



Wines For The Weekend

Great South African Blends

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California winemakers tend to take things one grape at a time: cabernet sauvignon; syrah; chardonnay. Australia, too, plus a few semillon-chardonnays and cabernet-shiraz wines. Simplicity sells.

But South Africa? Two grapes in one bottle? That's just getting started. How about a cabernet-syrah-merlot-pinotage? Or for a white, a chenin blanc-brenache blanc-viognier-chardonnay?

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South Africa is, properly speaking, part of the New World, but it has an unseemly predilection for blending that evokes Old World winemaking--think of France's Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape, where some wines have 13 different grape varieties contributing to a single wine. I say unseemly, because it can make the wines hard to sell. We're programmed to order by varietal, so if one dominant grape doesn't show up on the label, our minds file the wine under "troublesome." European wines go under regional monikers instead, but they've got history working for them (though, even there, many lesser-known regions would be glad to stick the grape name on the label if local law didn't prohibit it).

It would be one thing if South African blends were confined to the budget bin; many places have wineries that throw a random mix of "leftovers" into a bottle. That happens in South Africa as well but, on the other hand, many of their blends are among the country's most critically acclaimed, in-demand wines. Blending, after all, is a great way to get lots of complex flavors and textures into the bottle.

Now, it's true that many of these wines have fairly conventional grape combinations. Bordeaux-style blends (we might call them Meritage) of cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc and so forth, are old hat in Stellenbosch; and Rhône-like blends of syrah, grenache and mourvedre, or syrah and viognier--one of the few red-white blends--are becoming increasingly popular in Paarl and Swartland.

But there are some quirky local combos as well. Pinotage and ... well, anything, can call itself a Cape Blend. For example, the cab-syrah-merlot-pinotage wine mentioned earlier? That's the [Warwick Three Cape Ladies](#) (\$22). (Syrah only made its way into the wine in the recent 2004 and 2005 vintages; the winery's managing director Mike Ratcliffe is not one to mess with brand recognition for the sake of one grape--that's what back labels are for.)

The white-wine grape chenin blanc is used in many styles in South Africa, but its new identity as a blending grape owes its fame to winemaker Eben Sadie, whose [Palladius](#) (\$50) takes chenin's acidity as its backbone, with chardonnay, viognier, clairette blanc and grenache blanc adding weight, roundness and spicy, nutty aromas. Several other wineries are putting their own stamp on this combination.

So where do these guys get off, asking sommeliers to memorize their blends and shoppers to read their back labels? Well, they may be New World, but they've been growing wine grapes for 350 years, so their wine industry is actually older than many of the famous chateaus of France. Maybe blending is something that comes with age and experience.

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Jim Clarke is the wine director at [Megu](#), a Japanese restaurant in Lower Manhattan. In addition, he writes about wine and beer regularly for a number of trade and consumer publications and occasionally serves as a wine judge and panelist for various events.

Jim Clarke's Picks: South African Blends

These are among the country's most critically acclaimed, in-demand wines.

Prices will vary by retailer and the state of purchase.

Fundi 2007

Red: Cabernet sauvignon, syrah and merlot

This blend is full and broad, with rich tannins; aromas of smoke and blackberry dominate the nose, with notes of dark chocolate and loganberry coming through on the palate.

Fundi is a one-time project, a selection of wines donated to a training program for 2010 and the FIFA World Cup, being held in South Africa. The profits go to train 2010 new wine stewards, focusing especially on previously disadvantaged minorities. Instead of spending their money on the one-time benefits of advertising, the South African wine industry has wisely decided to make a permanent--and needed--improvement in how South African wines are served and sold domestically.

Sadie Family Palladius 2007 (\$50)

White: Chenin blanc, viognier, chardonnay, clairette blanc and grenache blanc

Full and powerful, with lots of apricot, melon and lemon. It's not all fruit though; substantial mineral and honey notes come through too. This wine found a whole new place for chenin blanc in South Africa.

Vilafonte 'Series C' 2004 (\$60)

Red: Cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc and malbec

Full and firm, with cassis, blackberry, smoke and dark chocolate aromas.

Tulbagh Mountain Vineyards White 2007 (\$26)

White: Chenin blanc, viognier and clairette blanc

From Tulbagh, a small, up-and-coming region, this is full-bodied, clean, and long. Apricot, pear and floral touches come through, as well as a bit of tangerine and minerality on the palate.

Anura 'Maestro' 2004 (\$28)

Red: Syrah, mourvedre and Grenache

Dark fruit--boysenberry, black plum--plus notes of cocoa, roast coffee, pipe tobacco and a little meatiness. Moderately tannic, with a medium body and good length.

Warwick 'Three Cape Ladies' 2005 (\$22)

Red: Cabernet sauvignon, pinotage, syrah and merlot

Full-bodied, with lots of dark fruit: blueberry, blackberry and plum. There are touches of smoke and dark chocolate as well.

The Chocolate Block 2007 (\$30)

Red: Syrah, grenache, cabernet sauvignon, cinsault and viognier

Definitely chocolatey, as the name suggests, but there's also plenty of licorice, blueberry, black plum and pepper touches. Full-bodied and round, but firm, with moderate tannins.

Spice Route 'Chakalaka' 2007 (\$17)

Red: Shiraz, grenache, mourvedre and carignan

Shows lots of rich, dark fruit, with a bit of smoke and roast espresso. Full and smooth, with sweet tannins.

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