

Until recently there was pretty much general consensus that the Cape's best chance at a world class red wine would be Cabernet-based. Up to the 1980s, Cabernet Sauvignon was the country's only real so-called noble cultivar. There were small plantings of shiraz, but almost all of the vineyards were badly virused and the wines emerged leathery rather than bright-fruited or peppery. Cabernet, on the other hand, while no less virused, managed to produce much purer wine.

South Africa's first modern merlot vineyards came into production at the end of the 1970s and the variety was expected to perform the same role in our wine as it did in Bordeaux. Meerlust Merlot and Meerlust Rubicon swiftly became the Cape's most sought-after red wines. Other properties launched ultra-premium blends, initially with a merlot addition to their cabernet sauvignon, but later with some - or all - of other Bordeaux varieties. Whereas the top wine from Kanonkop, for example, had been a cabernet sauvignon, in time the estate's highest priced red was the Paul Sauer proprietary blend. Within a decade, as plantings of cabernet franc and petit verdot (and more recently malbec) came on stream, the Cape's Bordeaux blends came to ape their Medoc models even more completely.

But then a funny thing happened: with the end of the country's political isolation we discovered that our much-vaunted cabernets were not as much admired in export markets as they were at home. Critics berated them for being too herbal, not plush and rich as Californian or Australian examples, nor as overtly intense as the finest Bordeaux reds. Very few achieved significant export volumes at decent prices. At the same time the domestic market was discovering alternatives: availability of pinot noir increased - and the quality producers of the great Burgundian cultivar conspired to keep prices high enough to imbue the variety with cachet in its own right. Then, as the Swartland became fashionable, red Rhone cultivars - shiraz, grenache, and mourvedre - attracted a following.

Cabernet still ticks along nicely: producers with a long established reputation do well enough, but the variety's dominance of the top-end of the market seems distant history. Among this year's Platter guide's five star wines there are four cabernets and four cabernet blends, compared with nine shirazes. Cabernet-based wines account for about 9% of all the five star laureates, compared with the 2006 guide where the cabernet and cabernet blends make up 25% of the total number.

Cabernet's loss of prestige has had an impact on the appellation where it performs best. At the turn of the century Stellenbosch was the country's most prominent region. Today it is not uncommon to hear (admittedly quite geeky) critics ask whether there's anything worth enthusing about from what was once the South Africa's most famous wine producing area. It seems that fashion, rather than patience, has become the hallmark feature of the Cape's fine wine trade. Cabernet's slightly old-fashioned image counts against it, as does its intrinsic inability to satisfy the demands of those seeking instant gratification. It needs at least ten years in the bottle before anything of its potential complexity reveals itself.

For wine drinkers serious about great wine however, cabernet has much to offer, and Stellenbosch remains its South African heartland. Many of the region's sometime legendary estates still have great vineyards, while several of the relative newcomers produce fine wines, usually from more recent, virus-free plantings. For classic cabernets and cabernet-blends look no further than Alto, Meerlust, Rustenberg, Kanonkop (Paul Sauer and Cabernet Sauvignon), Le Riche, Thelema, Jordan, Vergelegen, Vriesenhof,

Simonsig (The Garland), Warwick and Neil Ellis among the longer established names, and Waterford, Delaire-Graff, Glenelly, Tokara and Morgenster among the newer producers. Avoid alcohol levels of 15% or more (no matter how appealing the wines taste when young) and be willing to cellar your treasures. If this doesn't work for you, don't despair: there's a host of other cultivars from other appellations which deliver alcoholic fruit juice - entirely free of the risk of vinosity.