



THE
CHRISTIAN EEDES

CHARDONNAY REPORT

- 2012 -

presented by



Private Investments

INTRODUCTION

When Chardonnay is at its best, it's arguably the grape responsible for the greatest dry white wine in the world, whatever lovers of Riesling might like to think. It has a universal following, by far the best selling wine, white or red, in the United States for instance. And there is a well established frame of reference when it comes to discussion of style and quality, the traditional home of the variety being Burgundy in the northeast of France where it has been grown for centuries but benchmark examples occurring around the world especially from Australia and California, USA.

In South Africa, serious attempts at growing the grape date from the early 1980s and the variety has comprised a steady 8% of the national vineyard for the last while. All of the above makes the South African wine industry's efforts with it worthy of scrutiny.

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 consisted 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

First and foremost, it is gratifying for those of us who believe that terroir is not entirely bogus to see two vineyards that featured in the top 10 of the inaugural 2011 report repeat the feat this year. Hamilton Russell Vineyards 2009 was there last year and it's the 2011 this time around, as is the case with the 2009 and 2011 Tokara Reserve Collection Walker Bay. In addition, Sterhuis which had its 2009 vintage fall just outside the top 10 last year now sees its 2010 make the cut.

Out of this year's 10 most highly rated wines, five are from Stellenbosch, three are from Walker Bay and two are from Elgin. Just outside the top 10 is De Wetshof Bateleur 2009 from Robertson and Koelfontein

2010 from Ceres. The origin of the best performing wines in 2011 was equally diverse (three Walker Bay, two Elgin, two Paarl, two Stellenbosch and one multi-regional) so it really doesn't appear that any one district or ward has a stranglehold on top quality Chardonnay.

Making generalisations about the particular merits or demerits of a vintage is fraught with difficulty given how heterogeneous growing conditions are from one district to another in South Africa but reflecting on the findings of the first two reports, it does seem that 2009 was something special, the wines possessing fruit purity and freshness that 2010 and 2011 didn't provide. The wines of these latter two vintages typically seem to be really rich and sometimes a little cumbersome.

When winemakers have got their 2010 and 2011 wines right, the end-result is wines of power and complexity, perhaps not that easy to drink but worthy of contemplation. When they've got it wrong, all the old failings of Chardonnay re-appear: wines without enough fruit concentration to carry the amount of oak put on them; a lack of freshness, whether this is due to injudicious malolactic fermentation or not; and too much "funky" character – wines handled either too reductively or too oxidatively.

On a more positive note, it's pleasing to note a broad range of styles. Chardonnay, as we know, is extraordinarily malleable in the cellar and winemakers are clearly having a blast experimenting with different techniques. So you have: 1) light-bodied with lime fruit and high acidity, 2) fruit-driven with moderate acidity and oak pushed far back, 3) traditional – ripe citrus and oak (dubbed the "marmalade style" by the panel), 4) "Burgundian" – flinty, leesy and generally more savoury and 5) spontaneous ferment/oxidative – rich, broad and honeyed.

One of the purposes of this report is to have narrowed down what's out there without at all wishing to be prescriptive and you are now urged to try a variety of the more highly rated wines yourself towards selecting what best suits your palate.

THE TOP 10

FIVE STARS

Jordan Barrel Fermented 2011

Price: R109 (to be released 1 November).

Stellenbosch. A complete wine showing great fruit purity, bright acidity and well integrated oak. Floral perfume, citrus and attractive oak on the nose. The palate shows great flavour intensity (just enough leesy character) and the finish is long and savoury. Drink now – 2016.

Uva Mira Single Vineyard 2011

Price: R200

Stellenbosch. Toasty oak plus slight reductive note on the nose. Rich and full but balanced thanks to racy acidity. Very expressive with notes of naartjie and orange, honey as well as appealing secondary character. Great concentration – really succulent fruit – before a savoury finish. Drink now – 2016.

FOUR AND A HALF STARS

Almenkerk 2011

Price: R145

Elgin. Shy nose. Ultra-intense with driving acidity and well-judged oak. Notes of lemon and lime plus a hint of oatmeal. Purity and depth of fruit is what impresses here – a wine with a real sense of place. Drink now – 2016.

