

WINE AND DINE

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Try some S. African wine while watching World Cup

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The world's attention is shifting to South Africa, the host country for the 2010 FIFA World Cup Soccer Championship. Soccer is widely regarded as the most popular international sport, so the games played through July 11 will be watched by scores of fervent football (called soccer in the U.S.) fanatics throughout the world.

As South African wines are also gaining prominence in the wine world, now is a good time to try one of these wines and tip our caps to the World Cup soccer games. Whether it's a refreshing white wine for sipping or a rich red that pairs nicely with a grilled steak, South Africa can score the winning goal for your taste buds.

South Africa

South Africa is the most prominent wine region on the African continent, both in terms of production and quality. Little was known about this country's wine industry prior to 1990, because of apartheid and a closely guarded government. The release from jail of Nelson Mandela in 1990 and his subsequent election as the country's first black president in 1994 signaled the end of apartheid and allowed the global community to embrace the new South Africa.



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This generated a dramatic rise in wine exports. However, South Africa needed to improve the quality of its wines by developing its Terroir to successfully compete on the global stage. Terroir is a wine's sense of place and time. The place refers the winery's soil, geography, climate and the winemaking traditions.

Time refers to a specific growing season (was it a hot or wet summer?) and the yields of that year's crop (this can be controlled by removing some fruit from the vines during the growing season).

The winery decides if it wants quantity (more wine) or quality (lower yields for a more concentrated, flavorful wine).

While South Africa traditionally produces large crops, there is a movement to open new wineries that focus on lower yields and higher quality wines. The three major regions of the South African wine industry are located near Cape Town, and are known as the Northern Cape, Eastern Cape and Western Cape. Of these, the Western Cape is home to the two most important wine areas, Paarl and Stellenbosch.

South African wines

Early on, South Africa was most famous for its port wines and sherries. Wine connoisseurs have long regarded South African sherry as the equal to fine Spanish sherry and its ruby and tawny ports are also held in high regard. While growing in popularity, sherry and port represent a small segment of general wine consumption. White and red table wine makeup the majority of wine sales today.

White wines have historically dominated South Africa's table wine production. The leading varietal, Chenin Blanc (locally called Steen), has its roots in the Loire Valley of France and may have been introduced by the French Huguenots or the Dutch East India Company in the late 1600s.

In keeping with its emphasis, Chenin Blanc leads South Africa's wine exports. Also, Chenin Blanc's natural acidity and versatility makes this varietal a good blending partner with other whites like Colombard. Paarl and Worcester are the leading wine regions for Chenin Blanc production.

With South Africa's warm climate, these wines tend to offer more tropical fruit flavors than the Chenin Blancs produced in the Loire Valley of France (a lean style with mineral flavors).



South African wines include Petit.
Courtesy of Bill Garlough

Bill's Wine Picks

(with suggested retail prices)

2008 Graham Beck Chenin Blanc (87 pts. Wine Spectator): \$14

2007 Warwick Pinotage (88 pts. Wine Spectator) : \$19

2007 Excelsior Cabernet (popular selling, not rated): \$9

2007 Graham Beck Cabernet (full bodied, 87 pts. R. Parker) : \$15

2008 Waterford Estate Cabernet (89 pts. Wine Spectator) : \$27

Wine of the Month

Ken Forrester Petit Chenin Blanc

Suggested retail: \$9

Ken Forrester is known for producing quality South African wines.

The Chenin Blanc Stellenbosch Petit 2008 rated 87 pts. by the Wine Spectator and received a Best Values designation.

The Wine Spectator describes this white as "showing delightful floral, heather, candied lime peel and quince notes on a bright, unadorned frame."

100,000 cases were produced, so it should be readily available.

Cheers!

On the red side, South Africa produces a varietal that is unique in the wine world -- Pinotage (a cross between Pinot Noir and Cinsaut grapes). Among some of my wine friends, this is not a favorite. However, it is popular in South Africa for outdoor barbecues, as it offers a rustic and smoky flavor that pairs well with barbecue meats, and is worth a try.

Today, South Africa is producing better quality Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Shiraz that successfully compete in the global market. Of these, South Africa is best known for its Cabs. Cabernet Sauvignon is the most widely planted red varietal in South Africa and is produced in both a blended (with Shiraz or Bordeaux varietals) and straight (100 percent Cab grapes) style.

The Stellenbosch region is known for its Cabs and produces a medium-bodied style with soft tannins, ripe fruit (red cherry and coffee flavors) and smoky notes.

To combat South Africa's warm/hot and dry climate, the newer, quality-minded wineries seek vineyard plantings on valley hillsides that offer good soil (includes some clay to help hold water) with cooling fog and sea breezes. Better vineyard sites, lower yields per acre and improved fermentation processes are creating exciting wines. Give them a try and cheer on your favorite team during the World Cup.

Bill Garlough is the founder and owner of My Chef Catering in Naperville, the winner of the 2007 U.S. Chamber's national Small Business of the Year. Bill is a level 1 master sommelier and pairs food and wine for My Chef's customers. He can be contacted at www.mychef.com.