

## 38

## South Africa

Most of South Africa's wine regions are found on and around the coastline of the Cape where they can take advantage of the cooling influence of the Southern Ocean. This, combined with the dramatic mountainous backdrop, provides a landscape that allows South African winemakers to produce a broad range of wine styles.

### CLIMATE AND GRAPE GROWING

With its vine growing regions located at between 27° and 34° south of the Equator, South Africa should have a hot climate. However, although in certain inland areas the summer temperatures can become very hot (regularly rising in excess of 30°C), many vineyard areas are subject to cooling influences. The most important of these come from the Southern Ocean. The cold Benguela Current flows up from the Antarctic running past the tip and up the west coast of Africa, cooling coastal areas. This is magnified by the regular strong south-easterly summer winds, known locally as the Cape Doctor. These bring air cooled by the ocean further inland and can reduce temperatures by a further couple of degrees in some areas.

The other defining feature of the South African wine lands is the prominent mountain ranges running throughout the wine regions. They offer producers a dramatic range of different altitudes and aspects, as well as a multitude of different soils, which result in a range of different site climates. Altitude has a marked influence on vineyard climate, with those on valley floors generally much warmer than those in the mountains. In common with many other wine producing regions in the Southern Hemisphere, vines may be planted on the southern slopes of mountains to benefit from cooler temperatures. This mountainous terrain can also cast shadows over

nearby vineyards, again, giving slightly cooler temperatures during different parts of the day. Nearer the coast the mountains can also help channel the winds through the vineyards.

### GRAPE VARIETIES AND WINEMAKING

#### Black Varieties

**Cabernet Sauvignon**, which is the most widely planted black variety, is used for varietal wines and also blended with **Merlot** and Cabernet Franc for Bordeaux-style blends. On its own, Merlot is capable of producing full-bodied, plummy wines. **Syrah** is very widely planted too. In hot climates it gives rich, full-bodied reds that are often high in alcohol and display ripe black fruit flavours, sometimes with an earthy or meaty character. It is also grown in some cooler areas giving less full-bodied, peppery examples. **Pinot Noir** is less tolerant of the hot South African climate and is planted in small amounts in the coolest coastal areas. The vast majority of premium red wines are matured in oak, with at least a proportion of new barrels used, to give toasty aromas.

**Pinotage** (Pinot Noir × Cinsault) is the only other black variety with significant plantings. This crossing was developed in South Africa and, as it is hardly grown anywhere else in the world, is often deemed a point of difference. Pinotage is made in a range of styles. It is sometimes blended with international varieties, to make

### SOUTH AFRICAN WINE LAWS

South Africa's GI system is the Wine of Origin Scheme (W.O.). Wines stating **Wine of Origin (W.O.)** on the label will carry a Certification Seal on every bottle.

The law recognises four different sizes of production area. The largest is the geographical unit, a catch-all appellation that allows for multiple regional and district blends. Currently, the only one of any importance is Western Cape. This is widely used by producers even for premium wines as it allows producers to blend the best parcels of fruit from different areas. The Western Cape is divided into **regions** – large areas that tend to follow dominant geological features. The most important regions for wine grape growing are the Coastal Region, Breede River Valley and Cape South Coast. These regions are further split into **districts** and then **wards**.

**Estate Wines** – These wines must come from a single estate and all the grapes must come from estate vineyards that cover a single geographical area. The estate must also have facilities on their land, allowing them to process the grapes and the wine up to and including bottling. This law allows top producers to release Estate Wines but at the same time release other W.O. wines under their brand name.

### OTHER LABELLING TERMS

Like many other wine producing countries and regions, South Africa has a voluntary sustainable agricultural scheme. Here, it is called Integrated Production of Wine (IPW) and certified producers can display their credentials as part of their W.O. seals.

a 'Cape blend'. On its own, Pinotage can be made in a light, fruity style with red berry flavours, whereas wines from old bush vine wines may be very full-bodied, with rich, spiced, berry fruit. When fermented and/or stored with heavily toasted oak staves, Pinotage can take on intense coffee or chocolate aromas. These wines, often marketed to highlight their unique style, are very popular with some consumers.

