

# Out of Africa

It may be new to the wine-producing fraternity but Africa's progress is amazing, says *Lionel Lau*

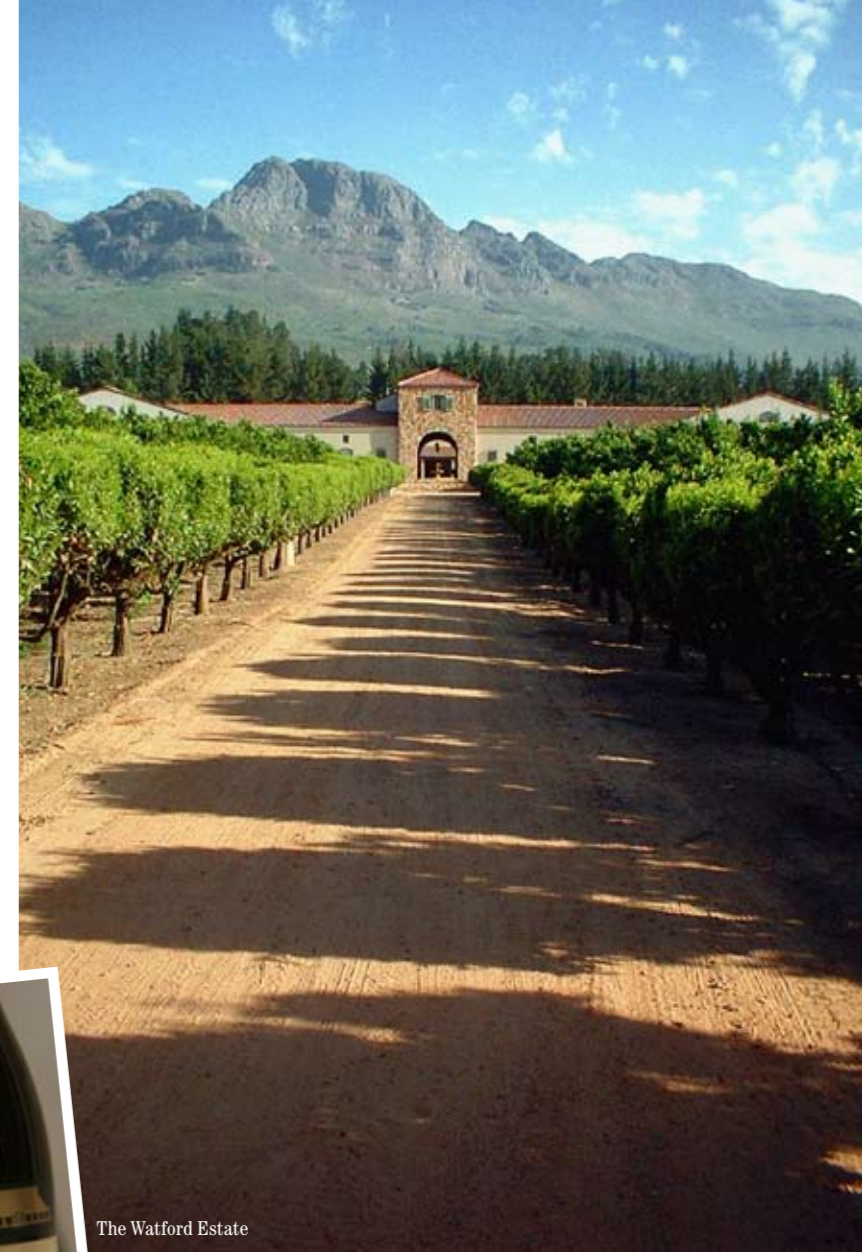


The wine business in South Africa is at least 350 years old, but in my mind it has only produced its best bottles in the past two decades. And what amazing progress it has made! There are new labels, new vineyards and a new outpouring of interest in the country's wine culture, both at home and overseas.