Hamilton Russell Vineyards 2011

Price: R290

Walker Bay. Hugely complexity on the nose and palate. White and yellow fruit, some burnt matchstick, some earthiness, the list goes on. Rich and powerful, smooth textured, tangy acidity. Drink now - 2016

Hartenberg 2010

Price: R78

Stellenbosch. A forceful wine which manages to retain balance and finesse. Plenty of ripe fruit, attractive oak and tangy acidity. The texture is creamy, the finish long and dry. Has real presence. Drink now – 2015.

KWV The Mentors 2011

Price: R111

Elgin. Citrus blossom, lime and hint of vanilla on the nose. Leaner style but lovely fruit purity and freshness even so. Good complexity including an attractive leesy note. Long, dry finish. Drink now – 2016.

Radford Dale 2011

Not yet released.

Stellenbosch. Rich and full yet complex and subtle. Great flavour intensity, attractive oak, tangy acidity. Notes of lemon, orange and tropical fruit. Also honey and some exotic leesy character. Drink now – 2016.

Sterhuis Barrel Selection 2010

Price: R105

Stellenbosch. Citrus and peach, spice and some burnt matchstick. Also some oak-derived vanilla and slight nuttiness. Rich and broad with good flavour intensity and bright acidity. Fruit purity impresses. Drink now – 2015.

Sumaridge 2010

Price: R150

Walker Bay. Vanilla and a hint of burnt matchstick on the nose. Complex palate showing pear, citrus and some almond. Pure and focused with great intensity and bright acidity. Drink now – 2015.

Tokara Reserve Collection Walker Bay 2011

Price: R121

Walker Bay. Hint of reduction on the nose. Good fruit concentration, tangy acidity, well integrated oak. Rather exotic flavour profile with notes of ripe citrus, apricot and pineapple. Full with a silky mid-palate. Drink now – 2016.

ALSO FOUR AND A HALF STARS

De Wetshof Bateleur 2009

Classically styled with notes of white fruit, smoke and almonds on the nose. Relatively medium bodied with good fruit expression plus an attractive leesy quality. Understated with a long, pithy finish. Drink now – 2014.

Koelfontein 2010

Pronounced honey, nutty notes on the nose. Rich and broad with soft acidity and well-judged oak. Intensely flavoured with juicy fruit but also some intriguing oxidative character. Drink now – 2013.

FOUR STARS

Bartinney 2010

Citrus, peach and toffee apple on the nose. Rich and full but balanced. Ripe, sweet fruit offset by bright acidity. Some quirky developed notes lend interest. Drink now – 2013.

Boschendal Reserve Collection 2011

Lunchbox orange, spice and some yeasty character. Rich and full, sweet and round. Some oxidative character, moderate acidity – unusual but has interest. Drink now – 2014.

Callender Peak Mountain Vineyards 2011

Lunchbox orange and peach on the nose. Rich and broad with a slight oxidative quality about it. Apparently sweet and thick textured but tangy acidity lends balance. Drink now – 2014.

Crystallum Clay Shales 2011

Peach, slight yeasty note plus toasty oak. Rich and thick textured with balance provided by tangy acidity. Unusual but rewarding. Drink now – 2014.

Delaire Graff 2011

A more restrained style with pure lem-lime fruit, well-judged oak and moderate acidity. Very well made but perhaps lacking excitement. Drink now – 2014.

Edgebaston - Finlayson Family Wines 2011

The nose shows a floral note, citrus and peach as well as a hint of oak. Great fruit expression despite being relatively medium bodied. Oaking is well handled, acidity appears gentle and soft. Drink now – 2014.

Eikendal 2011

Pronounced vanilla note on the nose. Good fruit concentration and creamy texture while soft but sufficient acidity lends balance. Very well put together. Drink now – 2014.

Glen Carlou 2011

Notes of honey, nuts and caramel on the nose. Big but balanced with ripe fruit, well integrated oak and moderate acidity before a pleasantly savoury finish. Very well made but perhaps a little generic. Drink now – 2014.