### White Varieties

**Chenin Blanc** is the most widely planted variety of either colour. While the importance of this variety has declined, growers are now making better use of its versatility and producing great wines in both sweet and dry styles. At a basic level, Chenin Blanc produces easy-drinking wines with simple stone fruit flavours. However, an increasing number of producers are making wines from old bush vines, which can offer more concentrated and complex flavours and a fuller texture. Barrel fermentation and barrel ageing can contribute extra body and toasty oak flavours to some of these wines. Colombard remains the second most widely planted white variety. A significant proportion of this is used in brandy production.

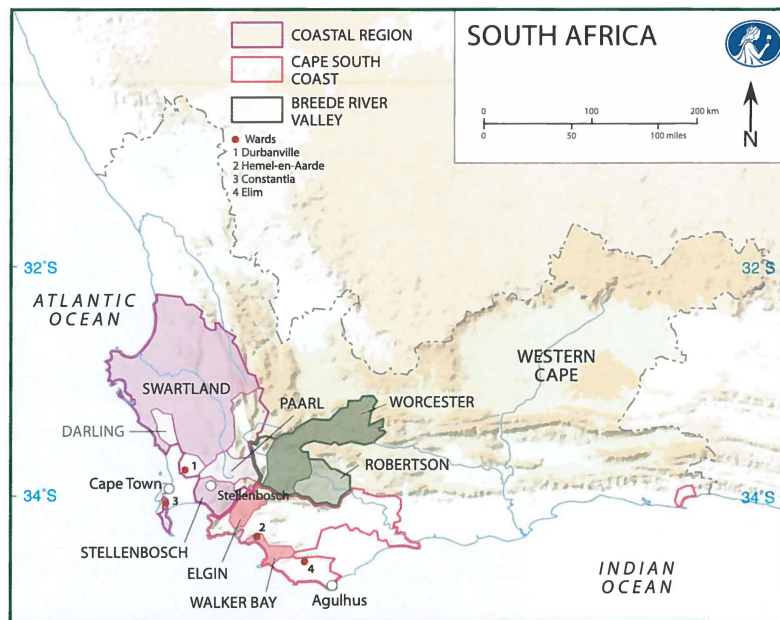
**Sauvignon Blanc** is also widely grown. The wines show a range of possible styles but often have a herbaceous character. The best examples come from the coolest regions and can display very pure flavours of citrus and green fruit. In warmer regions the grapes need to be picked early to retain such flavours, as well as high levels of acidity. **Chardonnay** can make wines of exceptional quality, particularly in the cooler sites. Burgundian techniques such as barrel fermentation and lees-stirring contribute to the character of many premium examples.

Muscat of Alexandria (here called Hanepoot) is not as widely planted as the other varieties but is used to produce late-harvest dessert wines when the grapes are left to shrivel on the vine. Noble rot can also be an influence in these wines. Plantings of Viognier have increased dramatically over the last couple of decades; it usually makes rich, perfumed wines that have a hint of toasty oak. High-quality white blends have also emerged, particularly from Swartland. These wines are often made from Chenin Blanc blended with Rhône varieties such as Marsanne, Roussanne, Grenache Blanc and Viognier.

### REGIONS AND WINES

Well over 90 per cent of the wine made in South Africa comes from the Western Cape. The most important regions of the Western Cape are covered below. The majority of the remainder of the wine comes from the very hot and irrigated Orange River in the Northern Cape, which is known mostly for inexpensive whites that are rarely seen on export markets.

Note that some wineries located in certain districts or wards may source their fruit from a wider area than the



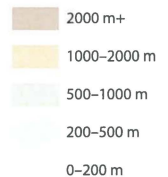
GI in which they are located. Their wines may be labelled with a region, for example Coastal Region, or with a geographical unit, for example Western Cape. A number of premium wines are made this way.

