

Suppressed Magic: Chenin Blanc in South Africa

High volume harvests and sales, leading to complacency, keep this grape from greatness. By Tim James.

Chenin Blanc is not exactly glamorous. Nowhere does it have the aura of, say, Chardonnay. Is this image responsible for the lack of inspiration in South African Chenin? Or, are apathy, ignorance and greed suppressing the magic in the Chenin vineyards of the Cape?

It is becoming a disconcerting truism that wines made from South Africa's most widely-planted grape generally fall far short of their potential. How has this "magical chameleon of a grape", as [renowned UK wine writer] Jancis Robinson calls it, been transformed into the Cape's plodding workhorse – serviceable for anything and everything from table wine to brandy? From what is not despatched for distillation or fortification, the vast Chenin harvest seldom produces more than a string of crisp guava-laden wines for early, easy, and forgettable drinking. Pretty good for plastic tumblers at a picnic.

In fact we must beware of speaking loosely about the "neglect" or "failure" of Chenin in South Africa: the present situation is not one that most producers and consumers would regard as unsuccessful. Virtually every co-op, some estates as well as the big merchant-producers market at least one version of varietal Chenin or include it in a blend; bottle-store shelves offer plenty of choice.

Paradoxically, it is the success of the established Chenin formula that is primarily responsible for the failure in quality. While serious wine drinkers regret lost opportunities, there is a multitude of well-served consumers for whom the miraculous variations in wine mean little, who ask only for reliability, availability – and the cheaper the better. The farmer seeking nothing more glorious than a successful cash crop is also happy: full tanks (and tankers) count most, especially when KWV will mop up at guaranteed prices any wine that even the big merchants do not want.

For, unfortunately, the structure of the South African wine industry, in this case has only encouraged mediocrity, and there are some soundly practical reasons for the generally pedestrian quality of Chenin wines. Prime amongst these is overproduction. High crop yields are frequently at the root of a wine's lack of concentration, flavour and character.

In the hotter areas, where grapes and commercialism flourish with the aid of copious irrigation and fertiliser, the figures are startling. In the Olifantsrivier region at one extreme, Chenin was harvested in 1991 at an average yield of nearly 30 tons per hectare. The comparable figure for Chardonnay in Stellenbosch was 3,7 tons.

Stellenbosch Chardonnay tonnage compares with a figure for Chenin nearly three times as high: 11,5 tons per hectare. This disparity eloquently indicates what is expected of the two varieties. It is particularly unfortunate because it is areas like Stellenbosch, where mature Chenin vines are to be found, in good soils and a good climate, which should be capable of producing excellent and characterful wine.

For Chenin, the factory bulk-production approach begins in the vineyard and continues in the cellar. An unrigorous selection of grapes precedes a winemaking process (often high-tech) which tends to strip the grapes of their subtler and more interesting components. All in the

cause of a super-clean, super-safe, and cheap product. Meanwhile, care and attention and the caresses of expensive French oak are lavished on luckier grapes. The beguiling aromas of honey, flowers and hay of the best Loire Chenins seem far, far away.

So where, the serious wine drinker asks, are those for whom winemaking is a vocation and a labour of love as well as a business, who will do for Chenin what has been done for other varieties? Some large-volume producers such as Perdeberg and Boland, do better than most. And there are examples of ambition – on a tiny scale at Boschendal, for example and more recently at Glen Carlou and Villiera – but they are very few, and very isolated.

Perhaps this is where Chenin's image comes in – it's difficult to see the racing potential of an animal that everyone regards as a workhorse. Familiarity breeds conservatism as well as contempt – Chenin Blanc has been like this since the "Lieberstein revolution" of the sixties; what reason to change as long as the market is unprotesting?

Isolation and an isolationist mindset during the apartheid years. Few exciting foreign wines were available locally to suggest to winemakers what their modest grape was capable of; few winemakers travelled in search of ways of improving their wines. Local wine judges continued handing out medals to bland mediocrity.

Consumers, too, had little basis for comparison. Surrounded by fresh, fruity and cheap white wine that was at its best in its vintage year, they carried on buying it in bottle or box – or avoided it. The vicious circle of the marketplace kept Chenin in its place. Winemakers incurring the costs of a superior wine confront an established reputation and the reluctance of most customers to pay the same price for a bottle labelled "Chenin Blanc" or "Steen" as for a more fashionable variety.

But thanks to some pioneering winemaking efforts, and to events like the Cape Wine Masters' recent Symposium and Wine magazine's "Chenin Blanc Wine Challenge", winemakers and drinkers alike are being alerted to the suppressed magic in Cape vineyards. The potential to produce a high-quality, distinctively South African white wine is right there. We can look to Chenin's future with a little more confidence than seemed possible a few years back – perhaps with even some excitement.