



# Cape whites: in the mix

Critics are abuzz at what looks set to be 'the next big thing' from South Africa: premium white blends to rival the best from Bordeaux, the Rhône and beyond.

Tina Gellie visits the Cape to find out why – and what to buy

BEING PIGEONHOLED IS not something that sits comfortably with South Africa's winemakers. With its diverse climate and terroir, rich history, vast geography and myriad grape varieties, the country is too eclectic to restrict under a catch-all banner for just a few wine styles. (Admittedly, it's cornered the market in Pinotage, but that's unlikely to take the world by storm just yet.)

But there is one style that looks set to become a signature for the Cape while allowing winemakers the freedom to express their individuality: white



*'Cape white blends have a point of difference to whatever else is on the shelf'* Ian Naude, Adoro (pictured left)

blends. These are not wines made from the dregs of various barrels and tanks, churned together each vintage for the sake of adding a blend to a winemaker's range (though there are plenty of those); they are quality wines – often an estate's flagship – and potentially the country's USP.

'It's a really exciting, positive category for South Africa,' says Corne Marais of Avondale in Paarl. 'We have such a breadth of microclimates, terroirs and grapes that it's the logical choice to play to our strengths.' Fellow Paarl winemaker, Adele Dunbar of Fairview describes white blends as a 'space to experiment', offering more flexibility than with red blends. 'It's awesome to make a complex white that scratches an itch more than just a varietal wine.'

Two dominant styles have emerged over the past few years: a Bordeaux-esque blend of Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon, and a Mediterranean-style blend that is usually Chenin Blanc dominant. While cooler regions such as Stellenbosch are finding success with Bordeaux blends (Tokara's Director's Reserve is the best example, *see p59*), the latter are increasingly becoming a speciality of Swartland, made in a non-interventionist, often oxidative style.

Eben Sadie, of Sadie Family Wines, one of Swartland's (and the Cape's) most recognised winemakers, says people shouldn't be surprised by the success of South African white blends – it's simply a case of going back to the history books.

**Above left: Ian Naude of Adoro in Stellenbosch says Cape winemakers 'need to stand proud' with uniquely South African wines and not copy other countries**

**Top: Suzaan and Chris Alheit are based at the Hemelrand vineyard in Walker Bay (left) but source parcels of grapes from seven vineyards across the Cape for their acclaimed Chenin-based blend Cartology**

'All wines used to be blends,' he says. 'And all varieties used to originate in the Mediterranean. Swartland has a Mediterranean climate, so I'm just following a 3,000-year old grape model.' His Palladius, launched in 2002, was the first of its kind in South Africa and still one of the standard bearers (see box, opposite).

### Individual expression

South Africa has a history of planting grapes in the wrong places – mainly Chenin Blanc – purely to satisfy commercial demands for cheap, gluggable whites. But over the past 15 years, much work has gone in to identifying terroirs and choosing site-specific varieties. Additionally, many old-vine plots on their own rootstocks – ironically also of Chenin, but Semillon too – have been preserved.

Choosing to blend terroirs over varieties, at Alheit Vineyards in Walker Bay, Chris and Suzaan Alheit have created arguably the most exciting wine that has come out of South Africa in years. Cartology comprises a single-vineyard of Semillon from vines planted in 1936, plus 92% of dry-farmed Chenin Blanc chosen from seven seaside or high-altitude parcels; the vines are all between 30 and 76 years old.

'The Chenins are as different from each other as a Chablis is from Californian Chardonnay, so it is a true blend of individual terroir expressions,' says Chris. 'The end result should be like looking through the lens of old bush vines of the Western Cape.'

Cartology is Alheit's inaugural release and while a few more wines may be in the planning, they will all be white. 'South Africa's finest wines are its whites,' says Chris. 'Put them in a blind tasting against the best in the world and you'd not be embarrassed. Yes, sometimes our reds can look poor, but we should be very proud of our whites.'

Ian Naude, of Adoro in Stellenbosch, believes that in the desire to compete in export markets and seek international plaudits, many winemakers have been satisfied to copy existing wine styles, erasing what is 'South African' about their product. 'We need to break away from trying to make a Bordeaux blend or a Rhône blend. We need to stop copying other countries and stand proud with a host of Cape white blends that not only have a point of difference to whatever else is on the shelf but are



**Above: Marc Kent of Boekenhoutskloof wants people to 'taste the estate, vintage and terroir' in his wine, not the grapes**

**Top: the gnarled vines in the 'TVoetpad vineyard used in Eben Sadie's field blend (see opposite) were planted 100 years ago**

*'A blend should reflect the estate, not the grapes. If it doesn't, I've made the wine the wrong way'* **Marc Kent, Boekenhoutskloof (left)**

recognisable as uniquely South African,' he says. There's copying and then there's using what you have, says Donovan Rall, winemaker at Vuurberg in Stellenbosch and for his own label, Rall. 'Why be the same as everyone else if you can be unique,' he says. 'At the same time, while I might love Gewurztraminer, for example, my vineyards and climate tell me what I should be working with, and that might be a blend of Sauvignon and Semillon. So that's not copying Bordeaux, it's being sensible.'