Hartenberg The Eleanor 2009

Ripe citrus plus a yeasty note on the nose. Rich and full with a creamy texture and tangy acidity. Drink now – 2014.

Iona 2011

Notes of blossom, yellow fruit, honey and almond on the nose. Rich and full with pure fruit, relatively thick texture and fresh acidity. Good complexity and a long finish. Drink now – 2016.

Jordan Nine Yards 2011

Very expressive with notes of ripe fruit, toasty oak, honey and nuts on the nose and palate. Rich and full with relatively soft acidity. Powerful and complex, a blockbuster in the best sense. Drink now – 2016.

Julien Schaal Mountain Vineyards 2011

Subtle but complex nose with notes of citrus and vanilla plus some reduction. Slightly sweet on entry but there's a good core of fruit, moderate acidity and clever use of oak. Currently a little unresolved but promises much. Drink 2013 – 2015.

KWV Cathedral Cellar 2011

Made in a modern style with plenty of forward fruit, prominent oak and relatively soft acidity. A luxurious wine with layers of flavour. Drink now – 2014.

Lourensford Winemaker's Selection 2011

Slight citrus note on otherwise shy nose. The palate shows good fruit concentration and some yeasty character. The oak is carefully judged and there's fresh acidity – rather closed at the moment and should reward maturation. Drink 2013 – 2016.

Paul Cluver 2011

Somewhat old-fashioned with notes of ripe citrus, toasty oak and honey on the nose and palate. Rich and full with tangy acidity. Delicious but lacking the refinement of previous vintages. Drink now – 2016.

Rupert & Rothschild Baroness Nadine 2010

Yeasty note plus slight oaky note on the nose. Classically styled with lemon flavour and zesty acidity. Drink now – 2013.

Rustenberg Five Soldiers 2010

Hint of toasty oak on otherwise shy nose. The palate is focused and tight with pears, lime and lemon, bright acidity and well assimilated oak. The finish is long and dry. Drink now – 2015.

Tokara Reserve Collection Stellenbosch 2011

Hint of reduction on the nose. Huge concentration with lem-lime and oatmeal flavours. Thick textured, oak well judged, tangy acidity. Powerful but balanced. Drink now – 2016.

Van Loveren Christina van Loveren Limited Release 2011

Attractive floral note the nose. The palate is light bodied, clean and fresh. Mainly lime but also some yellow fruit flavours. Modern but very appealing. Drink now – 2014.

Vins d'Orrance Cuvee Anais 2011

Lunchbox orange and prominent vanilla note on the nose. Rich and full but vibrant acidity lends balance. Good complexity with some appealing secondary character. Drink now – 2014.

Vondeling 2010

Subtle vanilla note on the nose while the palate shows succulent fruit, thick texture and soft acidity. Rich and round. Drink now – 2013.

THREE AND A HALF STARS

Ataraxia 2010

Slight reduced note on the nose. Currently closed and quite demanding with slight leesy note to go with citrus fruit. The acidity is very fresh to the point of aggressive. Drink 2013 – 2015.

Bouchard Finlayson Kaaimansgat Limited Edition 2010

Full and intensely if somewhat unusually flavoured – notes of ripe citrus and peach, oak-derived vanilla and spice as well as some leesy character. Drink now – 2013.

Bouchard Finlayson Missionvale 2010

Ripe citrus and peach, vanilla and some yeasty notes on the nose and palate. Good palate weight, relatively thick textured, moderate acidity. Very well assembled but arguably lacks real distinction. Drink now – 2013.

Cape Point Vineyards 2011

Citrus blossom, lemon and attractive oak on the nose. The palate shows pure fruit and gentle acidity. Pretty and poised but lacking some intensity, length. Drink now – 2014.

Chamonix Reserve 2011

Floral note, white fruit and spice on the nose. The palate is medium bodied with plenty of clean fruit and fresh acidity but the oak currently sits apart. Drink 2013 – 2016.

Crystallum The Agnes 2010

Ultra-ripe fruit and slight oxidative note on the nose and palate. Rich and full with relatively soft acidity. Drink now – 2013.

