted of two trusted colleagues, namely Roland Peens and James Pietersen, both of Wine Cellar, Cape Town merchants and cellarers of 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
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TASTING NOTES

93 – BEST OVERALL

Laibach Claypot 2016

Price: R320

Total production: 5 100 bottles

Abv: 14.5%

Matured for 16 months in French oak, 100% new. Attractive aromatics of red and black fruit, violets, tea leaf and oak spice. The palate shows pure fruit and bright acidity while the finish is long and dry. Intense but not weighty, this a beautifully balanced and elegant wine.

92

Shannon Mount Bullet 2016

Price: R450

Total production: 7 600 bottles

Abv: 14.5%

Matured for 20 months in French oak, 25% new. A complex nose of red and black berries, dried herbs, earth and a little boot polish. The palate shows dense fruit, fresh acidity and nicely grippy tannins, the finish long and savoury.

91

Dornier 2017

Price: R148

Total production: 7 994 bottles

Abv: 14.5%

Matured for 16 months in French oak, 20% new. The nose shows red and black fruit, crushed leaves, milk chocolate and oak spice while the palate is marked by good fruit expression, fresh acidity and firm but fine tannins – lovely structure and balance.

91

Groot Constantia 2016

Price: R249

Total production: 32 000 bottles

Abv: 14.2%

Matured for 18 months in French oak, 61% new. A subtle nose of black and blue fruit, herbs, vanilla and spice. The palate is full and luscious – good fruit density, no shortage of freshness and smooth tannins. The finish, meanwhile, is long and savoury.

91

Meinert 2015

Price: R158

Total production: 6 650 bottles

Abv: 14.45%

90.5% Merlot, 5% Cabernet Sauvignon, 2% Pinotage, 1.25% Petit Verdot and 1.25% Cabernet Franc. Matured for 18 months in a combination of new and older French oak barrels. Red fruit, dried herbs and vanilla on the nose. The palate is medium bodied with juicy fruit and fine tannins – already quite approachable.

90

Creation 2017

Price: R210

Total production: 8 000 bottles

Abv: 15%

Matured for 16 months in French oak, 20% new. Dark fruit and toasty oak on the nose while the palate is rich and full bodied with plenty of sweet fruit and chewy tannins.

90

Eagles' Nest 2015

Price: R185

Total production: 27 500 bottles

Abv: 14.2%

Matured for 18 months in a combination of first-, second- and third-fill French oak barrels. Red fruit and some leafiness on the nose while the palate is medium bodied with vibrant acidity and fine tannins, the finish nicely savoury.

90

Groote Post 2017

Price: R150

Total production: 10 773 bottles

Abv: 14.42%

Matured for 15 months in French oak, 35% new. Aromatics include cherries and plums, some floral perfume and leafiness. The palate has good fruit concentration, bright acidity and crunchy tannins.

90

Holden Manz Reserve 2016

Price: R500

Total production: 2 761 bottles and 363 magnums

Abv: 14.65%

Matured for 22 months in French oak, 50% new. Berry fruit, dried herbs, vanilla and pencil shavings on the nose. The palate is rich and full bodied with sweet fruit, good freshness and firm tannins, the finish long and dry.

90

Jordan Black Magic 2016

Price: R179

Total production: 15 084 bottles

Abv: 13.6%

Matured for 16 months in new and second-fill oak. Red and black fruit, herbs and some floral character plus attractive oak on the nose. The palate is medium bodied with a nice energy about it – juicy and fresh with a dry finish.

90

Overgaauw 2017

Price: R190

Total production: 14 000 bottles

Abv: 14%

Matured for 18 months in older French oak. The nose is very primary with notes of berry, fresh herbs and attractive oak. The palate is full but balanced with juicy fruit, fresh acidity and fine tannins, the overall impression being sumptuous and soft.

90

Remhoogte Aspect 2015

Price: R180

Total production: 10 000 bottles

Abv: 14.5%

Matured for 24 months in French oak, 30% new. Dark fruit plus turned earth and oak spice on the nose. The palate is plush and smooth textured – dense with a long, dry finish.

COMPLETE SCORES A – Z

Name	Wine of Origin	Score
Almenkerk 2015	Elgin	88
Asara Vineyard Collection 2017	Stellenbosch	88
Badsberg 2017	Breedekloof	88
Bein 2016	Stellenbosch	87
Bein Reserve 2016	Stellenbosch	87
Cape Town Wine Co. 2017	Cape Town	88
Creation 2017	Walker Bay	90
Creation Reserve 2016	Walker Bay	88
Delaire Graff Banghoek Reserve 2016	Banghoek	89
Dieu Donné 2017	Franschhoek	78
Dornier 2017	Stellenbosch	91
Durbanville Hills Collectors Reserve The Lighthouse 2017	Durbanville Cape Town	88
Eagles' Nest 2015	Constantia	90
Elgin Vintners 2016	Elgin	88
Fleur Du Cap Series Privee 2016	Stellenbosch	89
Glenelly Glass Collection 2016	Stellenbosch	86
Glenelly Glass Collection 2017	Stellenbosch	89
Groot Constantia 2016	Constantia Cape Town	91
Groote Post 2016	Darling	88
Groote Post 2017	Darling	90
Holden Manz Reserve 2016	Franschhoek	90
Idiom 2015	Stellenbosch	88
Jason's Hill 2016	Breedekloof	86
Jordan Black Magic 2016	Stellenbosch	90
Ken Forrester Merlot Reserve Pat's Garden 2016	Stellenbosch	87
La Bri 2017	Franschhoek	87
Laibach Claypot 2016	Stellenbosch	93
Laibach Woolworths Ladybird 2017	Stellenbosch	85
Lanzerac 2017	Jonkershoek Valley Stellenbosch	89
L'Avenir Provenance 2018	Stellenbosch	89
Le Bonheur The Manor Meander 2018	Stellenbosch	87
Longridge 2017	Stellenbosch	89
Marklew 2016	Simonsberg Stellenbosch	83
Meinert 2015	Devon Valley	91
Meinert 2016	Devon Valley	88
Muratie Alberta Annemarie 2015	Stellenbosch	89
Oldenburg 2015	Stellenbosch	88
Overgaauw 2017	Stellenbosch	90
Rainbow's End 2017	Banghoek Stellenbosch	87
Remhoogte Aspect 2015	Simonsberg Stellenbosch	90
Rustenberg Stellenbosch 2018	Stellenbosch	86

Shannon 2017	Elgin	89
Shannon Mount Bullet 2016	Elgin	92
Spencer Bay 2017 (Namaqua Wines)	Olifants River	85
Steenberg 2016	Constantia	87
Stellenbosch Reserve Kweekskool 2017	Stellenbosch	89
Villiera Monro 2017	Stellenbosch	88
Whalehaven 2015	Coastal Region	89
Whalehaven 2016	Coastal Region	88
Welbedacht Barrique Select 2016	Wellington	77
Wildevorst 2017	Swartland	83
Zevenwacht 2016	Stellenbosch	86
Zorgvliet 2017	Banghoek	88