

# Arts&Leisure

## Wine

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**T**RADITIONALLY consumers of South African wine regarded Cabernet and Cabernet-based blends as something of the oenological "A" team, with most white wines a distant second and all other reds somewhere in the amateur league. While this was true of the 1960s and 1970s, with the arrival of varieties such as Pinot Noir, (Rhine) Riesling and Sauvignon Blanc, as well as improved planting material, the game began to change dramatically.

As with any untested new toy, a lot needed to be learnt: vinification strategies which worked well for robust reds were not the ideal way to approach Riesling and Pinot. Sauvignon Blanc offers a range of style and flavours depending on its level of ripeness: until recently most growers were unable to manage their vineyards to ensure relatively even ripening, so a focused approach to Sauvignon Blanc production was limited to very few (primarily cool climate) producers.

In the past five years we have seen dramatic improvements across all three varieties. All have in common an obligation on the producer to concentrate on purity of fruit. While Pinot and Riesling evolve with age (and Sauvignon from cooler sites needs time to settle down) all of these varieties express at least an element of their charm in their freshness and linearity.

Until recently there were very few credible Pinot Noir producers. Even those with an established reputation often delivered imperfect wines to the market. In part, the problem related to the clonal material available in SA. Virus also played a role. If the phyto-sanitary condition of the vines is imperfect, you cannot expect the fruit fully to express its potential. Now this is changing and the evidence is everywhere.

The newly released Oak Valley Pinot Noir 2007 is truly impressive: classic black cherry aromas with sweeter, slightly pungent strawberry notes on the palate. The oak is still very evident, and the plumpness of the fruit is more New World than Burgundian. Neighbour Paul Cluver has been making fine Pinots for a number of vintages and now has a super-premium wine — Seven Flags — to compete with the Cape's best (and most pricey) Pinot Noirs.

Meerlust was an early Pinot producer working with the same quite ordinary clonal material as Hamilton Russell in the early 1980s. Most of those vineyards have since been grubbed up and replaced with virus-free Burgundy clones. There can be no doubt that this helps to explain the elevation of the 2004 vintage to five-star status in Platter. Just looking at the wines being made by Bouchard Finlayson, Flagstone, Hamilton Russell, Chamonix, Newton Johnson and Herold (to name but a few) provides all the evidence necessary to talk of a renaissance in Cape Pinot Noir.

The marked improvement in Cape Sauvignon Blanc and (real) Riesling has been more frequently observed. A recent tasting the 2008 Crystallum Sauvignon Blanc — made by Peter-Allan and Andrew Finlayson (sons of Peter of Bouchard Finlayson fame) — shows that these changes are substantial and not cosmetic. Properly sited Walker Bay vineyards and winemaking which takes account of the lessons of the past come together in this restrained, slightly mineral and very elegant white wine.

Where is the obvious room for improvement? Elsewhere there is still an over-dependence on oak, rather than fruit, to carry a wine. The Zeevenwacht Z Series Cabernet Franc blend from the 2006 vintage seems to have fallen into this trap.

Hopefully, as the price of French barriques increases as the rand slides, economics will give the fruit an opportunity to express itself.

