

AN INTRODUCTION TO SOUTH AFRICA

OVER-VIEW

- With just 1% of the world's vineyards, South Africa is 20th in terms of plantings but is 8th overall in the world in terms of production.
- Approximately 225,00 acres of vines are in South Africa.
- The four major areas of grape growing are in Paarl (17,491 acres), Stellenbosch (15,674 acres and THE red wine area), Robertson (11,838 acres the big white wine and dessert wine region) and Swartland (13,380 acres north of Cape Town producing booming reds).
- Paarl is on 33.4° Latitude, about the same as Spain.
- Consumption has dropped 21% between 1970 and 1990 to about 9 litres per capita. Beer consumption, in comparison, sits at 130 litres per capita and is in the top 5 markets in the world.

MAJOR GRAPE VARIETIES

- In a major impediment to wine sales, almost ¾ of South Africa's vines produce white grape varieties.
- The major white grapes are Chenin Blanc (25.6%), Columbard (11.1%), Chardonnay (5.7%), Sauvignon Blanc (4.9%) and Semillon (1%)
- The major red grape varieties are Merlot (21.6%) Cabernet Sauvignon (5.6%), Pinotage (4.7%), Cinsault (3.9%) and Shiraz (2%)

HISTORY

- Jan van Riebeeck was the Cape's first European settler. This 33 year old Dutch surgeon was intent on developing a cure for scurvy which was problematic for the sailing crews going to and from the Dutch East Indies. Riebeeck was no viticulturist, but on April 6th, 1652 he recorded, "Today, praise be to God, wine was pressed for the first time from Cape grapes."
 - By 1685, one of the most famous wines in the world was established; Groot Constantia. In 1688, 200 French Huegenot refugees fleeing religious persecution, came to the Cape and brought their winemaking expertise.
 - Phylloxera struck in 1886 and it took almost 20 years for the industry to recover. They replanted with the prolific Cinsault grape and as vineyards came on stream, the flow became a deluge to the point where the industry collapsed.
 - This brought the formation of KWV, the Cape Wine Growers Co-operative, in 1918. KWV was legally empowered to restrict product and set minimum prices resulting in a stabilization of the industry.
 - The boycott of South African products in the 1980s brought about a stagnation of the industry. As other regions around the world took advantage of advance technology and winemaker exchanges to substantially increase the quality of their wines, South Africa remained mired in the winemaking of the 70s. The world passed them by.
 - With the end to the Boycott in 1991, South Africa re-entered the world of wine. Although enthusiastically received, especially in Canada, the wines were not up to world standards.
 - Over the last ten years, the whole industry has significantly improved in all areas of grape growing and winemaking. The proof is in the awards and accolades recently being given to the South African wineries, but this has not translated into sales.
 - Continuing economic and political concerns have also hurt the industry over-all. There is great upheaval in the industry as wineries try to adapt to the new realities of the industry.
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PINOTAGE

- South Africa's most famous grape is not necessarily its best grape.
- A cross of Cinsault (called "Hermitage") and Pinot Noir, this grape was developed in 1925 by Professor Perold. Although it won the trophy in 1959 as Best Cape Red Wine, it wasn't until 1961 that the name finally appeared on a bottle of 1959 Lanzerac.
- The industry has pinned much of its hopes on the uniqueness of Pinotage following the success of Zinfandel in California and Malbec in Argentina.
- Pinotage is quite distinct for its paint-like pungency (from isoamyl acetate) which makes it easily identifiable and very much a "love it or hate it" wine.
- Pinotage is a good producer; the fruit is darkly coloured, it ripens by mid-season, and it has good acidity. It can bear anywhere from 4.8 to 7.2 tons per acre making it a substantial bearer.
- The 1990s saw the reduction of viruses, the use of new clones and attention to the most advanced winemaking techniques bringing the quality of South African Pinotage substantially higher. While it may not be the best Cape wine, it is certainly giving other grapes a run for their money.

THE VALUE OF SOUTH AFRICA

- As South Africa has improved the quality of its wines with the latest clones, technology and winemaking techniques, demand has not risen. The public's perception is still "I tried it about five or six years ago and it wasn't very good". The quality has changes significantly in that time, yet people are still reluctant to go back and try them again.
 - With the price of the U.S. dollar putting California wines out of most people's reach and the increasing demand for Australian and Chilean wines raising prices for those wines, South Africa has quietly become one of the best wine values on the market today.
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