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SIGNATURE
RED BLEND
REPORT 2019

WINEMAG.CO.ZA

ABOUT SIGNATURE RED BLENDS

Why should South Africa be bound by the Bordeaux model when it comes to creating great blended red wine? Perhaps the Rhône is a better reference point given local growing conditions while the so-called “Cape Blend” incorporating Pinotage potentially gives us a unique selling proposition. Then, of course, there are the red blends of yesteryear – Alto Rouge, Chateau Libertas and Rustenberg Dry Red to name but three – which conformed to no particular model but are revered for their complexity and longevity.

Once again, we called for wines which were “distinctive of their originators” and instead of the usual practice of dividing them into various sub-groups according to style (Pinotage-based vs Shiraz-based being the differentiation most usually made) we tasted them as one continuous line-up – the thinking being that the fundamentals of wine appreciation such as complexity and balance should apply when it came to making quality assessments.

KEY FINDINGS

58 entries were received from 42 producers and the average score was 89.8, compared to 68 entries from 54 producers and an average score of 89.25 in 2018, and there were 32 wines to rate 90 or higher on the 100-point quality scale compared to 30 a year ago.

This was the most pleasing tasting of the year so far, firstly because the overall quality was so high – 55% of the line-up rated 90-plus compared to 46% in the case of Cabernet Sauvignon Report and 23% in the case of the Merlot Report. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the panel appreciated how original many of the wines appeared to be – it's terrifically exciting to see South African winemakers starting to trust their intuition as to what combination of varieties work best in a blend rather than using templates inherited from Europe or blindly adhering to predetermined parameters.

Top of the pile are two wines from the Jean Engelbrecht stable, namely Donkiesbaai Rooiwijn 2017 and Rust en Vrede Estate 2016, which perfectly illustrate how much signature red blends have to offer.

The Rooiwijn 2017 is maiden vintage of a wine that consists of equal parts Cinsault and Grenache plus a dash of Syrah, the grapes from unirrigated bush vines in Piekenierskloof. Some might see this as "Rhône-style" but it could equally be argued that this a clever and particularly South African take on a "light red" that is currently so in fashion around the world (the Cinsault and Grenache both undergo whole-bunch fermentation and alcohol is a moderate 13.82%).

The Rust en Vrede Estate 2016, on the other hand, is a wine which has a track record dating back to 1988 – this label was originally made its 1986 debut as a Cabernet-Merlot but then winemaker Kevin Arnold (now of Waterford) saw fit to deviate from the Bordeaux model by adding Syrah into the mix two years later and that blend was to become standard.

Another happy outcome of this year's tasting was the good performance of Alto Rouge. This label, dating from the 1920s, was once much prized but has become somewhat dreary in recent times – 92-point ratings for both the 2016 and 2017 vintages suggest that owners Distell are attempting to restore it to its former glory. It should not go unremarked that originally this used to be a Cinsault driven wine with portions of Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz added whereas today it is more a Bordeaux-style blend with a twist...

Finally, this tasting raises issues about the composition of the national vineyard. Cinsault, for instance, makes up 1.8% of our 93 021 ha of total plantings while Grenache makes up 0.4% (while single-variety examples of both Cinsault and Grenache can be unconvincing, they seem to work very well indeed when used in a blend).

Of the 58 entries, 23 carried the very broad designations of either "WO Western Cape" or "Coastal Region", leading to the thought that many producers are compelled to search far and wide for the various components they need to bring a wine from concept to execution.

It is also interesting to note once again that while Stellenbosch usually dominates the Cabernet Sauvignon and Cape Bordeaux Red Blend classes, its pre-eminence does not apply here – only four of the top 12 and eight of the 32 wines to score 90-plus are from this district.

All of the above poses the question: Is what we've got planted ideal in terms of ensuring our competitiveness in world terms or should we be mixing things up a lot more?

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.

TASTING NOTES FOR THE TOP 12

94 Donkiesbaai Rooiwijn 2017

Price: R300

Total production: 4 500 bottles Abv: 13.82%
47% Grenache, 47% Cinsault and 6% Syrah.

Matured for 12 months in older 500-litre barrels. A complex nose of red and black berries, roses, dried herbs and spice while the palate is substantial but not weighty – good fruit expression to go with lemon-like acidity. Beautifully balanced and possessing great detail.



94 Rust en Vrede Estate 2016

Price: R450

Total production: 56 880 bottles Abv: 14.63%
52% Cabernet Sauvignon, 39% Syrah and 9% Merlot.

Matured for 22 months in French oak barrels, 40% new – 70% 300-litre in size and 30% 500-litre. Red and black fruit, herbs and a touch of white pepper. Juicy and fresh with lovely ripe tannins and a savoury finish. Has heft but equally tension and energy.



93 Fairview Extraño 2016

Price: R105

Total production: 10 700 bottles Abv: 14.17%
71% Tempranillo and 19% Grenache, both from Paarl, and 10% Carignan from Swartland.

Matured in French and American oak barrels (of which 20% was in new barrels) for 24 months. Red and black berries, herbs and some earthiness on the nose. Medium bodied with a good core of fruit, fresh acidity and pleasantly grippy tannins. Rustic in the best way.



