

# The International Wine Review

## South African Sparkling Wine: A Hidden Treasure



When the *International Wine Review* did its exhaustive tasting of sparkling wines a couple of years ago, South Africa was poorly represented with just one—albeit very good—wine. When we traveled to South Africa in November we decided to correct this oversight. We tasted over 40 *méthode champenoise* sparkling wines made with traditional Champagne grape varieties and given extended aging on the lees. Unfortunately, South Africa keeps their sparkling treasure hidden from the rest of the world. Internationally, South Africa is best known for its outstanding

Chenin Blanc, Sauvignon Blanc, Syrah, Pinotage and other still wines. Our reviews of South African sparklers can be found below.

One reason South African sparklers are not better known is their youth. The first *méthode champenoise* (called Méthode Cap Classique in South Africa) sparklers were made in South Africa just 30 years ago. Today there are 79 members of the Cap Classique Producers Association, an organization formed in 1992 to promote Méthode Cap Classique (MCC) wines. MCCs are produced in different regions ranging from cooler areas like Constantia and Elgin to the warmer parts of Franschoek and Robertson.

Our take away from the tasting is that South African MCCs compare favorably with the best sparkling wines of the New World and are higher in quality than many of the commercial sparklers we have tasted across the globe. (See the International Wine Review **Report # 14 The World of Sparkling Wines and Champagnes.**)

Perhaps the best news is that the bar for the top MCCs keeps getting set higher. Established producers like Graham Beck, Boschendal, Pongracz, Villiera, and Twee Jonge Gezellen are bringing out flagship sparkling wines that represent a significant improvement in the sparkling wine industry. And newer producers like Topiary, Colmant, and Ambeloui are already raising the bar with other producers not far behind.

Below we provide tasting notes on our 34 favorite South African sparkling wines. Regrettably, of these wines, to our knowledge only Graham Beck (Maritime Wine Trading Collective, importer), Simonsig (Quintessential Wines), Twee Jonge Gezellen (34 South) and Villiera (Fairest Cape) are imported to the US. Hopefully, more of these superb sparklers will be imported as US consumers and importers discover this hidden treasure. Meanwhile, we recommend that you travel to South Africa to taste these these sparklers *in situ*. You won't be disappointed.

### **Tasting Notes and Ratings**



**Boschendal**, one of the South African pioneers of méthode champenoise is today recognized for its outstanding sparkling wines. Currently at the helm is the talented young winemaker Lizelle Gerber (shown here). She's preparing a 2007 Blanc de Blancs that will be released in 2012, after 5 years on the lees. We tasted it and found it to be superb and a legitimate contender for top South African

bubbly.

#### **Boschendal NV Brut Rosé Franschhoek 88+**

The Brut Rosé is a blend of 50% Pinot Noir, 30% Pinotage, and 20% Chardonnay that spends 12 months on the lees. It shows fresh red berry fruit notes on the nose and palate, a dry attack, and clean finish. It has 10 g/l RS.

#### **Boschendal 2007 Grand Cuvée Brut Franschhoek 91**

A 50/50 blend of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir the Grand Cuvée is one of South Africa's best sparkling wines. Brioche and ripe fruit show on the nose and palate with a rich mousse and elegant mouth feel. Spends 3 years on the lees.

#### **Cederberg 2006 Brut Blanc de Blancs Cederberg 90+**

The more we come to know about this winery, the more impressed we are. This sparkler spends an impressive 48 months on the lees. It reveals a brioche nose and a smooth, refined palate of toast, nuts and melon with a note of flint. Finishes long and ripe. Absolutely delicious!

#### **Constantia Uitsig 2008 Brut Blanc de Blancs Constantia 88+**

This Chardonnay based MCC spends 36 months on the lees yet it still has a fresh fruity apple and citrus nose. The attack is rich with a soft, creamy palate that is delicious with bright fruit flavors.

#### **De Wetshof NV Brut Robertson 88**

This is an attractive, fruit forward sparkler with abundant bubbles and ripe nose. The palate shows nuts, yeast, and ripe apple. Finishes crisply.