### Coastal Region

The **Stellenbosch** district stretches from just inland of the coast at Somerset West right up into the mountains that surround the town of Stellenbosch itself, and has long been the hub of fine wine production in South Africa. The climate here is moderate to warm depending on location. There is sufficient rainfall in the winter and summers are rarely too hot, thanks to the cool winds from False Bay that are funnelled by the mountains into the valleys. However, above all, the success of Stellenbosch lies in the variety of altitude, aspect and soil that is available in such a relatively small area. The district is divided into a number of distinct wards, which highlight this diversity. In recent years, Stellenbosch has built up a reputation for top class red wines, in particular Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot (which are often made in Bordeaux-style blends), Syrah and Cape red blends. The cooler sites can produce high-quality Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay as well.

The **Paarl** district is a large district that lies to the north of Stellenbosch. It is less exposed to the cooling influences of the sea, being further inland, and temperatures tend to be hotter in the summer although this can be moderated by cooler night-time temperatures. Like Stellenbosch, the mountainous terrain offers a variety of altitudes, aspects and soils. A range of grape varieties is grown; Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Pinotage are the most important reds, whereas Chenin Blanc and Chardonnay are the most planted whites.

### KEY





Vineyards looking across to the town of Stellenbosch. The mountains here help to channel the cool ocean breezes through the vineyards.



Old vines in Swartland. Vines like these are a source of grapes for some of South Africa's best and most interesting wines.



**Constantia** ward in the Cape Peninsula district has some of the oldest vineyards in the Cape, which lie on the eastern flanks of Table Mountain. These vineyards are constantly cooled by the Cape Doctor and the producers here have a particular reputation for Sauvignon Blanc. One of the estates continues to produce the sweet wine *Vin de Constance* from late-harvested Muscat. There are some vineyards planted south of Table Mountain closer to Cape Point itself. These vineyards are well exposed to the cooling influence of the ocean and have made a speciality of Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon. Some Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon is planted in the warmer sites.

To the north of Cape Town, the large **Swartland** district, which used to be considered as a source of inexpensive grapes and wine, has undergone a considerable transformation in recent years and is now a centre of innovation and premium wine production.

It is recognised particularly as a source of old vine Chenin Blanc, and high-quality Syrah, both of which are often dry-farmed (grown without irrigation), lowering yields but enhancing fruit concentration. A number of premium Cape blends (both red and white) also come from this district. The Darling district sits to the south-west of Swartland, its position near the coast meaning it receives cooling sea breezes. This area built its reputation on Sauvignon Blanc but now produces a range of other varieties, and like Swartland is a source of old vines.

**Durbanville** ward in the Tygerberg district offers hillside sites north of Cape Town, cooled by the sea breezes that also blow through Cape Point. It has built a reputation for Sauvignon Blanc.

### **Breede River Valley**

The **Worcester** district lies at the western end of the Breede River Valley. The climate is hot and dry and irrigation, largely drawn from the river, is essential. With fertile soils, this district can produce a significant proportion of South Africa's annual production, the majority of which is white wine made from Chenin Blanc and Colombard. Much of this wine is used for distillation but nevertheless Worcester is a reliable source of well-made red and white wines for high volume branded wines.

The **Robertson** district is situated to the east of Worcester. Robertson has a similar but slightly cooler climate to Worcester thanks to the south easterly winds that are drawn into the valley. This region is also a reliable

source of well-made wines for high volume brands. However, thanks to the cooling influences and notable outcrops of less fertile soils, this region can also produce some excellent Syrahs and full-bodied Chardonnays.

### **Cape South Coast**

This area, which is well exposed to the ocean, is a regular source of some of the best fruit and wines. The most well-established vineyard area is the **Walker Bay** district, which contains the various wards of **Hemel-en-Aarde**. This has long been home to some of South Africa's best

Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs. Other varieties such as Sauvignon Blanc, Merlot and Syrah are grown with equal success.

To the north-west of Walker Bay is the **Elgin** district, where altitude is another important cooling influence. The area has a particular reputation for intense, fresh Sauvignon Blancs, and is showing promise for Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Syrah. To the south-east of Walker Bay, in the Cape Agulhas district, is the **Elim** ward. Elim also has a particular reputation for pungent, herbaceous Sauvignon Blanc, but Syrah is also showing promise.