

THE
**CHRISTIAN
EEDES**

**CABERNET
SAUVIGNON
REPORT**

TOP 10

- 2012 -

WITH SANLAM PRIVATE INVESTMENTS

INTRODUCTION

James Molesworth of US magazine *Wine Spectator* tasted GS Cabernet Sauvignon 1966 during a 2007 visit and gives it a score of a then unprecedented 95 on the 100-point scale, acknowledging it as proof that South Africa was capable of producing classic wines. Last year, Neal Martin, critic-at-large for website eRobertParker.com said of the Zonnebloem Cabernet 1959 that were it to be included a line-up of top wines from Bordeaux of the same vintage it would “knock most of them out of the field” . Nederburg Auction Cabernet Sauvignon 1974 is the stuff of legend.

Despite Shiraz attracting all the hype at the moment, there’s good reason to put more focus on the potential of South African Cabernet Sauvignon to produce wines that can compete with the world’s best.

For one thing, its sheer ubiquity counts in its favour with it being the second most widely planted variety after Chenin Blanc, making up 12% of the national vineyard at the end of 2011. A lot of this might be planted in less than ideal locations and suffer from over-cropping but at least some of it must be capable of greatness.

For another, there’s Cabernet Sauvignon’s general high standing. The top end of the global market is already familiar with the variety and has no problem paying serious money for the best wines made from it (the icons of Napa Valley, California being a case in point) and in light of this, it seems only sensible that South Africa should aim to offer contemporary examples of single-variety Cabernet Sauvignon which stand uncontested as superlative.

METHODOLOGY

Rather than endeavouring to be all-inclusive, my departure point was to scrutinize the front-runners in the category. I put together a line-up of 60 wines, partly consisting of examples which had fared well in recent local or international competition and partly from those producers I consider to be the best in their field even if somewhat low-profile.

Why the limited size of the line-up? The South African wine industry is extraordinarily dynamic with new producers of note emerging all the time but I’m less concerned with performing a talent-spotting function (this is achieved by other tastings with bigger line-ups) and more interested in discovering if a hierarchy of quality is starting to emerge, the modern era of South African wine now well under way.

Even though a top 10 is generated based on the tasting, the exercise is pitched more as an in-depth analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the category in question, all wines submitted receiving a rating and a detailed tasting note. This, in addition to the fact that producers are not asked to pay an entry fee, alleviates the “competition fatigue” that exists in many quarters.

The judging panel was chaired by myself and further consist of two trusted colleagues, namely Roland Peens of Wine Cellar, a Cape Town firm which brokers and cellars fine wine and James Pietersen, beverage manager for local restaurants Balducci’s and Belthazar. Both are experienced tasters, Peens a former taster of Platter’s and Pietersen an existing one. PKF were tasting auditors.

KEY FINDINGS

Many commentators contend that, litre for litre, South Africa's whites display significantly higher quality than its reds. Based on this tasting, this does not appear entirely fair: quality at the top end of the Cabernet Sauvignon category is unquestionably world class but there is perhaps not quite as much depth as you might expect from a white wine category like Chardonnay.

A defining feature of the best examples was succulence of fruit. Criticisms of local reds have long been either that they are too green, too ripe or, in a few unfortunate cases, both too green *and* too ripe (the product of sugar ripening outpacing phenolic ripening) but the top wines are now as pure as pure can be.

It is also pleasing to report that while local red often gets criticised for clumsy use of oak, this wasn't very much in evidence. Producers don't seem to be using very much *less* oak; rather they are now working with fruit of a suitable standard to assimilate meaningful oak influence while also going about their oak treatments in more sensitive fashion.

Better fruit and more careful handling in the cellar is, in turn, affecting tannin texture for the better: whereas local Cab tended to be astringent to the point of mouth-puckering in the past, we are starting to see wines with wonderfully fine-grained tannins. They're there but they don't attack you...

A significant criticism which can be made is that too many wines still err on the side of over-ripeness, as if producers are convinced that if they are to be contenders at the top end of the market then they must deliver a product of extra weight and power. What results are wines which initially can't fail to get your attention, but ultimately do not convince because they lack definition, finishing hot and sweet...

There are, too, a number of more old-fashioned wines, these typically appearing more medium-bodied with aromas and flavours of red fruit and stewed veggies. They are not without charm but typically a bit rustic and are unlikely to wow the international critics. They are however what many South Africans grew up on and hence provide the comfort of the familiar.

