

# Taking root



Efforts to seek out and preserve old-vine Chenin Blanc are currently reaping rewards for South Africa's winemakers. Tim Atkin MW finds out how one of the country's oldest varieties has become its newest source of world-class wines

THE CAPE WINELANDS are some of the most beautiful in the world, all craggy peaks, sweeping vistas and cobalt blue skies.

By these dramatic, almost cinematic standards, the Mev (Mrs) Kirsten vineyard is something of a disappointment.

Situated in the Jonkershoek Valley, close to the untidy urban sprawl of Stellenbosch, it has none of the grandeur of some of South Africa's greatest crus. And yet this 0.7ha parcel of

Chenin Blanc is undeniably special, a distinction that's reflected in its historical importance as well as the quality of its wine.

'It's a small vineyard, but it's the one that ignited my love of old vineyards,' says Sadie Family winemaker Eben Sadie, whose Old Vine Series includes some of South Africa's best whites and reds.

'I like the fact that I can't predict what it's going to do from one year to the next. It has a

**Below: Andrea and Chris Mullineux in the vineyard**



*'As people have become aware of these heritage vineyards, they've stopped pulling them out'* Rosa Kruger (left)

way of breathing in the city light. It's like Stellenbosch is present in the wine.'

First made by Sadie in 2006, Mev Kirsten dates to 1905 and is the Cape's most venerable Chenin block, even if vines have been added and replaced since. It is also, Sadie says, 'the vineyard that created the wave'. Three waves actually: for site-specific Chenin Blancs; for old vines; and (more of a ripple than a breaker) for more ambitious pricing of Cape wines.

Sadie wasn't the first in South Africa to take Chenin seriously. Ken Forrester's The FMC – a self-confident attempt to 'make the best wine in the world and sell it at the same price as a top Chardonnay' – was released in 2000, two years after its eponymous owner had founded the Chenin Blanc Association of South Africa. But Mev Kirsten ignited a new level of interest in one of the country's oldest cultivars.

We don't know for certain, but the variety known as Steen or Stein may have arrived in the Cape as early as the 17th century, although it wasn't until 1963 that Professor CJ Orffer >