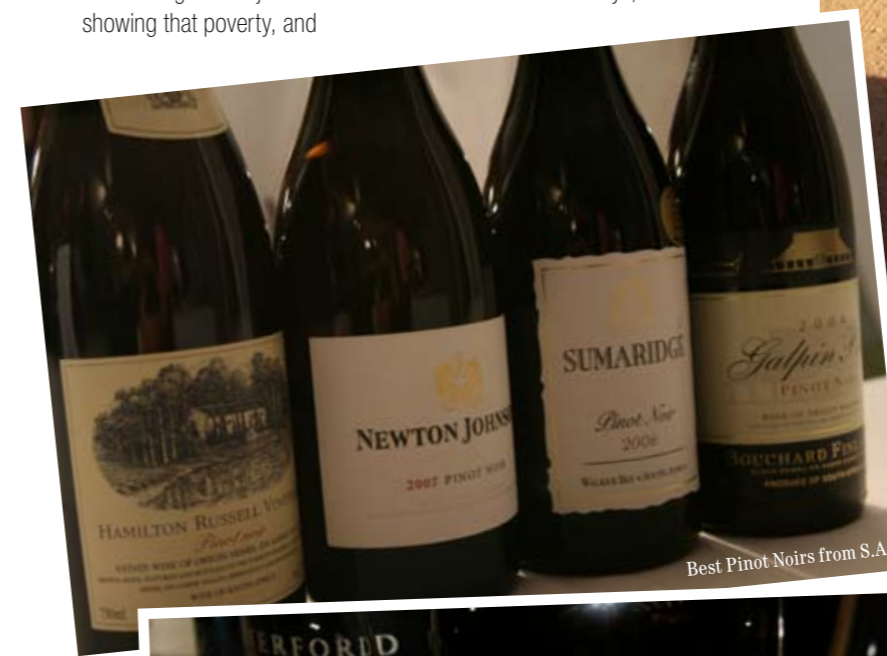
Nearly all of the South African wines exported to the all over the world come from the beautiful southwestern corner of the country around Cape Town called the Coastal Region or Western Cape on wine labels. The Cape includes 17 regions and districts. Among the most famous are Stellenbosch (outside Cape Town), Paarl and Constantia.

Most people who visit the Cape will return with a love of the land, the people and the wines burning bright in their hearts. But no one comes home from South Africa without being acutely aware of the social and economic problems faced by this re-born country, still little more than a decade after it emerged from the shadow of Apartheid.

On my very first visit recently, I noticed that ugly townships spread for miles alongside major roads on the outskirts and motorways, showing that poverty, and



The Watford Estate



Best Pinot Noirs from S.A.



Waterford Estate, the Gem

its bedfellows of crime, disease and lack of education, are still acute problems for huge numbers of mostly black and coloured South Africans. Whole cities of corrugated iron shacks and basic government-provided shelters peter out within a few hundred yards of high end housing and multi-million pound wine estates.

Whilst South Africa's social and political future remains uncertain to a point, the wine producers are a remarkably gregarious, positive and enthusiastic lot. They too face their share of problems of course which includes a downward trend in domestic wine consumption and a global over-production of wine but the business of growing, making and selling wine in South Africa is about as tough as anywhere in the world.

But the flip side to all this doom and gloom is this majestic wine land, its proud and ambitious people, and the wine itself. The Cape has been making huge strides in all of these areas: understanding its terroir better and the science of matching vine to soil; new young winemakers bursting through with much more exposure to global influences; wine quality improving rapidly



Christophe & Sabrina of Vins d'Orrance

with certain grape varieties and styles emerging as key players. All of these factors has helped boost the growth and development of South Africa as a major wine force. In fact as recent as last August, South Africa emerged triumphant from the Decanter World Wine Awards.

It won 12 Regional Trophies and an amazing six International Trophies – among them the International Bordeaux Varietal Trophy (Under £10) and the International Rhone Varietal Trophy (Over £10)

Only 26 International Trophies are awarded. The only other region to come close was Australia with four – but it entered hundreds more wines.

So things are looking good for South African wines and whilst some estates, like Meerlust, Klein Constantia and Rustenberg, are literally centuries old, having been founded in the 1600s; others, like Kanonkop and Simonsig are younger, but still have 50 or 100 years of top-quality reputation behind them.

But there is also a new, post-Apartheid breed of estates and winemakers who have hit the scene, like Duncan Savage of Cape Point Vineyards, Christophe Durand at Vins d'Orrance, Francois Haasbroek of Waterford and Eben Sadie for Sadie Family Wines. Their youthful zest and boundary-busting vision for the wines they want to make has had a real impact.

One of the truly uplifting things about the South African scene is the mutual respect and admiration shown by the established figures and the new breed of younger winemakers. Over several meetings, lunches and dinners, I witnessed a real enthusiasm to taste, discuss and learn about each other's wines, but also a genuine interest in each other's opinions and winemaking philosophies.

The effort to redistribute wine wealth and responsibility to the black community through Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) projects is ongoing. Many BEEs now exist and a wine industry charter has been developed, that should map a way forward.

Young coloured winemakers are starting to make their mark too, mostly graduates of the Stellenbosch University oenology course. One of the first graduates, Carmen Stevens at Amani Vineyards manages a double whammy by being both black and female in the sometimes rather macho world of South African wine production.

