

Cape expectations

After being compared to the Médoc, the Simonsberg has much to live up to. CHRIS LOSH talks to some of the top producers and presents his pick of the best wines to come out of this promising region, while TOM CANNAPAN meets the dynamic duo behind the Vilafonté project

Equating an up-and-coming star wine region to an established classic appellation is a bit like dubbing a young cricketer 'the new Ian Botham'. It sets an impossibly high benchmark with crippling pressure and tends to leave everyone rather disappointed by the time the spit-buckets are emptied. So I was fearful for the Simonsberg, a ward (sub-region) of Stellenbosch, which has acquired the moniker of 'The Médoc of the Cape'. Not least because, at first glance, they could hardly be more different.

Where the Médoc is a grey, flat splotch that spends six months of the year veiled in salty Atlantic murk, the Simonsberg is arguably one of the most wine-growing areas on the planet. Climb even a couple of hundred metres up its steep slopes and you are rewarded with a breathtaking view out over the vineyards of Stellenbosch towards False Bay to the south and Cape Town further west. You couldn't climb 50m on the Médoc if you tried, and the views, apart from the odd imperious-looking château... well, let's just move on, shall we?

The comparison, of course, is nothing to do with picture-postcard beauty, but everything to do with the wines, which have the reputation of being elegant, structured and long-lived – and not just by South African standards. Top wines in a good vintage will happily last 20 years or more.

'The comparison with the Médoc is defined less by flavour than by weight,' says Mike Ratcliffe at Warwick Estate – certainly, the reds show a fruit character that is more powerful and restrained than most South African wines. The tannins, while some way short of the gum-stripping qualities of *en primeur* Pauillacs, are usually more noticeable than in your average New World red. Fruit bombs they are not.

'There's good fruit in Simonsberg wines, but it's not that sweet, over-ripe fruit, and the tannins are broad and quite dry,' says Adi Badenhorst, winemaker at Rustenberg. 'This stuff ages really well. What we haven't got yet is the ageing consistency of the great Bordeaux – there's a lot of bottle variation as the wines get older.'

Nonetheless, Badenhorst, who worked the 1998 vintage at Angelus in Saint-Emilion, and is a self-confessed Bordeaux nut, sees hope for the future. He recently had a 1957 Rustenberg which he describes as 'fantastic'. 'I love to make wines that can age because I love drinking old Bordeaux,' he says. 'Wine should be refreshing.'

Wine has been grown on the Simonsberg since the 17th century, but arguably its most important time was in 1980, when it became the South African wine industry's first designated ward. Wards, unlike districts (such as Paarl and Stellenbosch), were delineated more strenuously

by agricultural specifics, such as soil, microclimate and landscape, rather than larger geographical features, for example, mountains and rivers. In the case of Simonsberg-Stellenbosch, the key to its demarcation was one particular soil type: a rust-coloured terra rossa that looks not unlike that found in Coonawarra. In the Simonsberg, though, there's no lime just below the surface. The soil is 100% deep, decomposed granite, and these soils are some of the oldest anywhere on the planet. At 500 million years of age, they are twice the age of those in France and too old even for fossils.

The series of vertically rising lumps which dot the Cape are made up of three layers. The top layer is sandstone – bare, solid and inaccessible to all but rock climbers and lichen. The middle layer is the reddish decomposed granite, found from about halfway down the mountain to the lower edges, where Malmesbury shale takes over.

'There are some well-known farms that had their vineyards on the shale and we didn't let them in when we set up the boundaries,' says Dawid Saayman, soil specialist in the region. 'They were very cross with us.'

Deep and dense, the granitic soil is usually broken up before planting to encourage the vines to deep-root. And while it drains extremely well, it also retains sufficient moisture to make



The pick of the Simonsberg crop

95 Peter Barlow Rustenberg Estate 1999

Consistently one of South Africa's best reds, this picked up five stars in the *John Platter Guide*, and with good reason. This is a seamlessly powerful red wine with immaculate balance and harmony. Drinking well now, but has plenty of structure to age further. Drink 2005-2015
£24.99 @ GGR, HDS, LEA, NYW, RSW

94 Rustenberg Chardonnay 2003

The team at Seckfords call this their 'baby Puligny-Montrachet' and it's not the hubris it seems. The 20-year-old vines give fabulous ripe pear fruit and cinnamon spice, with a creamy mid-palate and a definite minerality. Like good Burgundy from a warm year at a steal of the price. Drink 2005-2012

£9.99 @ CER, DBY, SCK, SSU, SWB

94 Warwick Trilogie 2001

Top-quality blend of Cabernet, Merlot and Cabernet Franc – one of the Simonsberg's most Bordeaux-like wines. Elegant, with sweet, mid-weight plum fruit, cedary top-notes and a herbaceous lift from the Cabernet Franc. Fresh, effortless and built to last. Drink 2006-2015
£13.99 @ HFW, F&M, SFA, WSO



92 Morgenhof Estate Première Selection 2000

Powerful wine, with rich, plump black fruit flavours topped with wood spice and underscored by broad, dry tannins. Succulent and luscious with plenty more years of life left in it yet. Drink 2005-2012
£13.95 @ HAR, HFW, SFA