93 Org de Rac Die Waghuis 2017

Price: R150

Total production: 6 550 bottles Abv: 14.25%

44% Grenache, 27% Shiraz, 25% Mourvèdre and 4% Verdelho.

Matured in mainly older oak for 14 months. Red berries, some meaty character, pepper and other spice on the nose. The palate shows plenty of sweet, dense fruit offset by a good line of acidity while the finish is agreeably smooth and creamy.



93 Plaisir De Merle Grand Plaisir 2014

Price: R430

Total production: 5 000 bottles Abv: 14.63%

58% Cabernet Sauvignon, 25% Petit Verdot and 17% Shiraz.

Matured for 18 months in barrel, 85% new – 85% French oak and 15% American. Some floral perfume before red and black berries plus notes of spice, earth and undergrowth. The palate is rich and smooth textured – great fruit concentration offset by bright acidity before a long, long finish. A powerful wine.



93 Vondeling Monsonia 2016

Price: R225

Total production: 10 000 bottles Abv: 14%

67% Shiraz, 21% Mourvèdre, 8% Carignan and 4% Grenache.

Matured for 16 months in large-format French oak barrels, one-third new. A complex and subtle nose – red and black berries, crushed herbs and an attractive hint of reduction. The palate has excellent concentration and structure – a great core of fruit, bright acidity and fine tannins. Seamlessly assembled.



92 Alto Rouge 2016

Price: R120

Total production: 520 000 bottles Abv: 14.21%

28% Cabernet Franc, 23% Shiraz, 22% Merlot, 21% Cabernet Sauvignon and 6% Petit Verdot.

Matured for 14 – 16 months in a combination of first-, second- and third-fill barrels, mostly French and American oak. Red and black berries, fresh herbs, vanilla and spice on the nose. Medium bodied with concentrated, even luscious fruit offset by fresh acidity and firm but fine tannins. Layers of flavour.



92 Alto Rouge 2017

Price: R120

Total production: 620 000 bottles Abv: 14.35%

31% Cabernet Franc, 28% Shiraz, 22% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Merlot and 9% Petit Verdot.

Matured for 14 – 16 months in a combination of first-, second- and third-fill barrels, mostly French and American oak. A hint of smokiness before red and black berries, fresh herbs, tilled earth and attractive oak-derived notes on the nose while the palate shows good fruit density and smooth tannins. Nicely put together.



92 DeMorgenzon Maestro Blue 2017

Price: R215

Total production: 10 000 bottles Abv: 14.5%

58% Syrah, 26% Grenache, 10% Mourvèdre and 6% Petite Syrah.

Matured for 18 months in a combination of 300-litre barrel, 10% new and 3 000-litre foudre. Red and black fruit, flowers and herbs on the nose while the palate is rich and dense yet not short of freshness and the finish is nicely savoury. Full bodied yet very well balanced, a polished offering.



92 Ernie Els Big Easy Red Blend 2017

Price: R165

Total production: 213 000 bottles Abv: 14.56%

60% Shiraz, 20% Cabernet Sauvignon, 5% Grenache, 5% Mourvèdre and 5% Viognier.

Matured for 14 months in older 300-litre barrels – 80% French oak and 20% American. Red and black berries, flowers, fynbos and spice on the nose while the palate possesses lovely fruit purity, bright acidity and crunchy tannins. Powerful and intense but equally not short of vibrancy.



92 Nederburg The Motorcycle Marvel 2017

Price: R205

Total production: 54 533 bottles Abv: 14.41%

42% Carignan, 25% Grenache, 23% Shiraz, 7% Mourvèdre and 3% Cinsault.

Matured for 26 months in 300-litre barrels, ranging in age from first to fifth fill. Attractive aromatics of red fruit, rose, rooibos, white pepper and other spice while the palate is seemingly light with zesty acidity and fine tannins. Remarkably accessible at this early stage.



92 Underworld Blend 3 2018 (Strange Kompanjie)

Price: R90

Total production: 4 692 bottles Abv: 13.81%

37% Grenache and 15% Carignan, both from Darling, 33% Durif from Stellenbosch and 15% Mourvèdre from Paarl.

Matured in older French oak for nine months. The nose shows lovely floral perfume before red currant and pomegranate, cinnamon and other spice. The palate is light yet flavourful with a great line of acidity and very fine tannins, the finish super-savoury. Great purity and poise.



