



THE
CHRISTIAN EEDES

CHARDONNAY REPORT

- 2014 -

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INTRODUCTION

The Chardonnay Report was begun in 2011 to scrutinize the top-end of the category in South Africa on an annual basis. In undertaking the exercise, I wanted firstly to take a view on the overall level of quality but secondly start to explore issues of terroir – is provenance discernible and moreover might it start becoming something worth a real premium?

METHODOLOGY

Since inception, the tasting has been capped at 60 wines, partly consisting of examples which have fared well in recent local or international competition and partly from those producers I consider to be the best in their field even if somewhat low profile.

While other bigger tastings can have a useful talent spotting function, the intention here is very much to do good by what might be called the seeded players, the finite line-up in particular intended to avoid the perils of palate fatigue.

Even though a top 10 is generated based on the tasting, the exercise is pitched more as an in-depth analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the category in question, all wines submitted receiving a rating and a detailed tasting note. This, in addition to the fact that producers are not asked to pay an entry fee, alleviates the “competition fatigue” that exists in many quarters.

The judging panel was chaired by myself and further consisted of two trusted colleagues, namely Roland Peens and James Pietersen, both of Wine Cellar, a Cape Town firm which brokers and cellars fine wine.

We tasted blind, scoring done according to the 20-point/5 Star system. After round one, 19 wines were deemed of particular merit and these went through to a second and final round. Grant Thornton were tasting auditors.

KEY FINDINGS

Year four of the Chardonnay Report and the question has to be asked: Are we any closer to mapping South Africa’s best terroir for Chardonnay? There are in fact four producers with wines in this year’s top 10 which have achieved this previously.

Stellenbosch property Uva Mira saw its Single Vineyard 2011 do exceptionally well in the 2012 tasting report with a rating of 5 Stars and from the 2013 vintage, it has upped the ante by opting to make two stylistically different versions of Chardonnay from that same vineyard, one called The Single Tree (price: R450 a bottle) and the other simply Uva Mira (R600) – the former rating 4 Stars this time around and the latter placing in the top 10, again picking up 5 Stars.



Then there's Hartenberg, its standard label 2010 also making the top 10 in 2012 and now its super-premium The Eleanor 2012 featuring, the only other wine next to the Uva Mira to be rated 5 Stars, while Haskell Anvil and Paul Cluver are the other two repeat performers, these appearing in the top 10 this year and last.

While Elgin and the wards of Hemel-en-Aarde like to lay claim to being Chardonnay country, this year's top 10 is dominated by Stellenbosch with seven wines from this district included. Elgin and Upper Hemel-en-Aarde get a look-in via Paul Cluver 2013 and Newton Johnson Southend 2013 respectively while Chamonix Reserve 2013 ensures Franschoek is not completely out in the cold.

As for more general trends, the judges felt reduction was becoming a bit of an issue – a subtle note of “flint” or “burnt matchstick” can add complexity but sometimes sulphur management seemed a bit ham-fisted. “Sulphur was a bugbear for me. It shouldn't become a flavourant,” remarked Pietersen.

A lot of the wines also showed pronounced oak character but the judges tried to be lenient of this – without sufficient oaking, Chardonnay quickly becomes anemic.

Perhaps the biggest concern of all, however, was how many “funky” wines were on display, which is to say wines more or less lacking primary fruit and showing nutty and even more savoury notes, the result of spontaneous fermentation and/or oxidative winemaking.

Such wines were typically not short of interest but by the same token lacked Chardonnay typicity or any sense of place. One imagines that the rise of the “natural wine” movement is having an influence here but all winemaking rigour should not be forsaken – Burgundy learnt some hard lessons regarding “premox” (premature oxidation) when winemakers adopted a hands-off approach not so long ago and it is hoped South Africa can avoid the same anguish.

A few quibbles aside, South Africa best Chardonnay is world class, as international commentators from eRobertParker.com's Neal Martin to Tim Atkin MW are now recognising. For a long time, this has been available at a discount and to some extent still is, witness the 4½ Star-rated Longridge 2013 available for all of R100 a bottle. This must inevitably change – according to the very basic economic principle of increasing demand and finite supply – but the process will take a while and punters are advised to take advantage of the situation in the meantime.



