

I tasted a really good Sauvignon Blanc from a new Constantia winery recently. The property is called Constantia Royale, it has a few hectares of vineyard (with some more on the way) located at a lower altitude than many of the better known producers. The wine is perceptibly more sumptuous than the region's traditional examples, though still pleasantly free of lugubriousness. It takes quite a lot to get me enthusiastic about sauvignon blanc, so my pleasure was tinged with an element of surprise.

I've said some very rude things about the variety in my time - though always with the caveat that, unless the vineyards are properly sited, the winemaker has the unenviable task of trying to fix something which arrives broken in his cellar. It doesn't automatically follow that if the vines have been planted exactly where they should be happiest, the wines make themselves. While you can't produce good wine without good fruit, it's easy to mess up something as fragile as sauvignon blanc. Happily for most of the country's producers, their customers generally want something refreshing and crisp, served like Castle Lite, "muchee coldee" (to quote Le Carre). And, like Castle Lite, the colder it is, the more palatable it becomes.

Sauvignon blanc has been Constantia's calling card for almost 30 years - in other words, almost from the beginning of the modern era of sauvignon blanc in the Cape. In those days Constantia was probably the coolest of the viticultural regions, so, unsurprisingly, its wines were palpably better than the junk being produced in places better suited to port and muscadell. Its producers enjoyed a special reputation for their sauvignons - and accordingly were able to charge more for them. And since the cultivar is the ultimate cash cow (from harvest to loot-in-the-bank in under 12 months), it's easy to understand why they didn't want to jinx things by applying any dramatic changes to a tried and tested formula.

Except - thirty years is a long time in the history of the modern Cape wine industry. Several cooler viticultural areas have been established in that time, canopy management has become vastly more scientific and winemaking is now more technical. If you are a serious sauvignon consumer in South Africa today, there are countless styles and flavour profiles on offer. Instead of the bottled greenpepper/capsicum (due to excessive methoxypyrazines) which chased many serious wine-drinkers away from the cultivar, you can now get the more tropical (thiol) style, wines with more nuanced whiffs of passionfruit or hints of blackcurrant leaves, and also oaked examples which deliver a creamy mid-palate dimension to what is usually a more Bordeaux-like offering.

In short, Constantia is going to need to up its game - and, in fairness there's clear evidence that, for example, the new-ish owners of Klein Constantia are doing just that. But more importantly, producers in the region are going to have to do some serious belly-gazing if they are to reduce their dependence on a variety and style of wine for which the options have increased significantly in the past couple of decades. You would expect better chardonnays from Constantia - but no breath-taking examples come to mind. More importantly, it's hard to get excited about the reds. Eagle's Nest makes good shiraz and Constantia Glen some decent Bordeaux blends which, now that the vineyards have some maturity, yield fine wines for those willing to let them acquire the bottle-age they so desperately require. It's hard enough to sell the more herbal notes international punters happily accept from Bordeaux, but from nowhere else. Without time to round these off, the alternative has been to over-ripen the fruit, and then to use technical strategies like reverse osmosis to remove excess alcohol.

That's Photo-shop, not real photography, and clearly no one has been fooled. It's not too

late for this small but super-premium area to come right - but it's going to have to give up its loyal addiction to unremarkable sauvignon blanc to get there.