Mzokona Mvemve was also one of the first black graduates of the



Carmen Stevens, S.A.'s first coloured woman winemaker

Stellenbosch School, and he is now pursuing his own label development after being in charge of one of South Africa's big brand wines, Indaba for almost a decade.

Hopefully these two young winemakers will be more than 'poster children' for the empowerment movement. Along with the corporate initiatives and government-sponsored projects, they could herald a real broadening of the wine industry, and a breaking down of traditional roles and barriers.

Of the 44 million people who inhabit South Africa, less than 10 per cent is white. That huge majority of black and coloured South Africans need to have an economic stake in the production of wine. If today's beer-drinking black youth develop an emotional attachment to their country's wine industry, it could just hold a vital key to future strength and stability of that industry.

I visited over 20 booths during the three days at the Cape Wine Show 2008 as well as a handful of estates and some common themes emerged. There is an obvious sign of improved attention to detail and investment in quality that has permeated the Winelands.



Sauvignon Blancs from Constantia

**2008 BUITENVERWACHTING SAUVIGNON BLANC** The name may be hard to pronounce, but the effort is worth it—this wine from cool-climate Constantia, marked by notes of melon, fig and herb, may be one of the finest affordable Sauvignon Blancs in the world.



Vins d'Orrance wines

**2006 VINS D'ORRANCE CHARDONNAY CUVÉE ANAÏS** Made by one of South Africa's best new winemakers in a true garagiste fashion in suburban Cape Town, this elegant, nuanced Chardonnay has classic pear and apple flavors.

**2008 RAATS FAMILY WINES UNWOODED CHENIN BLANC** This wine is one of the world's great examples of the grape. Crisp, complex, it's as exciting as any Chenin Blanc from France's Loire Valley.



Raats Family Chenin Blanc

Another theme is a growing appreciation of the importance of matching grape variety to specific site. The influence of the 'Cape Doctor', the south-easterly wind that cools the vineyards, is well understood, but a deeper understanding of climate, terroir and the science of matching vines to particular soils and sites is evident.

Sauvignon Blanc has emerged as a trump card from the rather dark episode in 2004 when a few winemakers were found guilty of adulterating their Sauvignons with flavorings to give them aromatic pungency on the cheap. Viognier is another big story, being planted widely to make varietal white wines and for fermenting with Shiraz to make a Côte-Rôtie-style blend.

Here are some of the most interesting Cape producers and their wines together with tasting notes:



**2003 MEERLUST RUBICON** This winery wine has always been one of South Africa's most famous and revered Bordeaux style blends. The 04 was also tasted but far from ready and the 03 has all the charm or a young wine with plenty of legs to age.

**2005 VERGELEGEN CABERNET SAUVIGNON RESERVE** The estate dates back to 1700, but this well-made wine with its classic black-currant aromas is a terrific and always serious wine produced in a very modern style.



Vergelegen Wines



Meerlust wines

**2004 WATERFORD THE JEM** This is the winery's flagship wine which is named for one of the partners in the venture. Perfectionist winemaking partner Kevin Arnold took seven years before releasing it, a blend of eight varietals with Cabernet being the main component but with classic hints of leathery Shiraz coming thru, this is a broad-textured, juicy red made to cellar.



Kevin Arnold of Waterford Estate

**2006 LANZERAC PIONEER PINOTAGE** A fine example of the native South African grape, Pinotage (a cross between Pinot Noir and Cinsaut), and the 1959 vintage was the world's first pinotage and as such special attention is paid to this varietal. This red has a pleasingly smoky, earthy character showing ripe red fruit and funkiness.

**2006 STARK-CONDE CABERNET SAUVIGNON** This wine is so delicious it's hard to stop drinking it long enough to appreciate all that it has going for it—such as spicy floral notes and flavors of crushed plums and a touch of vanilla, it actually reminds me of a Margaux.



Marie Conde of Stark-Conde



Lanzerac Pioneer Pinotage



Stark-Conde wines

**2006 SADIE FAMILY WINES COLUMELLA**

Red wine specialist Eben Sadie was inspired by the Swartland, the belief in the value of blending and a prime vineyard sites to good advantage in making this gorgeously ripe, generous Rhone inspired wine. 2005 was the highest ever rated Cape wine by Wine Spectator Magazine.

**2006 HAMILTON RUSSELL PINOT NOIR** This wine, perennially rated one of South Africa's very best reds, has been a standard-bearer for the country since the early 1980's. Harmonious and silky, it's a wine to meditate over.

Columella, S.A. most expensive wine



Anthony and Talita of Hamilton Russell Vineyards