De Wetshof The Site 2010

Citrus blossom and a hint of oak on the nose. Made in a light, pretty style, this wine shows lovely fruit sweetness and gentle acidity. Drink now – 2013.

Fleur du Cap Unfiltered 2011

Pear and white peach, toasty oak and a waxy note on the nose. Rich and dense with an apparent sweetness. Lacks a little finesse. Drink now – 2014.

Glen Carlou Quartz Stone Single Vineyard 2010

Made in a big, bold style, this shows intense citrus, honey, nuts and some yeasty character. Sweet-fruited but bright acidity lends balance. Some concern about how mature this wine already appears. Drink now.

GlenWood Vigneron's Selection 2011

Prominent vanilla note on the nose and palate. Rich and ripe with sweet, juicy fruit and soft acidity. Some interesting oxidative elements before a slightly warm finish. Drink now.

Groote Post Reserve 2011

Sauvignon Blanc-like on the nose. More medium bodied with flavours of lime and grapefruit plus some leesy character and attractive oak. Acidity is particularly fresh. Drink now – 2014.

Laborie Limited Collection 2010

Modern in style with concentrated citrus fruit and lots of oak character. Creamy texture, bright acidity, pithy finish. Drink now.

Mulderbosch Barrel Fermented 2010

Complex nose showing citrus, burnt matchstick and some leesy character. Extravagant style with massive fruit concentration and lots of oak but bright acidity lends balance and there's a long, saline finish. Drink now – 2015.

Newton Johnson Family Vineyards 2011

Citrus and peach plus vanilla on the nose and palate. Well rounded with moderated acidity. Appealing but no great intensity or complexity. Drink now – 2014.

Oak Valley 2011

Curious in that the wine shows both pure primary fruit as well as notable oxidative notes. Notes of lime, green and yellow apple as well as some yeasty character while acidity can only be described as bracing. Drink now – 2014.

Springfield Méthode Ancienne 2009

Complex nose showing orange and peach, honey and some nuttiness. Rich, dense and thick textured. Unusual but compelling. Drink now – 2014.

Sutherland 2010

Shy nose. Leaner style with lime flavour and bright acidity. Slight lactic quality noted. Drink now – 2013.

Thelema 2011

Toasty oak on the nose and palate. Medium bodied with good freshness and some leesy complexity. Drink now – 2014.

Vergelegen Reserve 2011

Lime and lemon, slight vanilla note and spice on the nose and palate. Juicy fruit and bright acidity but also some leesy character. Straightforward overall. Drink now – 2014.

Vriesenhof 2011

Old school with citrus and apple accompanied by a pronounced yeasty character. Quite rich with moderate acidity. Has a noble rusticity about it. Drink now – 2014.

THREE STARS

Bouchard Finlayson Overberg Crocodile's Lair Kaaimansgat 2011

Very primary with notes of citrus and apple, some vanilla on the nose and palate. Clean and pure fruited with well-judged oak and moderate acidity. Drink 2013 – 2016.

Groot Constantia Gouverneurs 2010

Citrus, some yeasty character and toasty oak on the nose and palate. Concentrated fruit but acidity rather too soft, oak too much in evidence. Drink now – 2013.

Haskell Anvil 2011

Made in an ultra-modern style with plenty of forward fruit and loads of oak. Hard work at this stage. Drink 2013 – 2014.

Mulderbosch 2011

Vanilla note on otherwise shy nose. Sweetness on entry and relatively soft acidity makes it instantly approachable but no great complexity. Drink now – 2014.

Simonsig Aurum 2010

Toasty oak and some nutty character on the nose. The palate is rich and thick textured with some bruised apple flavour but lacks freshness, oak dominated overall. Drink now.

Waterford Single Vineyard 2011

Somewhat idiosyncratic with noticeable Muscat-like note on the nose as well as f citrus, peach and spice. Rich and broad with layers of flavour and moderate acidity. An acquired taste. Drink now – 2016.

TWO AND A HALF STARS

Meerlust 2010

Pronounced reductive note on the nose. Peculiar palate –sweet upfront but finishes almost bitter. Has intensity but appears overworked. Drink now.