### **Des Dieux 2007 Claudia Brut Elgin 89+**

The Claudia Brut spends 36 months on the lees, and it shows on the bread dough nose. The palate is fruit rich and creamy but dry with lees notes, and there are light red cherry and toasted almond accents on the finish. Very good!



**Graham Beck Wines** produces several lines of wines but is perhaps best known for producing some of South Africa's best sparkling wines. The sparkling wine effort is led by Pieter "Bubbles" Ferreira, who joined Graham Beck over 20 years ago. He continues to make improvements, including introducing the tête du cuvée Clive and recently planting Champagne clones of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir at the estate vineyards in Robertson. We tasted the full lineup of Graham Beck sparkling wine with Pieter at the Graham Beck winery in Robertson. The US importer is Martime Wine Trading Collective in San Francisco.

### **Graham Beck NV Brut Western Cape 89**

This 50/50 blend of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay is from the 2010 vintage; it shows fine bubbles and fresh citrus flavors. Spends 15 months on the lees and has about 8 g/l of residual sugar.

### **Graham Beck NV Brut Rosé Western Cape 89+**

This is the most popular sparkler in the Graham Beck portfolio, and it's easy to see why. The wine has a nice creamy mouth feel, fine bubbles, and light cherry and red raspberry aromas and flavors. It's clean, pure, and fresh. The fruit is from the 2010 vintage. RS 10 g/l

### **Graham Beck 2005 Brut Zero Western Cape 90+**

As Pieter Ferreira says, this is a wine with no makeup. Extended time (6 years) on the lees gives it a sweet, creamy texture. Flint shows on the nose, while the palate reveals rich brioche and hazelnut notes. A blend of 80% Chardonnay and 20% Pinot Noir. About 20% of the Chardonnay is fermented in barrel.

### **Graham Beck 2008 Blanc de Blancs Robertson 91**

The Blanc de Blancs is an excellent sparkler made with Champagne clones planted in the winery's Robertson vineyards. It shows a bread dough nose and a creamy palate with nut and flint notes. Half the Chardonnay is fermented in barrel, after which it spends three years on the lees in bottle.

### **Graham Beck 2005 Prestige Cuvée Clive Robertson 91+**

With a nose of fresh croissant, fine bubbles, and an intensely flavored and creamy palate, this elegant wine is the flagship for Graham Beck. It spends 5 years on the lees and 1 year on cork prior to release. A blend of 80% Chardonnay and 20% Pinot Noir.

### **High Constantia 2008 Clos André Cuvée Brut Nature Constantia 88**

The Clos André Cuvée Brut Nature is a pleasing blend of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. It's dry and crisp with yeasty notes on the nose and orchard fruit and light cherry flavors, finishing on a zesty note.

**JC Le Roux NV La Vallée Western Cape 87**

This Pinot Noir and Chardonnay blend has a sweet, fruity nose and palate with light yeast notes. A good sparkler to enjoy with wedding cake.

**Haut Cabriere NV Pierre Jourdan Cuvée Belle Rose Franschhoek 88**

This is an uncomplicated rosé with a rich mousse, delicate floral nose, and bright cherry fruit flavors.

**Haut Cabriere NV Pierre Jourdan Brut Franschhoek 87**

This pleasant and uncomplicated Pinot Noir/Chardonnay sparkler shows bright cherry notes on the nose and a very dry palate that reveals chalky notes on the finish.



Desiderius **Pongracz** was a member of the Hungarian aristocracy who fled Hungary after WWII and eventually moved to Stellenbosch, worked as a farm manager, and obtained a degree in agriculture from Stellenbosch University and became South Africa's preeminent viticulturalist. He is the author of the textbook *Practical Viticulture* still in use today. Elunda Basson (pictured here) is the winemaker at Pongracz, part of the Distell portfolio and one of South Africa's leading producers of MCC.

