

Grapes of good hope
South African wine freed from apartheid's shackles

Doug Frost, Special to The Chronicle
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Cape Town, South Africa -- In the 11 years since the first free post-apartheid elections in South Africa finally ended the country's pariah status, another revolution has begun -- in winemaking.

South African wine emerged from the isolation of apartheid in a misshaped and forgotten form. The white wines were nondescript and clean at best; the reds were often bitter and flawed, smelling more of leather than of wine.

But now modernity has come to South African wine, and it's time for consumers to get acquainted with the country's viticultural strengths.

Modern images of Africa are of a bleached, arid landscape, war-weary and too tired to try for anything but mere survival. In fact, South Africa, despite its economic challenges, can be an oasis. The colors of the 9,600 individual species of flora that carpet the winelands are a riotous rainbow.

The smells from these flowers are enough to turn any wine taster's head away from the glass and out the window. It's an aromatic cacophony more raucous than the music spilling out of a township shebeen, or drinking house.

The character of the wines is less dramatic. While many wine drinkers conflate South African wine styles with Australian wine, nothing could be further from the mark. Some of Australia's best-known areas, such as the Barossa Valley, are as hot as California's Central Valley, and the wines can be blowsy and jammy.

South African vineyards are mostly clustered along the coastal areas of the Western Cape, and many are cooler than Carneros. Wines here are typically understated, as tends to be true of cooler vineyard areas such as Champagne or the Loire Valley in France.

Some of the interesting flavors in past South African red wines were the result of sloppy work in the winery, rather than ideal viticulture and savvy winemaking. Saddle leather and Band-Aid aromas are not hallmarks of terroir (the combination of climate and soil that gives wine a sense of place) as some wineries once claimed; modern winemakers know those aromas come from spoilage organisms.

Until recently, some South African winemakers thought those aromas were a natural part of their wines. Fortunately, that attitude is changing.

Mimicking New Zealand

South African wine's first newfound success is Sauvignon Blanc. There is no question that the producers here have studied New Zealand's claim on the grape and are attempting to mimic it.

Many South African Sauvignon Blancs are crisp and herbal, in the mold of New Zealand's finest. Most of the Sauvignon Blancs that have made it into the American market come from Stellenbosch, about 25 miles east of Cape Town, and a few come from Paarl, about 35 miles northeast of Cape Town. Almost all of them are good, even if some take the herbal thing too far. Green pepper is appropriate on a plate, but not very appetizing in a wine glass.

Worse yet, some of the flavors have come from the lab and not from the fruit. KWV, the national co-op, has admitted to adding herbal flavoring agents to its Sauvignon Blancs, and the offending winemakers have been fired.

But the admission has led to rumors that some others are still doing it, and those rumors aren't limited to South Africa -- Australia has its accusers as well.

Newer, cooler regions such as Elim, near Africa's windy southern tip; Elgin in the Hottentots Holland mountains; Walker Bay on the Atlantic Ocean; Mossel Bay on the Indian Ocean; Darling 40 miles north of Cape Town; and much of mountainous Swartland are producing Sauvignon Blancs that taste and smell different from those in New Zealand.

Many of these wines are delicate, with complex aromas and just as many thirst-quenching abilities as New Zealand's best. The style that is South African Sauvignon Blanc is still debatable, but if the Sauvignon Blancs from these cool regions are any indication, New Zealand has honest competition from Africa.

The Chardonnays here have been far more mixed. For the last 10 years, most have exhibited gooey aromas from overuse of malolactic fermentation and new barrels. Plenty of those are still around. Regions such as the warm Robertson valley have made Chardonnays with all the subtlety of an Aussie butter bomb or a Napa double-oaked Chardonnay.

Yet a survey of the wines in barrels and soon-to-be-released products shows wines of more complexity. The Robertson region is blessed with limestone soils, and Chardonnay grown in those soils can age far longer than expected. Indeed, the remarkable character of France's white Burgundies may be more dependent upon the limestone soils than any other single factor.

So while Robertson is still finding its way, a handful of producers such as Graham Beck, Robertson Winery, Van Loveren, Excelsior Estate and especially De Wetshof Estate are making wines that have the rich drama of other New World Chardonnays, but finish with amazing crispness.

The critical regions of Paarl and Stellenbosch have hitched their stars to red wines. Over the last 20 years, Cabernet Sauvignon plantings have tripled and today 15 percent of all plantings in South Africa are Cabernet. In 2003, Cabernet Sauvignon accounted for more than 40 percent of all new red-wine vines planted. There seems to be an ongoing infatuation with Merlot as well, and today 7 percent of all South African vineyards are given to Merlot.