THE TOP 10

FIVE STARS

Delaire Reserve 2009

Not yet released

Initially appears reductive but opens up wonderfully in the glass. Red and black fruit as well as an attractive oak-derived vanilla note on the nose. Medium bodied but shows immaculate fruit delineation, fresh acidity and tannins which are smooth in the best sense. Finishes long and savoury. A wine that gives a sense of completeness. Drink 2014 – 2024.

De Trafford 2009

Cellar price: R230

Complex nose showing red and black fruit, fynbos perfume, spice and iodine. The palate is medium- to full-bodied with good concentration, fresh acidity and fine tannins. Luscious fruit but layers of other flavour. In a word, delicious. Drink 2014 – 2024.

Graham Beck The Coffeestone 2009

Not yet released

Subtle notes of cassis, floral perfume and pencil shavings on the nose. The palate is full bodied but focused and classically styled with excellent purity of fruit, fresh acidity and firm but fine tannins. Plenty of reigned-in power. An extremely well structured, age-worthy wine. Drink 2014 – 2024.

Tokara 2009

Cellar price: R79

Red and black fruit, spice and pencil shavings on the nose. The palate is medium bodied but shows pure, juicy fruit, vibrant acidity and fine tannins while the finish is long and savoury. Has great poise. Drink 2014 – 2019.

FOUR AND A HALF STARS

Cederberg Five Generations 2009

Cellar price: R300

Exceptionally well conceived with red and black fruit plus some attractive leafiness and oak-derived vanilla on the nose. Elegant and well balanced, the palate shows good concentration, fresh acidity and fine, powdery tannins while the finish is long and dry. Drink 2014 – 2024.

Rickety Bridge Paulina's Reserve 2009

Cellar price: R190

Complex nose showing floral perfume as well as spicy, earthy notes. The palate is rich and flavourful with concentrated fruit but also a pleasing savoury quality and good freshness. Fine-grained tannins make for a long, dry finish. Has real interest. Drink 2014 – 2019.

Stark-Condé 2009

Cellar price: R260

Dark fruit, dry tobacco and vanilla on the nose. Great fruit concentration, fresh acidity and firm tannins. Clean and pure with a long, dry finish. Very well assembled and will reward bottle maturation. Drink 2014 – 2019.

Stark-Condé Three Pines 2009

Cellar price: R130

Dark fruit and pencil shavings on the nose. Powerful but perfectly structured with massively concentrated dark fruit, fresh acidity and firm but fine tannins. A very serious, classy wine. Drink 2014 – 2024.

FOUR STARS

Kleine Zalze Family Reserve 2007

Not yet released

Unashamedly modern in style with dense red and black fruit and attractive oak. Appears sweet on entry but balanced by vibrant acidity. Clean and pure with well judged oak. Subtle note of mint lends interest. Drink now – 2017.

Louis 2008

Cellar price: R230

Dark fruit, oak and an attractive leafy quality on the nose. Full but balanced with great fruit density, bright acidity and firm but fine tannins. Pleasing savoury edge to the finish. A wine of refinement which should reward bottle maturation. Sultry Drink 2013 – 2018.

THE REST

FOUR STARS

Edgebaston 2009

Dark fruit combined with slight herbal note on the nose. Very concentrated, rich and ripe on the palate but bright acidity lends balance. Appears sweet on entry but tannins are firm and the finish is long and dry. Drink 2014 – 2019.

Flagstone Music Room 2009

Made in an unapologetically modern style, the nose shows cassis and vanilla notes while the palate is full-bodied and sweet-fruited with moderate acidity and soft tannins. Not profound but good in its style. Drink now – 2017.

Fleur du Cap Unfiltered 2009

Dark fruit, tobacco and tarry oak on the nose before a palate which is relatively lean and austere: good fruit expression but also quite tart acidity and very firm tannins. Drink 2014 – 2019.

Glen Carlou Gravel Quarry 2008

Powerful and weighty with ripe dark fruit and a slight minty note on the nose. The palate is massively concentrated and smooth textured. Appears sweet with lots of oak in evidence. Leaves little to the imagination. Drink now – 2015.

Graham Beck Chalkboard 2009

Blackcurrants, chocolate and overt mint on the nose and palate. A big, powerful wine with very concentrated fruit and a smooth texture. Drink now – 2015.

GS by David Finlayson 2008

A weighty, powerful wine with ultra-ripe dark fruit, soft acidity and smooth tannins. Rich and broad and already quite mellow. Drink now – 2015.

Guardian Peak Lapa 2009

A blockbuster with dark fruit, slight minty note and charry oak on the nose. The palate is very rich and full bodied but somehow a sense of balance is retained. Huge concentration, moderate acidity, firm tannins. Appears rather heavily extracted. Drink now – 2015.

