

The French drink Champagne pretty much right through the year. If they're not knocking off Port as an aperitif (France is still the largest export market for Douro fortified wines), they're probably popping a bottle of fizz as their guests walk through the door. For South Africans, sparkling wine consumption used to be limited to Christmas, New Year and family celebrations - though in the past few years we have begun to treat bubbly as more than just a special occasion beverage. A concerted national effort has seen consumption of Cap Classique increase by an average of about 15% annually over the past five years to roughly 7m bottles - roughly ten times the volume of the equally buoyant French Champagne sales in the country.

There are very few tricks to good Champagne-method sparkling wine. When Michel Bettane, probably France's best known wine commentator, was interviewed after judging the Cap Classique class at this year's Old Mutual Trophy Wine Show, he said that producing the right bubble by way of a second fermentation in the bottle is mechanical, technical, industrial. Getting the resultant fizz to have the right flavour depends firstly on the quality and structure of the base wine, and then on the length of time the wine remains on its yeast lees after bottle fermentation.

Until the present era of climate change, the Champagne district of France was at the northernmost limit of sustainable viticulture, and most years the fruit never ripened sufficiently to produce a decent still wine. High in acidity, slow evolving and puckeringly austere, it would have had no real commercial prospect but for the proximity of the region to the market of the French capital and the discovery of how to manage its transformation into bubbly. From this it should be clear that traditionally styled fizz needs crisp base wines. Since 2012 Boschendal's Lizelle Gerber, has been using only Elgin chardonnay and pinot noir for her cuvée - and the wines are palpably finer and more intense.

Chalky soils are equally important: they help to maintain lower pH levels in the juice and contribute a freshness to the final product. This explains why Robertson, with its lime-rich soils (similar to those of Champagne), is a great base wine source for Cap Classique. Graham Beck's Pieter Ferreira has been producing sparkling wine there for the past 25 years. Not all his fruit comes from the region but enough of it does to ensure that the range, from the standard non-vintage through to the Blanc de Blanc, has the edginess ordinarily associated with its French counterparts.

There's precious little that Ferreira still needs to learn about his speciality - though at a recent tasting he confessed that the importance of the glass of service had eluded him until quite recently. To illustrate the point, he served the same wine in a traditional, almost pencil-thin flute, in the new, wide-bowled Riedel glass and in a similarly generous fizz glass designed by French sommelier Philippe Jamesse.

There's no doubt that the narrow flute was the least successful, leaving the wine with no room to aerate and reveal its aromas. (There's growing consensus among Chefs des Caves in Champagne that most prestige cuvées could actually profit from decanting just prior to service.) While a tall glass helps to retain the bubble (which takes the old Champagne coupe out of the equation) the choice of a bulbous bubbly glass depends on your preferred style of fizz and whether it matters if you can't pour more than 4 people to a bottle.

Finally, the value of extended yeast contact is best illustrated through the recently released Krone RD 2001, the Cap Classique with the longest time on the lees (almost 15

years) of any of the bubbly in the market. One thing is certain, festive season Cape Classique drinkers are now spoiled for choice. There's almost no junk, pricing (except for prestige cuvées) is low, and, given the dramas of the past year, much to celebrate.