**Pongracz NV Brut Western Cape 88+**

A Pinot Noir and Chardonnay blend showing green apple and light red cherry fruit along with yeast notes. It's bright and rich tasting on the palate with a creamy mouth feel and a zesty finish.

**Pongracz NV Brut Rosé Western Cape 89**

The Brut Rosé has a rich mousse and a ripe, rich and creamy mouth feel. Red raspberry and cherry flavors complement yeast notes.

**Pongracz 2003 Desiderius 90+**

This superb MCC is a blend of 60% Chardonnay and 40% Pinot Noir that spends an astounding 87 months on the lees. The result is a beautiful and subtle wine showing freshly baked bread, cured lemon and lightly toasted almond aromas and a delicately flavored, very fine palate. Very good.

**Ross Gower 2008 Pinot Noir Brut Elgin 89**

Light rose tinted copper in color, this is a straightforward bubbly rosé with aromas of light cherry and a round palate of yeast and light red fruit notes finishing bright and dry. Spends 18 months on the lees.





**Simonsig.** French Huguenot Jacques Malan first set foot in the winelands of the Cape in 1688. Ten generations of Malans later, Frans Malan began bottling wine under the Simonsig Estate label in 1968. He became one of the modern pioneers of South African wine, producing the first *méthode champenoise* wine (Kaapse Vonkel) 30 years ago. Today, Johan Malan (pictured here) is the winemaker. The US importer of Simonsig is Quintessential Wines of Napa CA.

### **Simonsig 2009 Kaapse Vonkel Stellenbosch 88**

The Kaapse Vonkel (Cape Sparkling in Afrikaans) is a well made, inexpensive sparkler. It shows yeast, ripe apples and a light tangerine zest aromas and flavors and finishes dry and clean. It's a 55% Pinot Noir, 43% Chardonnay, 2% Pinot Meunier blend that's aged 15+ months on the lees.

### **Simonsig 2009 Brut Rosé Stellenbosch 87**

This Pinotage based rosé reveals notes of dried cherry and wild strawberry with yeast and earth notes on the finish. Pleasant drinking.

### **Simonsig 2005 Cuvée Royale Blanc de Blancs Stellenbosch 90+**

With six years on the lees, the Cuvée Royale is Simonsig's tête de cuvée. It shows lightly toasted almond, bread dough and hints of orange and lemon zest on the nose. It has a rich, creamy mousse and lemon citrus and almond flavors with a delicious, fresh finish.

### **Steenberg 2008 1682 Brut Pinot Noir Western Cape 89+**

This eye of the partridge colored sparkler has a ripe, very yeasty, assertive nose and flavors of raspberry and cherry. The palate is round and creamy, finishing dry. Spends 36 months on the lees. Delicious.

### **Sterhuis 2008 Blanc de Blancs Stellenbosch 90**

This is a fruit forward, ultra-brut MCC showing notes of lemon citrus and brioche. The bubbles are fine and the palate creamy, but the lack of dosage lends an austere note. The base wine is fermented in old barrels for 6 months; spends 26 month on the lees in bottle. Very, very good.

### **Teddy Hall 2005 Blanc de Blancs Stellenbosch 89**

This bubbly is more oxidative than the norm with aromas and flavors of toasted nuts and caramel. The palate is creamy, rich and smooth, and the wine is very good, but one has to like this style.

### **Topiary 2009 Brut Blanc de Blancs Franschhoek 92**

This is one of our favorite MCCs. It's elegant with melon, lemon and brioche aromas and flavors. The delicate palate is creamy and elegant with a very satisfying finish. The winemaker of this outstanding sparkler is Mark Carmichael-Green.



**Twee Jonge Gezellen** Twee Jonge Gezellen is one of South Africa's very best producers of sparkling wine. Grapes are handpicked at night to retain coolness and freshness. No sulphur is added. Up to 15% of the base wine is from previous vintages. Matthew Krone [pictured here] is the winemaker. We tasted his wines with him during our visit to Robertson last month. The US importer of Twee Jonge Gezellen is 34 South of Annapolis MD.