TOP 10

FIVE STARS

Hartenberg The Eleanor 2012

Price: R210

W.O. Stellenbosch. A classic nose showing citrus, subtle oak, some leesy complexity and a hint of burnt matchstick. Plenty of reined-in power – arresting fruit purity but also good weight and texture, zippy acidity lending balance. The finish is long and savoury. Drink now – 2017.

Uva Mira 2013

Price: R600

W.O. Stellenbosch. Peach and citrus, a pleasant leesy quality, subtle vanilla and spice. Sweet, ripe fruit offset by tangy acidity. Complex and balanced with a savoury finish. Extraordinary richness and depth of flavour –wow! Drink now – 2018.

FOUR AND A HALF STARS

Chamonix Reserve 2013

Price: R250

Compelling nose of peach, lemon and blue orange plus some roast almonds. Powerful but balanced – sweet, juicy fruit and tangy acidity. Drink now – 2018.

Eikendal 2013

Price: R108

W.O. Stellenbosch. A hint of reduction on an otherwise shy nose. A wine of real poise - pure citrus fruit, oak just about perfectly judged and a great line of acidity. Great depth of flavour and a long, pithy finish. Drink now – 2018.

Grand Vin de Glenelly 2013

Price: R135

W.O. Stellenbosch. Blossom, lime and lemon plus subtle vanilla. Pure and focused – good fruit concentration, racy acidity, carefully judged oak. Layers of flavour and a long finish. Drink now – 2018.

Haskell Anvil 2012

Price: R290

W.O. Stellenbosch. Complex nose showing lime and lemon, some leesy complexity, attractive oak and hint of burnt matchstick. Rich and full but balanced by bright acidity. Layers of flavour, the overall impression savoury. Drink now – 2017.

Longridge 2013

Price: R100

W.O. Stellenbosch. Lovely floral fragrance, lemon and some yeasty complexity on the nose. Weightless intensity on the palate – real depth of flavour and great freshness, the finish long and saline. Subtle and elegant. Drink now – 2018.

Newton Johnson Southend 2013

Price: R125

W.O. Upper Hemel-en-Aarde Valley. White peach, lemon, subtle vanilla and some burnt matchstick. Rich and broad with sweet, ripe fruit upfront before a saline finish. Has good texture making for nicely coated acidity. Drink now – 2018.

Paul Cluver 2013

Price: R150

W.O. Elgin. Lime and lemon, attractive oak and some not unpleasant reduction. Good weight and texture plus fresh acidity, the wine carrying its oak very well – provides a delicious sweet 'n sour sensation. Drink now – 2018.

Stellenrust Barrel Fermented 2013

Price: R115

W.O. Stellenbosch. White peach, lime and lemon plus an intriguing leesy note and subtle vanilla. Great fruit expression – this wine is wonderfully juicy and fresh before a saline finish. Drink now – 2018.

REST OF LINE-UP

FOUR STARS

Bartinney 2013

Peach and citrus, some yeasty complexity and attractive oak. Quintessential modern Chardonnay. Drink now – 2016.

Bouchard Finlayson Kaaimansgat 2013

Citrus, vanilla and some burnt matchstick on the nose. Good fruit purity and zippy acidity while the finish is long and savoury. Drink now – 2018.

Chamonix 2013

Very expressive on the nose showing stone fruit, blue orange and some earthiness. Sweet fruited, rich and full but balanced by tangy acidity. Drink now – 2018.

Crystallum Clay Shales 2013

Exotic nose showing peach, lemon, orange and some notes of honey and nuttiness suggesting evolution. Rich and broad but has plenty of interest. Drink now.

De Wetshof Bateleur 2012

Oak and some subtle notes of honey and nuts on the nose – primary fruit not much in evidence. Rich and broad with moderate acidity. Finishes gently savoury. Drink now – 2015.

Delaire Graff 2013

Subtle oak derived notes on a generally shy nose. A big wine which nevertheless shows good composure – lemon-cream flavour, a good line of acidity and oak very well integrated. Drink now – 2018.