90 Kanonkop Pinotage 2002

From probably the best-known Pinotage estate in South Africa, this is a spicy, voluptuous and fruited example. Blackberries, raspberries, mace, nutmeg and licorice combine in a heady swirl. Tannins are still a little dry at the moment, but built for mid-term ageing. Drink 2007-2012
£14.99 @ MWW

89 Brampton Shiraz/Viognier Rustenberg 2003

Not 100% from the Simonsberg, but such good value thought I would recommend it anyway. Fabulous pure, fresh, summer berry fruits with a grind of the pepper mill. More Rhône than Australia, and at a good price. Drink 2005-2008
£8.99 @ HGT, MFS, SSU



88 Zondernaam Chardonnay 2002

Second label of the famously fussy Tokara winery. A terrific Chardonnay, showing taut, zippy lemon fruit in a light coating of butterscotch. A hugely drinkable wine. Drink 2005
£8.99 @ ENO

86 Delheim Pinotage Rosé 2004

Whatever your feelings on Pinotage, it does work well in wines like this. Fresh, cheerful and packed with juicy red berry fruit, and a touch of residual sugar, this is a great summer evening glugger rather than a great food wine. Drink 2005
2005 (available July 2005): £6.40 @ JKN

85 Delheim Gewürztraminer 2004

Something of an oddity not just in the Simonsberg region, but in the whole of South Africa. Still, this has good varietal quality, with attractive lychee and rose petal flavours and a more food-friendly weight than bigger, blowsier offerings from Alsace. Medium-dry. Very good as an accompaniment for spicy food. Drink 2005
£6.46 @ JKN

• See p92 for a key to stockist codes



Committed to quality: from left to right, Spatz Sterling of Delheim; Adi Badenhorst of Rustenberg; Mike Ratcliffe of Warwick Estate

irrigation an optional extra, at least in normal years. This is very much a key to understanding the character of the Simonsberg's wines. No irrigation means stressed vines, which means small, more intense berries and a higher skin-to-pulp ratio which, in turn, means more tannins and colour, even with less skin contact. You don't see a lot of over-extraction in the Simonsberg.

'People in South Africa try to get more out of a wine than is really there,' says Abrie Beeslaar, winemaker at Kanonkop. 'Our wines are more classic in style than most from the New World.'

Not that the terra rossa is all good news. Free-draining and deep it might be, but it's also considerably more fertile than any serious grower would wish. Even with minimal or zero irrigation, most have had to develop a cover-crop programme to suck nutrients out the soil, and the

viticulturalists could talk to you for hours about their theories on canopy management.

At altitude

As well as the soil, the Simonsberg has another advantage over much of the Cape's vineyards: height. There's an old saying in the Cape that 'the vineyard that can see the sea is a good vineyard', and, from the mountain's slopes, the Atlantic is easily visible. While it would be pushing it to say there's any real maritime influence, the extra height (vineyards go up to 500m) helps mitigate summer temperatures and catch any breezes off the ocean. Plus, the south-west orientation of the Stellenbosch side of the Simonsberg mountain means that some vineyards don't see any sun until late morning. The Stellenbosch side receives an average of 12 days less sunlight than the north-

east-facing Paarl side. Cool climate it isn't, but nor is it a baking cauldron, and the temperature drops markedly at night.

With the different aspects of its slopes and 300m of height variation, it's perhaps no surprise to find the Simonsberg's producers playing with so many different grape varieties – in contrast to Bordeaux. It's not hard to imagine the reaction were you to suggest putting in a few Syrah vines to a grower in the Médoc, still less Gewürztraminer. And, as for Pinotage, it's hard to find consensus in the Cape, still less Bordeaux. Yet, although this is a well-established quality region, there's a feeling that there's more to come. 'As an industry, we're only 30 years old,' says the venerable Spatz Sperl of Delheim. 'No one can tell me he has yet found the perfect site for Sauvignon Blanc, for example.' ➔


Nowadays, growers tend to plant the whites higher up on the cooler slopes, with the reds lower down. Generally speaking, the mountain is better known for its reds. But don't write off the whites. There are some excellent Chardonnays, while Warwick Estate's Professor Black Sauvignon Blanc (released last year) has quickly made a name for itself.

The difference between the whites and the reds is proven ageability. Even the best Chardonnay lacks the steely, coiled-spring tautness of a top Burgundy, while the best reds have a silkiness of fruit and solidity of backbone that promises to reward cellaring. Perhaps that's why there has been interest from abroad. Foreigners haven't been rushing to invest in South Africa since the

industry opened up in the early-1990s, but the Simonsberg, and the nearby Helderberg, have seen some big names moving in. The latter has a venture between the Prats family (of Cos d'Estournel), Hubert de Bouard (Angelus) and Lowell Joost of the local Klein Constantia estate, while Madame Lencquesaing of Pichon Lalande has a 25-hectare project on the Stellenbosch side of the Simonsberg. Not surprisingly, she has planted a hatful of Bordeaux varietals, but has been unable to resist the lure of Syrah.

