

WINE OVERVIEW



SOUTH AFRICA

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Closely review the syllabus for this wine level to determine just what items require your attention in each of the region/country overview documents.

This “New World” wine producing country has its origins in 1659, when the first wine was made on the Constantia Estate south of present day Capetown. This area was settled by the Dutch East India Company as part of a supply route, and grapes were planted to help the sailors prevent scurvy. When the area became a British colony in 1815, a pipeline to Britain was created, resulting in almost a million gallons of wine being shipped back by 1860. This was to sharply fall off, however, as the combination of less favorable tax laws and the devastation of phylloxera heavily curtailed the production and export of South African wine. The period following would force the growers to almost completely reinvent their industry, not for the last time, and arguably not for the better.

Farmers that did replant grapes at all, tended to replant with high yield varieties, with little concern for quality. The glut of generic wine that eventually flooded the country resulted in the formation of KWV, a cooperative created to deal with production levels up to three times the demand. By managing crop yields, moving some production into distillation, and centralizing the otherwise unregulated industry, KWV was instrumental in allowing the growers to survive until the 1990’s, when the lifting of Apartheid opened the doors to the international market. This sudden exposure to the global wine culture resulted in the dramatic increase of popular vinifera plantings such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Sauvignon Blanc, and Chardonnay.

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SOUTH AFRICAN WINE LAW

The current version of wine law in South Africa dates back to 1973, and has well-defined, nested geographic boundaries, but very little regulation as far as means of production or varieties grown. The system is based on the “Wine of Origin” (WO) designation, and has four levels. The broadest is a “Geographical Unit”, narrowing to “Region”, “District”, and finally “Ward”. The first three categories are based on long term political boundaries; only the “Ward” WO relates directly to soil, exposure, micro-climate, or other common means to differentiate a narrow wine region’s style and/or quality of product.

Although about a third of producers participate in a voluntary certification program requiring that a wine contains a minimum of 85% of the claimed grape and vintage year, there is no mandatory regulation as far as the percentages included.

Chaptalization, or the adding of sugars, is illegal in South Africa, although very few regions would find this to be a problem, as most regions are at least a region III on the Winkler scale (see Raising the Bar materials on Climate). A common issue is low acidity in the harvested grapes, and as such, the law does permit acidification.

MAJOR VARIETALS OF SOUTH AFRICA

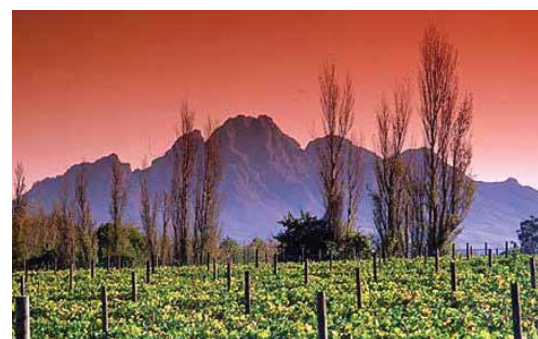
RED

- Pinotage – South Africa’s signature red grape, for better or for worse. Created in 1925 as a cross of Pinot Noir and the common, high yield Cinsault (known locally as Hermitage), this grape has a dubious reputation. At its best is dark and complex, but frequently suffers from an aroma of band-aid and acetone.
- Cabernet Sauvignon – Production of international varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon is increasing, largely at the expense of Pinotage. Generally does fairly well in most winemaking regions of South Africa, which tend to be warm.
- Merlot – Also on the rise, as wineries market to international markets. Seems to have no particular affinity for the country, but is perfectly serviceable.
- Pinot Noir – Lightly planted, and usually in the cooler regions, such as Walker Bay.
- Syrah/Shiraz – Either term is allowed, and many believe that this grape has the potential to become the best that South Africa can produce, combining the texture of new-world Shiraz and the depth and structure of the northern Rhone.

WHITE

- Chenin Blanc – Known locally as Steen for many years, Chenin Blanc is the workhorse of the South African wine world, and is the most widely planted grape in the country. Runs the gamut from soft, light and aromatic, to dense, structured and long lived. Also frequently made into sparkling wine, where it produces a soft, low-acid bubbly that can be very enjoyable, but rarely exceptional.
- Sauvignon Blanc – One of the underrated wines of South Africa. Has perhaps less uniqueness than it does in New Zealand, but is a consistently enjoyable wine, clean, racy and fresh.
- Chardonnay – Another grape planted largely for the marketing appeal, it does the best in the same areas where Pinot Noir thrives, such as Walker Bay and Elgin.

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WOs OF SOUTH AFRICA

There are only three Geographical Units in South Africa: Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, and the fairly new Eastern Cape. Of these, only the Western Cape is currently of global importance. It is also rare to find wine carrying a label bearing anything more broad than a “District” WO, although the “Coastal Region” Region is sometimes used to produce wines blended across the areas around Capetown.

WESTERN CAPE

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By far, the most important current winemaking area in South Africa, the Western Cape covers the Southern tip of Africa, and is the area containing Capetown. This includes Constantia and Stellenbosch, the areas first planted by the Dutch East India Company. It contains five Districts, the most important being:

Breede River Valley – In the middle of the Western Cape, far to the east of Capetown. It is best known for the Robertson Valley Ward, which produces a wide variety of international wines from its various microclimates.

Cape South Coast – This District sits along the coast east of Capetown, and best known for the emerging Walker Bay Ward, which takes advantage of the ocean winds to produce high quality Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

Coastal Region – The source of most wines seen in the US, the Coastal Region District includes some well regarded wards. Stellenbosch lies just behind Capetown, and is home to the vast majority of wines imported to the US. It is popular for Chenin Blanc, Syrah, Pinotage, and Bordeaux varietals, especially from the narrow Devon Valley. Paarl and Darling are seen less often, but produce a range of well made wines, with the wines based on red Bordeaux varietals showing impressive weight and texture in Darling. Constantia runs from the city of Capetown down the peninsula around False Bay. The original home of South African viticulture, and the home of Groot Constantia, the oldest wine estate in the country.