Glen Carlou Quartz Stone 2012

Citrus, honey and also some nutty, savoury notes – already quite advanced. Big and powerful – delivers plenty of flavour. Drink now.

Hartenberg 2012

Lime, lemon, peach and an intriguing leesy note. Good fruit concentration and coated acidity. Has detail and length. Drink now – 2015.

Iona Elgin 2013

Expressive nose showing peach and citrus plus a hint of oak. Lean in a good way – pure fruit and really fresh acidity before a savoury finish. Has real complexity and finesse. Drink now – 2018.

Journey's End Destination 2013

Peach, citrus plus subtle vanilla and spice on the nose. Good fruit concentration and bright acidity but oak could arguably play less of a role. Drink now – 2018.

Koelfontein 2012

Citrus, oak and plenty of secondary character on the nose and palate. Thick textured with coated and acidity before a savoury finish. Drink now – 2015.

KWV Cathedral Cellar 2013

Lime and lemon plus a definite leesy quality on the nose – rather exotic. Good fruit concentration and tangy acidity before a slightly nutty finish. Drink now – 2016.

KWV The Mentors 2013

Lime and lemon plus oatmeal and attractive oak spice. Good fruit concentration and bright acidity. Big but not without nuance and well balanced. Drink now – 2018.

Meerlust 2013

Citrus, white peach, some yeast complexity and plenty of oak. Rich and full but retains balance – a statement wine. Drink now – 2016.

Môreson Mercator Premium 2013

Expressive nose showing ripe citrus and some waxy notes. Succulent sweet fruit and fresh acidity, the oak well integrated. Carefully put together. Drink now – 2018.

Mulderbosch 2013

Citrus blossom, white peach and lemon on the nose. Good fruit concentration, racy acidity and well-managed oak. Weightless intensity and excellent balance. Drink now – 2018.

Newton Johnson Family Vineyards 2013

The nose shows ripe citrus, some leesy character and a hint of reduction. Good core of fruit and bright acidity before a savoury finish – properly complex. Drink now – 2018.

Oak Valley Elgin 2013

Vanilla, attractive oak spice and some reduction on the nose. The palate is big and rich and obviously aspires to seriousness. Long, savoury finish. Drink now – 2016.

Paul Cluver Woolworths Block 2A Single Vineyard 2013

Citrus, vanilla and a toasty note on the nose. Oak dominates at this stage but pure fruit and racy acidity suggests this wine has a good future ahead of it. Drink 2014 – 2018.

Radford Dale 2013

Very primary with citrus blossom, lime and lemon plus attractive oak spice. Subtle and quite light bodied with a good line of acidity and a pithy finish. Drink now – 2018.



Richard Kershaw Elgin Clonal Selection 2013

Lemons, oranges, serious oak and some reduction on the nose. Super-sexy with plenty of ripe fruit and nicely coated acidity. Good depth of flavour and a long finish. Drink now – 2018.

Rustenberg Five Soldiers 2012

Citrus and stone fruit plus vanilla and some reduction. Good fruit concentration but oak currently to the fore. Rich and broad in the mouth with coated acidity. Drink now – 2017.

Sumaridge 2012

Lemon and orange plus toasty oak and a slight yeasty note. Rich and full balanced by tangy acidity. Drink now – 2017.

Thelema 2013

Citrus plus pronounced reduction on the nose. Lime, lemon and some leesy character on the palate. Thick textured with tangy acidity before a savoury finish. Drink now – 2016.

Tokara Reserve Collection Stellenbosch 2013

Shy nose but the palate shows massive fruit concentration, a great line of acidity and well judged oak – lime and lemon flavours upfront before a long, savoury finish. Drink now – 2018.

Uva Mira The Single Tree 2013

Citrus and attractive oak spice on the nose. Lemon-cream flavour and particularly bright acidity. Well assembled and may gain extra complexity with time. Drink now – 2016.

Vriesenhof 2013

Vanilla and some yeasty complexity on a generally shy nose. The palate is rich and broad with lemon cream flavour. Pleasantly sweet 'n sour. Drink now – 2016.

Yardstick 2012

Peach, citrus and some leesy character. Sweet, rich and ripe before a long, savoury finish – a generous wine well executed. Drink now – 2017.

