



Paarl Wine Region Dominates South Africa's First Top 10 Merlot Competition

Merlot wines from the Paarl region led the way in this year's inaugural Hallo Merlot Top 10 Competition committed to honouring South Africa's best wines made from the country's most popular grape cultivar. From the 10 top-scoring wines, four originated from Paarl wineries, followed by three from Stellenbosch, with Merlot producers in Elgin, the Swartland and Constantia making up the balance.

In the honours list of Merlot Top 10 accolades, Paarl was represented by the following wines: Glen Carlou Collection 2018, Anura Reserve 2020, Vondeling Barrel Selection 2019 and Landskroon 2020. Stellenbosch held three Top 10 spots thanks to Delaire Graff Banghoek Reserve 2019, Bein Little Merlot 2019 and Dornier 2019.

Org de Rac 2019 (Swartland), Groot Constantia 2018 (Constantia) and Elgin Vintners 2019 completed the Top 10 list.

Organised by the South African Merlot Forum, the first Hello Merlot Top 10 Competition attracted 71 entries from wineries spread throughout the Cape.

Dawie Botha, chairman of the Merlot Forum and winemaker at Anthonij Rupert Wines, said the results of the first Top 10 Merlot Competition underscored the overall commitment to quality by South African winemakers crafting Merlot, as well as the regional terroir-expression found in the producing of these wines.

"As the top-selling single varietal red wine in South Africa, the missing link in the country's Merlot offerings has been the lack of a competition to assess the state of the wines made from this variety as well as to recognise the top producers," says Botha.

"This inaugural Top 10 has done just that with 71 wines entered from all major Cape wine regions, showing diversity of terroir harnessed by a collective commitment to making excellent wines from this esteemed Bordeaux variety. With local wine drinkers buying more Merlot than any other single red variety, this competition aims to create an awareness of the high standard of winemaking and the specific regional identities found in the country's Merlot offering. The popularity of Merlot is the result

of wine lovers experiencing quality when they are enjoying this wine, and the competition also wishes to celebrate this fact.”

The Merlot grape has had a mercurial rise in popularity among Cape wine farmers over the past 40 years. In 1982 the country had a mere 81 ha planted to Merlot which has increased to over 5 400 ha today.

“Besides the increase in Merlot plantings over the past four decades, winemakers are seeing Merlot expressing the unique geographical identity of the South African wine landscape, giving the attractive drinkability of the variety a true fingerprint of Cape terroir,” says Botha.

The Merlot Top 10 was judged by Cathy van Zyl (MW), wine writer Malu Lambert, critic Spencer Fondaumiere, Tarryn Vincent from Reciprocal Wine Company and Matthew Copeland, cellar master of Vondeling Wines who also served as panel-convenor.

Copeland says it was no surprise to see the Top 10 awards dominated by younger wines. “The judges were unanimous that the more youthful wines showed freshness, elegance and polish,” he says. “Obviously terroir plays an important role, but astute winemaking and a focussed approach to expressing unique Cape nuances from the Merlot grape was a key feature of this year’s offering. South African Merlot is in a great place, a fact highlighted by this competition which, to my mind, is going to go from strength to strength.”

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