The Merlots of South Africa are very unlike those of California in most aspects. The warmest vineyards, even those of Stellenbosch, which accounts for 17 percent of South Africa's wine, are cool by California standards. Much like Monterey Cabernet of the 1980s, the wines can show herbaceous, vegetal notes. There are some pretty blends with Merlot but work remains before Merlot can be successful on the world market.

Many South African Cabernets carry this herbal component as well. For both varieties, recent improvements have occurred in the vineyards, and the wines are riper and taste less leafy as a result. Some are optimistic, though I find that optimism a bit naive.

Shiraz is a more forgiving variety. Its meteoric rise in the world's vineyards is not due to some passing fancy (OK, that's part of it). It has the virtue of showing character in both cool and warm climates, and being flavorful, whether expensive or cheap.

South Africa is awash in new Shiraz plantings. Virtually every region has worthy versions, and some of the best wines in the country are composed of, or with, Shiraz. Shiraz was the No. 1 variety planted in 1999 and 2000; today, it covers 9 percent of the vineyards, but that could double soon. It's growing at the expense of white wines; more than 7,000 acres of white wine vineyards were uprooted in 2003 alone.

The Simonsberg hillside near Stellenbosch is producing first-rate red wine, not the least of which is great Shiraz. Delheim and Kanonkop Wine Estate, among others, have some exciting wine in their cellars. Rustenberg, known for its Bordeaux varieties, makes excellent Shiraz.

The pearl that gives Paarl its name is a round granitic outcrop above the great Shiraz vineyards owned by Charles Back. Back's product line, with labels such as Spice Route, Fairview, Goats do Roam and Goat Roti, is vast.

"Looking at my range of wines," he admits, "I'm confused."

The workhorse grape

Then there is Pinotage, South Africa's little grape that so often can't.

Created in 1926 from a crossing of Pinot Noir and Cinsault (a ubiquitous and often dull grape in southern France), Pinotage was intended to be South Africa's unique, workhorse grape. Instead, it was ignored for years and even in the 1950s and '60s, when it became more widely planted, it had more detractors than suitors. Even today, many prominent South Africans have nothing kind to say. The classic descriptors of rusty nails and rubber boots should explain it all.

The gentlemen of the Pinotage Association look to change Pinotage's fusty image. Porterville Cellars and Koelenhof Wine Cellar offer delicious Pinotage rosés. Graham Beck has a style it refers to as "easy-drinking"; the winery's Pinno 2004 is a fun, fresh-fruit and barrel-free version of Pinotage.

Pinotage has traditionally been an integral part of the popular wine style called a "Cape Blend." These days no one knows exactly what a Cape Blend should be. Some argue that it must have at least a significant amount of Pinotage; others say any little amount will do.

California's Zelma Long, along with her vineyard consultant and husband Phil Freese, owns property here and is making wine under the label Vilafonte, and is influencing many Cape winemakers. The second female graduate of UC Davis' Enology program, Long was chief enologist at Robert Mondavi Winery in the 1970s and later moved on to become first winemaker and then Chief Executive Officer of Simi Winery.

Long, who still has a home in Healdsburg, believes that instead of locking in a required percentage of particular grape varieties, as is done in much of Europe, the market ought to settle the question in South Africa.

Mike Ratcliffe, director of Warwick Estate, says, "The industry has decided they should encourage the winemakers and not limit them."

Some of the nicest reds South Africa offers are Cape Blends. Norma Ratcliffe, the winemaker at Warwick, makes Three Cape Ladies. The ladies in question are Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Pinotage. The wine is noble, complex and layered and Pinotage's rusticity is polished and shined.

With all these vinous options there is a remarkable diversity hiding beneath South Africa's wild carpet of flowers. The possibilities, it would seem, are endless.

Today, if you buy a South African white, you are likely to get a crisp, clean, perhaps slightly simple wine. If you buy a red, you may purchase something that is pleasant, soft and a little too earthy. Most South African reds lack the buoyant and vivacious fruit most New World drinkers have come to love and expect.

South Africa can do that and soon will. The bad news is that wine lovers expecting South Africa to compete with Australia are on the wrong continent. But in a short 11 years, South Africa has accomplished a world-changing political revolution. The country's vintners deserve a few more years before we pass judgment on their wines' potential.