THREE AND A HALF STARS***Ataraxia 2012***

Citrus, peach and subtle vanilla. Good fruit expression with tangy acidity and well-judged oak – already quite accessible. Drink now – 2015.

Boschendal Elgin Series 2011

Peach, honey plus a yeasty (stale beer) note on the nose. The palate is rich but appears quite developed already. Sweet upfront before a savoury finish. A-typical. Drink now.



Cape Point Vineyards 2013

Citrus, vanilla and some yeasty character on the nose. Rich and broad with moderate acidity. A bit short of detail. Drink now – 2016.

Crystallum The Agnes 2013

Somewhat peculiar but interesting with citrus through tropical fruit, honey and definite leesy notes. Rich and full with tangy acidity and a savoury finish. Already appears quite evolved. Drink now.

DeMorgenzon Reserve 2013

Overt oak on the nose and palate. Very forceful, rich and ripe. Thick textured making for nicely coated acidity but ultimately rather hard work to drink. Drink now – 2016.

De Wetshof The Site 2013

Forthcoming nose showing citrus and attractive oak spice. The palate is light bodied with fresh acidity and a pithy finish. Nicely understated. Drink now – 2016.

Edgebaston - Finlayson Family Wines 2013

Peach, citrus, a hint of oak and some yeasty complexity. Medium bodied and well balanced – already very accessible. Drink now – 2016.

Glen Carlou 2013

Lemon through orange plus some yeasty, malty notes on the nose. Rich and full with sweet fruit and tangy acidity – has interest but not classic. Drink now – 2016.

Groot Constantia 2013

Rather reduced on the nose but shows intense apple and citrus plus prominent oak on the palate. Rich and full with rather tart acidity before a long, savoury finish. Needs time. Drink 2014 – 2018.

Hamilton Russell Vineyards 2013

Lemon, orange, yellow peach and dried mango plus some nutty character. Powerful and weighty thanks to super-ripe fruit and lots of oak. A bit short of freshness. Drink now – 2016.

Jordan Barrel Fermented 2013

Peach, citrus and a yeasty quality on the nose and palate. Sweet fruited with coated acidity. Plenty of vooma. Drink now – 2016.

Jordan Nine Yards 2013

Expressive nose showing marmalade, ginger and spice and toasty oak. Rich and ripe with sweet fruit and moderate acidity. Flamboyant style. Drink now – 2016.

Julien Schaal Evidence 2013 (magnum)

White peach and citrus on the nose and palate. Lighter style with clean fruit and fresh acidity. Currently quite shut down but shows refinement and should reward ageing. Drink 2014 – 2018.

Rustenberg Stellenbosch 2013

Peach and citrus on the nose and palate. Good fruit concentration, bright acidity and well-judged oak but lacks real detail. Drink now – 2016.

Vergelegen Reserve 2013

The nose shows citrus and peach, a definite yeasty character and oak spice. The palate is rich and full with soft acidity and prominent oak. Drink now – 2016.

Warwick White Lady 2013

Hints of peach and oak spice on a generally shy nose. The palate is full and creamy with coated acidity. Somewhat old fashioned. Drink now – 2016.

Waterford Single Vineyard 2013

Shy nose. The palate shows lime and some oak spice – made in a lighter style, this is clean and correct. Drink now – 2016.

THREE STARS***Bouchard Finlayson Missionvale 2012***

Prominent oak and a not unpleasant note of reduction on the nose. Rich and full with a smooth texture and coated acidity. Fruit arguably a bit lacking. Drink now.

Fleur du Cap Unfiltered 2013

Peach, ripe citrus and oatmeal on the nose and palate. Appears sweet and soft for undemanding drinking. Drink now.

Vondeling 2013

Lime and lemon plus subtle vanilla. Well balanced but straightforward. Drink now.

TWO AND A HALF STARS***Rupert & Rothschild Baroness Nadine 2012***

Oak to the fore but also peach and citrus plus a yeasty note. Appears oxidative and a little clumsy. Drink now.

Sterhuis Barrel Selection 2013

Unpleasant leesy note (curdled milk) plus oak on the nose. Sweet fruited with soft acidity. Seems confectioned. Drink now.