Rall is one of many who feels South Africa should focus on wine style and not go down the New World route of varietal labelling ('How many people say they hate Chardonnay but love Chablis?'), believing it gives the wine more identity. 'I want people to like my wine for what it is, not because it has 50% of Chenin in it this year. I'd remove the varieties from the label if I could, but people would only ask me.' Marc Kent of Boekenhoutskloof in Franschhoek agrees: 'A blend should reflect the estate, not the grapes. If it doesn't, I've made the wine the wrong way. I want people to taste our wine, and find the estate, the vintage and the terroir.'

### Going public

But with such a diverse range of wines under the banner of 'South African white blends', how do you know what you're buying? Will it be a 50:50 Sauv-Sem blend or a Chenin-dominant field blend of 10 grapes? Anthony Hamilton Russell of Hamilton Russell Vineyards in Hemel-en-Aarde says that as exciting as the white blends category might be, varietal wines are an easier sell. 'Aficionados might appreciate them but the public wants a

## Wines of the moment: top dozen Cape white blends



**Alheit Vineyards, Cartology, Western Cape 2011** 19/20pts (96/100pts)  
£22-£24 **Bentley's, Berry Bros & Rudd, Halifax Wine, Handford Lay & Wheeler, SA Wines Online, Swig** (92% Chenin Blanc, 8% Semillon) Seven parcels of dry-farmed, 30- to 80-year old bush vines. Bold and complex. Super-bright acidity lifts juicy apple, plum and citrus fruit. Creamy, nutty texture. Saline, mineral length. **Drink** 2013-2020 **Alc** 14%

**The Sadie Family, Palladius, Coastal Region 2010** 19 (96)

£37 **Berry Bros, Handford, Woodwinters, Swig** (60% Chenin Blanc plus Grenache Blanc, Clairette Blanc, Viognier, Chardonnay, Roussanne, Semillon Blanc, Semillon Gris, Palomino, Marsanne) Weighty, textured and juicy. Lifted acidity freshens a preserved lemon palate. Savoury cashew finish. Endless length. **Drink** 2013-2020 **Alc** 14.5%



**Mullineux, Swartland 2011** 18.5 (95)  
£16-£20 **Berry Bros & Rudd, Domaine Direct, Handford, Noel Young, Slurp, Solent Cellar, Swig** (65% Chenin Blanc, 26% Viognier, 9% Clairette Blanc) Textural, fresh, bright fruit. Bone dry with pure apple concentration. Fruit from 60-year-old, dry-farmed vineyards, fermented in old oak foudres. **Drink** 2013-2018 **Alc** 13%

**The Sadie Family, 'TVoetpad, Swartland 2011** 18.5 (95)

POA **Richards Walford** (Field blend: Semillon Blanc, Semillon Gris, Palomino, Chenin Blanc, Muscat) Organic, dry-farmed 1.4ha vineyard on own rootstocks, planted between 1900 and 1928. Nine-month natural fermentation gives a savoury, mineral

nutty and waxy palate. Intense concentration of juicy citrus peel, honey and papaya. Very long. **Drink** 2013-2020 **Alc** 13.5%



**Tokara, Director's Reserve White, Stellenbosch 2011** 18.5 (95)  
£18-£27 (2010) **Handford, Hedonism, Invinity, Swig, Winebear, Winedirect** (71% Sauvignon Blanc, 29% Semillon) Herbal nose, spiky passion fruit and waxy, nutty palate thanks to barrel fermentation in French oak. Complex and elegant with lovely concentration. Lanolin finish. **Drink** 2013-2018 **Alc** 14.5%

**Fable, Jackal Bird, Western Cape 2011** 18 (93)  
N/A UK [www.fablewines.com](http://www.fablewines.com)

(55% Chenin Blanc, 16% Grenache Blanc, 16% Chardonnay, 9% Viognier, 4% Roussanne) Bright, fresh, minerality, lifted apricot fruit and nutty notes. Elegant. Superb mouthfeel and length. **Drink** 2013-2018. **Alc** 13.5%

**Lammershoek, Roulette Blanc, Swartland 2010** 18 (93)

£11.50-£12.75 (2008) **Buy Wine Online, Stainton Wines, Woodwinters** (41% Chenin Blanc, 37% Chardonnay, 18% Viognier, 4% Clairette Blanc) Tight structure, smoky edge, oxidative complexity, great texture. Waxy, lanolin-like quince fruit with nutty notes. Lovely length. Organically farmed. **Drink** 2013-2018 **Alc** 13.5%