Meanwhile, on the Paarl side, there is a joint venture between Warwick Estate and celebrity Californian wine couple Phil Freese and Zelma Long. Called Vilafonté and billing itself as South Africa's first super-premium wine, its first two

wines were launched in May (see box below). So, does the Simonsberg deserve its 'Médoc of the Cape' tag? Well, yes and no. On one hand, there's more to the region than Bordeaux blends, and the growing number of rather good Syrahs, Chardonnays and even Pinotages coming out of the area deserve recognition. On the other, there is an undeniable cluster of top-class producers in a small area, which is quite Médocain, and it is best known for its long-lived Cabernet-based wines.

Maybe not the next Ian Botham, then, but certainly it could be the first Freddie Flintoff. 

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The Vilafonté project: where US celebrity and South Africa unite

Phil Freese and Zelma Long (pictured) are the Californian winemaking power behind the Vilafonté project in Paarl, a venture that includes Mike Ratcliffe of Warwick Estate, and Bartholomew Broadbent, the US distributor. Vilafonté has just released its first wines, a Cabernet-dominated blend called Series C, and a Merlot-dominated blend called Series M.

Husband and wife, Freese and Long are superstars of winemaking. Ex-head of vine growing for Robert Mondavi, Freese planted the Opus One vineyard. After 13 years with Mondavi, he started his own viticultural consultancy in 1993, working in California for Cakebread, Far Niente and Seghesio, among others. He also began a love affair with South Africa, advising big clients such as Rustenberg, Thelema and Warwick Estate.

Freese also looked after a 42-hectare (ha) vineyard in Paarl called Vilafonté, whose ancient gravel and clay soils he had planted with Bordeaux varieties. In a radical move, he planted at 5,200 vines per hectare – double the density of most in South Africa. This 'extreme viticulture' gives very low natural yields and also encourages more even ripening.




Though the vigour of these young vines means Freese green-harvests (removing some bunches) aggressively twice per season, he is confident that his planting and watering regimes will eventually result in naturally self-restricting yields.

Long is the sort of winemaker who attracts nods of recognition, approval and respect whenever her name is mentioned. One of the first female graduates of the oenology and viticulture course at the University of California in 1970, she maintains a huge workload, owning wineries in California, Germany and South Africa, and consulting from Oregon to Israel.

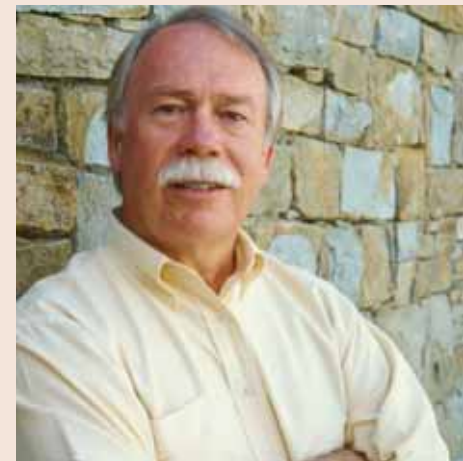
She started her career with Robert Mondavi; over a 10 year period she rose to chief winemaker. A move to Simi winery in 1979 saw her become CEO then business development vice-president of Chandon Estates.

Having retired from the corporate rat race, Long seems happy and at home in their small house near Stellenbosch, and is very much hands on during Vilafonté's harvest and blending.

At a time when so much emphasis is put on *terroir*, Vilafonté's decision to classify 'Series C' and 'Series M' by grape seems contrary. Long has no qualms: 'They are *terroir* wines; Vilafonté is the name of the vineyard and is a soil series in that vineyard. We have no wines from elsewhere, so they are about as *terroir*-focused as one can get.'

Global joint ventures are not common in the Cape and, though some view them with scepticism, Philip van Zyl, editor of the *John Platter Wine Guide*, says: 'The sort of foreign involvement which will help generate real star wattage has largely been absent. The Vilafonté project, with its US connection, is exciting, as it could signal the start of the Theronisation (as in Charlize) of the Cape.' 

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91 Vilafonté Series M 2003

Series M has a spicy, cedary and earthy quality, with black cherry fruit on the nose. The palate is juicy and filled with blackcurrant fruit, with a rasp of bittersweet plum skin and cherry acidity. It has good structure with a grippy quality, and that juicy plum fruit persists, with a deepening chocolatey character. Drink 2005-2015
£30 @ HFW, PLA, SFA

90 Vilafonté Series C 2003

This has a leafy quality on the nose, with some cedar and quite delicate black cherry and floral fruit. The palate is striking and bold, with chewy tannins dominating at present, plenty of svelte, glossy black fruit, and a keen edge of acidity. There is perhaps a touch of hollowness on the mid-palate, but a toasty support of oak fills out on the long finish and it should come together well.
Drink 2008-2020
£40 @ HFW, PLA, SFA

• See p92 for a key to stockist codes

For more information about Vilafonté contact: www.vilafonte.com; tel: +27 (0) 21 8844410