Journey's End The Cape Doctor 2007

Ripe red and black fruit, toasty oak and some savoury developed character on the nose and palate. Rich and full with a moderate acidity and a smooth texture. Drink now.

Kleine Zalze Vineyard Selection 2009

Intense red and black fruit and prominent oak on the nose and palate. Appears sweet on entry, gentle acidity, while the tannins are soft and plush. Drink now – 2014.

KWV Cathedral Cellar 2009

Ultra-ripe dark fruit on the nose and palate. Full bodied and juicy with relatively soft tannins. Very appealing but appears slightly sweet and somewhat lacking in complexity. Drink now – 2014.

Neil Ellis Vineyard Selection 2009

Dark fruit and prominent oak on the nose. The palate shows good purity, acidity fresh to the point of tart and firm but fine tannins. Full-bodied but somewhat angular at this stage. Drink 2014 – 2019.

Plaisir de Merle 2009

Some dusty oak and slight herbal note on an otherwise shy nose. The palate is classically styled with pure dark fruit, fresh acidity and prominent oak. Drink 2014 – 2019.

Rickety Bridge Paulina's Reserve 2008

Rather exotic nose showing floral perfume and spice. Ultra-ripe dark fruit, very smooth textured on the palate. Not unattractive but somewhat atypical. Drink now – 2015.

Rustenberg Peter Barlow 2007

Dark fruit, fynbos and vanilla on the nose. Full and intense, somewhat lacking in freshness and very polished tannins. Appears heavily worked. Drink now – 2017.

Saxenburg Private Collection 2007

Cassis, tobacco, some earthiness and toasty oak. Concentrated dark fruit, fresh acidity and firm tannins. Lacks a little finesse but is nevertheless rich and full and will have its fans. Drink now – 2017.

Spier Woolworths Reserve 2009

Oak-derived vanilla and chocolate on the nose. Rich and dense on the palate with plenty of ripe dark fruit and firm but fine tannins. Modern but very well put together. Drink now – 2017.

Springfield Methode Ancienne 2004

Red and black fruit as well as some developed notes. Good concentration, soft acidity, mellow tannins. Savoury edge to the finish. Drink now – 2014.

Teddy Hall Hercules van Loon 2008

Dark fruit, violets and earth on the nose. Succulent fruit, fresh acidity and firm tannins. Savoury note on the finish. Appears somewhat rustic but has appeal. Drink now 2013 – 2018.

Vergelegen 2006

Red and black fruit as well as herbs, earth and dusty oak on the nose. Medium bodied with good fruit concentration and fine tannins. A hint of the savoury character that development brings. Traditional in style. Drink now – 2016.

THREE AND A HALF STARS

Buitenverwachting 2007

Lean and austere. Plenty of cassis but also herbal, savoury notes. Concentrated fruit, fresh acidity and firm but fine tannins. Slight dirty note detracts and the finish is dry to the point of puckering. Old school. Drink now – 2015.

Glenelly Lady May 2009

Red fruit, vanilla and a notable herbaceous character on the nose. The palate is medium bodied with fresh acidity and fine tannins. An elegant wine towards the greener end of the flavour spectrum which will find favour in some but not all quarters. Drink 2014 – 2019.

Kanonkop 2008

Old fashioned in style, the nose shows red and black fruit, violets, herbs, iodine and vanilla. The palate shows concentrated sweet fruit, relatively moderate acidity and soft tannins. Understated and well balanced. Drink now – 2018.

Le Riche 2009

Ripe black fruit, attractive oak a slight green note on the nose and palate. The palate shows reasonable fruit weight but the oak is very much to the fore and acidity quite hard at this stage. Drink 2015 – 2017.

Le Riche Reserve 2009

Graphite and overt herbal, minty note on the nose. The palate has a sweet 'n sour quality – dark fruit contrasted by quite tart acidity. Tannins appear quite hard and astringent. Currently rather awkward but may come round. Drink 2015 – 2019.

Meerlust 2009

Red and black fruit, tobacco, freshly tilled earth as well as toasty oak on the nose. Big and powerful with luscious fruit, fresh acidity and smooth tannins. Appears very youthful and unresolved. Drink 2015 – 2019.

Nederburg II Centuries 2007

Dark fruit, vanilla and slight oxidative note on the nose. Rich and broad, appearing sweet and lacking a little freshness. Appears heavily extracted. Already quite mature. Drink now – 2014.