**Twee Jonge Gezellen 2008 Krone Borealis Vintage Cuvée Brut Robertson 89+**

The Borealis shows very fine bubbles and a ripe nose redolent of toast, yeast, and citrus. It's bright and intensely flavored on the palate with a fine mousse and robust, hazelnut notes. Spends 3 years on the lees, and the 50/50 Chardonnay and Pinot Noir blend goes through full malo. RS 8 g/l.

**Twee Jonge Gezellen 2005 Vintage Rosé Cuvée Brut Robertson 90+**

The medium salmon pink Krone Rosé is crisp, fresh and lively. Clean and elegant on the palate, it's nicely balanced with a creamy mouth feel and light red cherry notes on the finish. This 60/40 blend of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay spends 4.5 years on the lees. Very, very good.

**Twee Jonge Gezellen NV Nicolas Charles Krone Marque I Robertson 91**

A blend of the 2001-3 vintages, this is an elegant wine with a very fine mousse. Bread dough and ripe orchard fruit show on the nose and palate with light nutty flavors on the finish. It's a 50/50 blend of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir; 25% of the Chardonnay base wine is wooded.

**Vergelegen 2007 MMV Stellenbosch 90+**

This is a very delicate MCC with a fine mousse and lovely biscuit, light nut, and cured lemon aromas and flavors. A blend of 71% Chardonnay and 29% Pinot Noir, it spends 6 months on the lees in barrel with full malo followed by 3 years on the lees in bottle. Excellent. Winemaker André van Rensburg has crafted a winner.



**Villiera** is another of South Africa's stellar producers of sparkling wine, thanks to the talents of winemakers Jeff Grier (pictured here) and Christian Visser and viticulturalist Simon Grier. The vineyards were planted in 1983 and today total about 210 hectares under vine. Villiera has also played an important role in helping its neighboring winery M'Hudi, South Africa's first

wholly black-owned wine farm, get established. Fairest Cape is the US importer of Villiera.

**Villiera 2008 Brut Natural Chardonnay Stellenbosch (Bottelary) 90+**

This sulphur-free 100% Chardonnay MCC is made with no dosage, so it's chalky dry on the finish. It's a crisp, bold-tasting wine with apple flavors and full in the mouth. Excellent.

**Villiera NV Tradition Stellenbosch (Bottelary) 89**

The Tradition is well-made with very fine bubbles and smoothly textured. The nose is fresh and bright with aromas and flavors of yeast and apples and a very dry finish. A blend of 75% Pinot Noir, 25% Chardonnay, and 10% Pinotage aged about 12 months on the lees.

**Villiera NV Tradition Rosé Brut Stellenbosch (Bottelary) 88**

With a mostly Pinotage base, this pale pink salmon wine shows dried cherry and watermelon on the nose and somewhat wild flavors of earth and dried red fruit on the palate. It has very good length and finishes crisply.

**Villiera 2005 Monro Brut Stellenbosch (Bottelary) 91**

This is by far Villiera's top sparkler. It's a 50/50 Chardonnay and Pinot Noir blend that spend 5 years on the lees. The base wine goes through partial malo and spends some time in wood. It's an elegant wine with fine bubbles, a big mousse, and fullness in the mouth. Brioche, orchard fruit and almond slivers all make a showing on the creamy, rich palate. Excellent.

We thank Cathy Brewer of Villiera for the photo of bubbles in a glass, Helene Oosthuizen of [WOSA](#) for assembling the MCCs to be tasted, and James Pietersen, head sommelier of [Belthazar Restaurant](#) in Cape Town, for reviewing an earlier draft of this article. Of course, we are solely responsible for any remaining errors.

Mike Potashnik and Don Winkler, December 2011

Links:

[WOSA](http://www.wosa.co.za/): <http://www.wosa.co.za/>

[Belthazar Restaurant](http://i-winereview.blogspot.com/2010/04/world-cup-of-south-africa-wines-by.html): <http://i-winereview.blogspot.com/2010/04/world-cup-of-south-africa-wines-by.html>