BUYING GUIDE: CELLAR-DOOR PRICES FOR WINES RATED 90+

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
Donkiesbaai Rooiwijn 2017	94	R300
Rust en Vrede Estate 2016	94	R400
Fairview Extraño 2016	93	R105
Org de Rac Die Waghuis 2017	93	R150
Plaisir De Merle Grand Plaisir 2014	93	R430
Vondeling Monsonia 2016	93	R225
Underworld Blend 3 2018 (Strange Kompanjie)	92	R90
Alto Rouge 2016	92	R120
Alto Rouge 2017	92	R120
Ernie Els Big Easy Red Blend 2017	92	R165
Nederburg The Motorcycle Marvel 2017	92	R205
DeMorgenzon Maestro Blue 2017	92	R215
Creation Syrah Grenache 2017	91	R210
Boplaas Gamka Reserve 2015	91	R220
Ken Forrester Woolworths Reserve Collection SGM 2017	90	R79.99
Boplaas Ring of Rocks 2016	90	R120
Eikendal Charisma 2018	90	R120
Escapades Cabernet Sauvignon Shiraz Malbec 2017	90	R120
Old Road Wine Co. French Corner 2018	90	R125
Ken Forrester Renegade 2014	90	R150
Lammershoek's Red Mysteries 2017	90	R156
Le Riche Richesse 2016	90	R160
Bruce Jack Moveable Feast 2015	90	R180
De Krans Tritonia 2016	90	R185
Kloovenburg Eight Feet 2017	90	R200
Wildevorst Red 2015	90	R215
Boplaas Gamka Reserve 2017	90	R220
Glenelly Estate Reserve 2013	90	R250
Allesverloren Très Vermelhos 2017	90	R255
Iona One Man Band 2014	90	R290
Mary le Bow 2014 (Bruce Jack)	90	R320
Le Riche Richesse 2017	90	TBC

COMPLETE SCORES A – Z

NAME	WINE OF ORIGIN	SCORE
Allesverloren Três Vermelhos 2017	Swartland	90
Alto Rouge 2016	Stellenbosch	92
Alto Rouge 2017	Stellenbosch	92
Asara Vineyard Collection Cape Fusion 2016	Stellenbosch	89
Babylonstoren Babel 2018	Western Cape	89
Bellingham The Bernard Series Small Barrel S.M.V. 2015	Paarl	89
Bergsig Icarus 2014	Breedekloof	87
Bergsig Icarus 2015	Breedekloof	87
Boplaas Gamka Reserve 2015	Stellenbosch & Calitzdorp	91
Boplaas Gamka Reserve 2017	Western Cape	90
Boplaas Ring of Rocks Family Reserve 2016	Western Cape	90
Bruce Jack Moveable Feast 2015	Overberg	90
Creation Syrah Grenache 2017	Walker Bay	91
De Krans Tritonia 2016	Calitzdorp	90
DeMorgenzon Maestro Blue 2017	Stellenbosch	92
Donkiesbaai Rooiwijn 2017	Piekenierskloof	94
Dornier Cocoa Hill 2017	Western Cape	89
Druk My Niet T3 2013	Western Cape	87
Eikendal Charisma 2018	Stellenbosch	90
Ernie Els Big Easy Red Blend 2017	Western Cape	92
Escapades Cabernet Sauvignon Shiraz Malbec 2017	Coastal Region	90
Fable Mountain Vineyards Night Sky 2017	Tulbagh	88
Fairview Broken Barrel "7" 2015	Western Cape	88
Fairview Caldera 2016	Western Cape	89
Fairview Extraño 2016	Coastal Region	93
Fairview Goats do Roam Red Blend 2018	Western Cape	88
Guardian Peak SMG 2016	Western Cape	89
Glenelly Estate Reserve 2013	Stellenbosch	90
Glenelly Estate Reserve 2014	Stellenbosch	89

Holden Manz Proprietor's Blend 2015	Franschhoek	88
Holden Manz Visionaire 2014	Franschhoek	87
Iona One Man Band 2014	Elgin	90
Ken Forrester Renegade 2014	Western Cape	90
Ken Forrester Woolworths Reserve Collection SGM 2017	Western Cape	90
Kloovenburg Eight Feet 2017	Swartland	90
Lammershoek's Red Mysteries 2017	Swartland	90
La Petite Ferme Variation 2017	Franschhoek	87
Le Riche Richesse 2016	Stellenbosch	90
Le Riche Richesse 2017	Stellenbosch	90
Mary le Bow 2014 (Bruce Jack)	Robertson	90
Muratie Melck's Blended Red 2015	Western Cape	88
Nederburg The Motorcycle Marvel 2017	Western Cape	92
Nederburg Ingenuity Italian Blend 2015	Western Cape	89
Nederburg Ingenuity Spanish Blend 2015	Western Cape	88
Old Road Wine Co. French Corner 2018	Coastal Region	90
Old Road Wine Co. The Butcher and Cleaver 2015	Coastal Region	89
Old Road Wine Co. The Spotted Hound 2018	Coastal Region	89
Orange River Cellars Lyra Vega 2017	Northern Cape	89
Org de Rac Die Waghuis 2017	Swartland	93
Plaisir De Merle Grand Plaisir 2014	Simonsberg-Paarl	93
Rust en Vrede Estate 2016	Stellenbosch	94
Spice Route Chakalaka 2016	Swartland	88
Strandveld The Navigator 2016	Elim	89
The Black Pig 2018 (Spider Pig)	Western Cape	89
Underworld Blend 3 2018 (Strange Kompanjie)	Coastal Region	92
Vondeling Monsonia 2016	Voor-Paardeberg	93
Waverley Hills SMV 2014	Tulbagh	89
Wildehurst Red 2015	Swartland	90

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