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Special Report: South African Chenin Blanc

Introduction



While Chenin Blanc originated in the Anjou area of the Loire, today it can be said to be South Africa's grape with 350 years of history and double the plantings of France. It arrived at the Cape with the Dutch East India

Company in the 1650's and quickly established itself as South Africa's most important variety, producing both table wines and its highly popular brandy.

At the invitation of South Africa's Chenin Blanc Wine Association (CBA), we recently conducted a new tasting of Chenin Blanc wines released since our **Report # 30: The Wines of South Africa**. We tasted wines from every region of the Western Cape, including dry and sweet, oaked and unwooded styles. As well as the variety of styles, these wines demonstrate the high level of quality South African producers have achieved with this variety. Our reviews and ratings of over 50 wines from some 40 different producers are given in the Tasting Notes section of this report.

South Africa produces more Chenin Blanc than any other country. Chenin Blanc is also the most widely planted (18.5 thousand hectares) variety in South Africa, where, known as steen, it has long been the workhorse of the industry. Beginning in the latter part of the 20th century, after Professor Orffer of Stellenbosch University definitively identified steen as Chenin Blanc, producers began a long term effort to improve quality. Today, high quality Chenin Blanc is grown in every region of the Western Cape wine region, often from old, low-yielding bush vines.

The high quality of South African Chenin Blanc is revealed in the results of our tastings. We found 28 Chenin Blanc wines scored 90 and above with several receiving a rating

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of 92 points and higher. Chenin Blanc truly is South Africa's white wine grape, and the quality of the wine has improved immensely from the tankloads of steen produced just a few decades ago.

Chenin Blanc is very versatile and pairs well with a wide variety of foods, from delicate fish and seafood to pork and other white meats, domestic and wild fowl, many vegetable dishes, and a wide variety of cheeses. Chenin Blanc in its variety styles can also be an excellent alternative to other white wines such as Sauvignon Blanc and Viognier.

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