

THE FIRSTBORN OF NEW WORLD

JACKY I.F. CHEONG FRIDAY, MAY 13, 2016 - 9 HOURS AGO NO COMMENTS 282 VIEWS

Covering some 1.2 million sq km (more than France, Spain and Portugal combined) and with a population of 55 million (just 10 percent less than Italy), South Africa is a hugely diverse country, one with no less than 11 official languages – linguistically even more complicated than the old Austro-Hungarian Empire.

South Africa's vinous history can be traced back to the mid-17th century, when during the Dutch Golden Age the Dutch East Indian Company established a supply station in modern day Cape Town. The very first vines and wines were planted and made to combat scurvy amongst sailors voyaging along the lucrative spice route, vital to the Dutch economic dominance. Of the "Big Six" New World countries (including from west to east the US, Chile, Argentina, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand), South Africa is no doubt the oldest or, one might even argue, the bridge between the Old World and New World.

In the last quarter of the 17th century, many Huguenots (French Protestants) expelled by Louis XIV's Edict of Fontainebleau boarded on Protestant Dutch ships and emigrated to various parts of the New World, and South Africa was a popular destination, bringing with them viticultural expertise and winemaking know-how. Even today, French influence remains prominent – French varieties have hardly ever dropped below 75% of total vineyard plantings. By the 19th century, the Muscat Blanc à Petits Grains-based sweet wine Vin de Constance was already highly regarded on European royal tables, possibly the first New World wine to achieve international fame.

Much of the 20th century was the "dark age" for South African wine. State interference, bulk production and not least integrational boycott against the apartheid meant that significant progress was few and far between, with the notable exception of the Wine of Origin (WO) system – similar to the French AOC system – drawn up in 1973. Arguably the most terroir-conscious appellation system of the New World, the WO system comprises 4 levels of applications, from general to specific: province (geographical unit), region, district and ward. The stated area must constitute 100 percent of grapes used in the wine, and chaptalisation is strictly forbidden. Coinciding with Nelson Mandela's rise to power, South African wine has made huge progress in the last 20 years. Endowed with a welcoming Mediterranean climate, oceanic influence from the Atlantic and Indian as well as a myriad of soil compositions, South Africa may soon be no longer satisfied with its current status as a top 10 largest wine-producing country by production volume.



Morgenster Laurens River Valley 2011

A blend of 59% Cabernet Franc, 30% Merlot, 6% Cabernet Sauvignon and 5% Petit Verdot from the Helderberg Ward of Stellenbosch, aged for 16 months in French oak, of which 30% is new. Rich garnet with cardinal-ruby rim, the nose is alluring and perfumed, effusing black cherry and plum for fruits, enriched with cinnamon, pencil shaving, incense and geranium. Braced by delightful acidity, velvety tannins and clean minerality, the palate is chiselled and exuberant, emanating cassis and damson for fruits, complemented by nutmeg, black pepper, sous bois and graphite. Medium-full bodied at 14%, the dainty entry persists through a caressing mid-palate, leading to a sprightly finish. A veritable temptation in all regards.



Morgenster Reserve 2011

A blend of 59% Merlot, 21% Cabernet Sauvignon and 20% Petit Verdot from the Helderberg Ward of Stellenbosch, aged for 16 months in French oak, of which 60% is new. Dark garnet with carmine-purple rim, the nose is brooding and scented, furnishing blackberry and cassis for fruits, infused with tomato leaf, nutmeg and sandalwood. Buttressed by generous acidity, ripe tannins and clear minerality, the palate is profound and structured, providing black cherry and prune for fruits, supplemented by allspice, dark chocolate and cigar ash. Full-bodied at 14%, the dense entry continues through a potent mid-palate, leading to a saturated finish. A very fine wine with both stature and longevity.