

THE ROUTE TO ALL GOOD WINE

Rank Outsider, 25 February 2005 by Amy Wislocki

Horse breeders vie for land with vineyard owners in Robertson, South Africa, where the lime-rich soils work wonders for racehorses and vines alike. AMY WISLOCKI looks at a region enjoying a steady rise in fortunes.

Robertson's winemakers are fed up. While South Africa is the current darling of the new wine world (in 2004 sales of South African wine in UK shops hit the 10% mark for the first time), producers in Robertson are getting little - or none - of the attention.

'We're two hours' drive from Cape Town, and we have a problem in getting the media coverage,' says Paul de Wet, fourth generation co-owner of Zandvliet Estate. 'Robertson just doesn't get the publicity,' echoes Danie de Wet of de Wetshof. But it's not all down to geography. Robertson has been, to a large extent, written off by wine critics as a serious wine-producing region as it has a long history of bulk wine production, and is also warmer than the cool-climate areas such as Elgin and Darling, which are currently making the headlines. It's just not cool to be warm.

Misconceptions

But the critics could be missing a trick. While true that Robertson has long, hot, dry summers and little rainfall compared with some other South African wine regions, cooling southeasterly breezes channel moisture-laden air into the valley, which is effectively a semi-desert surrounded by mountains. The Breede River, the lifeblood of the region, encourages humidity in its environs - and is a source of irrigation. And, most importantly, Robertson enjoys a large difference between day and night-time temperatures.

'Stellenbosch might be 32 degrees during a summer's day and 22 degrees at night, whereas here we'd be 35 degrees during the day, but dropping to 18 degrees at night,' explains Janette Bruwer of renowned Sauvignon Blanc producer Springfield Estate.

Springfield's winemaker, Abrie Bruwer agrees that the climate brings its own benefits. 'The hot, dry days and cold nights mean that we don't need to spray much, and we can let the leaves hang loose to protect the grapes from the sun. It's unheard of to get greenness in Sauvignon Blanc here - there's too much light and heat.'

Zandvliet's de Wet likens Robertson to the Rhône: 'We have a chalkiness here that is not shared by other regions in South Africa. Of course, it's much warmer here than in the northern Rhône, but we have a gap in the mountains that allows in cooling, afternoon breezes, off the sea.'

The success of Springfield, de Wetshof and a few other key names has encouraged Robertson producers to move towards quality production, and there is a palpable sense of excitement as you travel the wine route. Time and again, you hear the same story: the winery has been producing wine for generations - often alongside other crops such as peaches or apricots - but recently decided to start bottling under its own label instead of selling in bulk. Robertson started as a wine region in the 1900s, but only in the last few years has the bug really caught hold and encouraged small growers everywhere to focus on high-quality, dry wines.

New chapter

'Stellenbosch has already arrived,' says Janette Bruwer, 'and has realised its potential. But it's become so commercial that you don't see the heart of the winemaking. Visit Robertson and it will often be the winemaker himself pouring you a sample. Hell, if he likes your face he might even put you in his pick-up and take you up into the vineyards for the rest of the day.'

There seems to be a deep-rooted terroir awareness here, with the focus on farming rather than winemaking. Just take some of the names of the region's wines: Springfield's Life from Stone Sauvignon Blanc, Zandvliet Kalkveld (Limestone) Shiraz, Goedverwacht's An Acre of Stone Shiraz, and Weltevrede's Rolling Stones Sauvignon Blanc (referring to the terroir rather than the band).

The relative youth of the region in terms of quality wine means producers are still experimenting. Springfield's Abrie Bruwer decided to age a palette of Cabernet Sauvignon under the sea to study the effects on ageing (it aged faster), while Weltevrede's winemaker Philip Jonker recently used ostrich egg white (instead of the far cheaper chicken egg white) to fine a batch of his Tricolore red.

As quality increases, land is going up in price. 'It costs around two thirds of the price that it would to buy land in Stellenbosch,' says Janette Bruwer, 'but prices are rising all the time - especially as we're competing with the horse breeders, who value the limestone in the soil as it strengthens the horses' bones.'

The limestone effect

Robertson has traditionally been a white wine area - Chardonnay, in particular, thrives here - but red wine production is growing every year, with a focus on Shiraz. Most of the top Shiraz producers here are proponents of the Rhône style, citing the limestone soils and the big day/night drop in temperature as the secrets behind the varietal's success. 'This is perfect Shiraz country and it's not surprising that plantings are expanding,' says Jacques Roux, winemaker at the impressive Robertson Winery cooperative. 'We get a Rhône style, with a lovely peppery character, and both red and black fruits.' These flavours shine through in the winery's eminently drinkable Wolfkloof Shiraz.

Robertson Winery is a good example of the positive advances in quality in the region. The coop represents 43 growers, all of whom own a share in the company. Founded way back in 1941, it has recently launched a flagship Shiraz, Number One Constitution Road. Made in tiny amounts - 16 barrels, to be precise - the first vintage, 2002, is deep and brooding, and has lots of potential. The coop has also released a new range of bottlings from single properties, which has led to a sharp increase in quality among the growers, competing to be chosen.

Zandvliet, which has rebranded for the UK and US markets under the Enon label, is another high-profile producer who has long believed that Robertson's future as a fine wine region lies with Shiraz. Like Roux, owner Paul de Wet is keen to stress the Rhône style, and is proud of the fact that Paul Jaboulet is both a close friend and mentor.

Surprisingly, Springfield Estate produces no Shiraz, and has no plans to start. Janette Bruwer explains why they are in the minority: 'Shiraz likes limestone, but we're using our limestone band for Chardonnay vines. We like Shiraz and we could make good Shiraz, but we've only been exporting for 10 years and we'd prefer to perfect what we have first.' It's such a steep learning curve in the region, she adds, that the most recent vintage is usually the best.

The upward trend has not gone unnoticed. South African wine writer John Platter describes Robertson's 'flashes of red wine brilliance' in the 2005 edition of his annual guide to the wines of South Africa. As word continues to spread, the road between Cape Town and Robertson will only get busier.