Neil Ellis 2009

Red and black berries on the nose. The palate is medium bodied with pure, juicy fruit, bright acidity and fine tannins. Already approachable, it should nevertheless become more complex with time in bottle. Drink now – 2017.

Rudera Platinum 2007

Ultra-ripe fruit as well as coffee and cola notes on the nose and the palate. Made in an oxidative style with prominent oak and soft acidity. Drink now.

Stark-Condé Three Pines 2008

Red and black fruit and attractive herbal note on the nose. The palate is medium bodied with fresh acidity and fine tannins. Layers of flavour and already quite accessible. Drink now – 2015.

THREE STARS

Boekenhoutskloof 2009

Red fruit, violets but also quite prominent oak-derived vanilla and coffee aromas. The palate is medium bodied with good fruit sweetness and vibrant acidity but the oak sits apart. A bit lightweight. Drink now – 2014.

Bon Courage Inkará 2010

Dark fruit, mocha and a slight meaty note on the nose. The palate is rich and full with ultra-ripe sweet fruit and soft tannins. Slight green edge on the finish. Made in an easy, modern style. Drink now – 2015.

Delheim 2009

Lifted red fruit and some fynbos on the nose. The palate shows juicy fruit and soft tannins and while appealing, ultimately comes across as rather simple and short. Drink now – 2014.

Grangehurst 2005

Reductive, earthy, vegetal notes on the nose. Leaner style with red fruit and a slight green edge. Fresh acidity and rather hard tannins. Drink now.

Hartenberg 2007

Red fruit, herbs and a slight reductive note on the nose. The palate appears rather plain with moderate acidity and somewhat coarse tannins. No longer entirely primary. Drink now.

Klein Constantia 2009

Ultra-ripe dark fruit, coffee and a hint of mint on the nose and palate. Appears sweet and a bit stewed with moderate acidity and soft tannins. Hot finish. Drink now – 2014.

MAN Vintners Tormentoso 2010

Ultra-ripe dark fruit as well as reductive note on the nose. Big and bold, sweet and soft. Drink now – 2014.

Nederburg Manor House 2009

Dark fruit, fresh herbs and slight reductive note on the nose. The palate is medium bodied with moderate acidity and not much tannic grip. No great distinction. Drink now – 2014.

Oldenburg Vineyards 2009

Closed on the nose. The palate is currently somewhat austere – the fruit is pure and concentrated, the acidity particularly fresh, the tannins firm and hard to the point of bitter. Needs time to open up. Drink 2015 – 2019.

Rudera 2009

Some fynbos perfume and vanilla on the nose. Also a hint of reduction. The palate currently reveals little although the tannins are soft and smooth. Drink 2014 – 2019.

Rust en Vrede 2009

Red and black fruit plus vanilla on the nose and palate. Appears sweet on entry but this is offset by fresh acidity and the tannins are soft and fine-grained. Drink now – 2017.

Spier Woolworths The Hutton 2009

Earthy note to otherwise shy nose. Very ripe fruit, bright acidity and sturdy tannins on the palate. Big and a bit rough-hewn. Drink now – 2014.

Thelema 2008

Red fruit and vanilla on the nose and palate. Medium bodied with moderate acidity and soft tannins. Very approachable. Drink now – 2015.

Thelema The Mint 2009

Red fruit, a hint of mint and vanilla on the nose. Medium bodied with fresh acidity and fine tannins. Green tinge again in evidence on the palate. Drink 2015 – 2019.

Zonnebloem Limited Release 2009

Red and black fruit, dusty oak and a hint of reduction on the nose. Sweet on entry but vibrant acidity lends balance. Appears big and smooth textured. Drink 2014 – 2019.

TWO AND A HALF STARS

Jordan 2009

Iodine, violets and slight green tinge to otherwise shy nose. Elegant to the point of slight, fresh acidity and fine tannins. No great distinction. Drink now – 2015.

Rickety Bridge The Bridge 2008

Lifted red fruit, cola and mint on the nose. The palate shows a raisined character with moderate acidity and soft tannins. Overdone. Drink now.

Spier Woolworths The Hutton 2008

Shy nose. Some dark fruit upfront and bright acidity but tannins astringent making for very dry, mouth-puckering finish. Drink now.

Vergelegen V 2007

Contains 6% Merlot and 2% Cabernet Franc. Very reductive on the nose. Big in structure but herbal edge detracts. Drink now – 2017.

Waterford 2008

Red and black fruit plus slightly jammy note. Appears sweet on entry and lacks both structure and length. Drink now.

TWO STARS

Delheim Grand Reserve 2007

Includes 5% Merlot. Jammy and sweet. Lacks freshness.