**Nederburg, Ingenuity White, Coastal Region 2011** 18 (93)

N/A UK [www.nederburg.com](http://www.nederburg.com) (35% Sauvignon Blanc, 15% Semillon, 14% Chardonnay, 10% Chenin Blanc, 8% Viognier, 2% Gewurztraminer, 2% Verdelho) Fresh, bright, lifted aromatics of white flowers and stone fruit. Tight, complex, firm palate with lifted spice. Creamy texture. Very well made and intriguing. **Drink** 2013-2018 **Alc** 13%

**Vuurberg, White, Western Cape 2011** 18 (93)  
£18.50 **Swig**

(50% Chenin Blanc, 20% Viognier, plus Grenache Blanc, Roussanne, Semillon, Verdelho and Clairette) Round and exciting with apple, pear and a creamy vanilla note. Bright mandarin fruit acidity. Textural, tight and mineral. **Drink** 2013-2020 **Alc** 14%

**AA Badenhorst, Funky White, Western Cape NV** 17.5 (91)

£13.95/375ml **Handford, Hedonism, Swig** (Chenin Blanc, Chardonnay, Viognier and eight other varieties) Made in a solera system but without fortification, so tasting more like a vin jaune. Bone-dry palate of salty almond, citrus peel, quince and mouthwatering acidity. Unique. **Drink** 2013-2023 **Alc** 13.5%



**David, Aristargos, Coastal Region 2011** 17.5 (91)

N/A UK [www.davidsadie.co.za](http://www.davidsadie.co.za) (31% Chenin Blanc, 27% Roussanne, 22% Viognier, 20% Grenache Blanc) Just three barrels are made of this rich, complex white. Spiced green apples, notes of liquorice and lemon peel. Soft acidity, creamy finish. **Drink** 2013-2020 **Alc** 14%



**De Morgenzon, The Maestro White, Stellenbosch 2011** 17.5 (91)

N/A UK [www.demorgenzon.co.za](http://www.demorgenzon.co.za) (50% Roussanne, 27% Chenin Blanc, 12% Verdelho, 11% Chardonnay) Each variety in this first release is vinified in concrete eggs, left in French oak for 11 months then blended together and back into oak. Weighty, textured and peachy with fine minerality. Long. **Drink** 2013-2018 **Alc** 14%

For full details of UK stockists, see p86

## Other Highly Recommended\* blends

**AA Badenhorst, Family White 2010** (£22-£25 James Nicholson, Swig, Woodwinters) **Boekenhoutskloof, Semillon-Sauvignon 2009** (£17-£20 Alfred the Grape, James Nicholson, New Generation, The Wine Society) **Cape Chamonix, Sauvignon-Semillon Reserve 2011** (£11-£14 Harrogate Fine Wine, SA Wines Online, Stone Vine & Sun, Swig, The Wine Society Woodwinters, Wright Wine Co) **Cape Point, Isleidh 2010** (£35-£38 Harvey Nichols, Swig) **Keermont,**

**Terrasse 2010** (£21 Swig) **Lam 2010** (£13.50 Harvey Nichols) **Miles Mossop, Saskia 2010** (£19-£20 Hangingditch, Harrogate Fine Wine, Swig, Wine Reserve, Woodwinters) **Rall 2010** (£30 Harvey Nichols) **Sequillo 2010** (£22-£23 Harvey Nichols, Swig, Woodwinters) **Vergelegen, GVB 2010** (£20-£26 Jeroboams, Majestic, Slurp, Swig) **Vuurberg 2010** (£18.50 Swig) **Waterkloof, Circle of Life 2011** (£14-£18 widely available via Boutinot) \*all scored 17 or 17.25/20 (90 or 90+)

recognisable Chardonnay, Chenin or Sauvignon. White blends haven't crossed into everyone's consciousness, unlike red blends which people can associate with Bordeaux or Rhône.'

General secretary of South Africa's Sommelier Association, Higgo Jacobs says he and his peers are key players in this introduction. 'Blends are the most exciting category of wine in South Africa today. I could make an amazing wine list entirely of red and white Cape blends that would pair perfectly with food. They are unique and great value, and sommeliers and merchants need to start championing them.'

In addition to Chenin Blanc, Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon, South Africa's white blends often include Viognier, Grenache Blanc and Grenache

Gris, Semillon Gris, Roussanne (and its Rhône partner Marsanne from the 2013 vintage), Muscadell as well as Verdelho, Clairette, Colombard and Palomino. The latter four less-regarded varieties are used to add freshness and acidity to counterbalance fat, oily varieties such as Viognier. 'It's true that some of the grapes we use are seen as low-class peasant grapes, but what they lack in character as individuals, together they make a great blend,' says Sadie. Rall adds: 'Just look at Champagne – it's not revolutionary, it's not new. The reason to blend parcels, grapes or both is to make the wine better, more consistent – more complete.'

As South Africa's white blends are proving, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. **D**

Tina Gellie is Decanter's chief sub-editor