



Photograph: Tim Atkin



‘For much of its history, Chenin was dismissed as a “workhorse grape”, good only for bulk wine production’

Above: Adi Badenhorst works with Chenin Blanc vines planted in the 1950s and 1960s

of Stellenbosch University identified it as Chenin Blanc. Antiquity isn't the same thing as nobility, however. For much of its history, Chenin was dismissed as a 'workhorse grape', good only for bulk wine production. Numerically at least, Chenin is the Cape's leading grape, with 18.5% of its 95,775ha. It overtook Semillon in the 1950s thanks to the KWV (Koöperatieve Wijnbouwers Vereniging), which controlled quotas and planting rights under the National Party and encouraged farmers to plant Chenin widely, often for brandy production. That's why it's grown all over the Cape and why, almost by default, it accounts for a disproportionately large number of the 1,377 vineyards over 35 years old; the definition of a heritage vineyard, according to South African Wine Industry Information and Systems.

Heritage vineyards

It's worth pausing here to say something about old vines in general and, more specifically, about the work of Rosa Kruger and her recently relaunched Old Vine Project (OVP). By the standards of Spain, Italy or France, not to mention California, Australia and parts of South America, the Cape does not have a lot of ancient vineyards. Kruger estimates that there are only 2,644ha that 'could make wine with a special character and purity', although a further 4,000ha are between 30 and 35 years old. There are two main reasons for this comparative paucity: viruses, especially leaf roll virus, shorten a vine's lifespan and economics. Once a vineyard dips below a certain yield, farmers are tempted to pull it out in a country where grape prices are still low. Old vines are a precious resource in South Africa, and one that the OVP is committed to preserving. Kruger has been cataloguing these special sites since 2002 and published her first list in 2014, adding to it as further parcels emerge. 'As people have become aware of these heritage vineyards, they've stopped pulling them out,' she says. The key is to

encourage more cooperatives to join the OVP's 35 members. 'That's where most of the old vines are,' adds Kruger, 'and many of the wines they produce disappear into blends. The encouraging thing is that the cooperatives are starting to put them aside and vinify them separately.' How much of this is Chenin Blanc? André Morgenthal of the OVP believes that it's about 53%, although no one knows for sure. The Cape's most ancient blocks are planted with Cinsault, Muscat or, in the case of Sadie's 'T Voetpad in the Swartland, a field blend of white varieties, including Palomino and Semillon, but Chenin is the largest source of old-vine wines overall. It's also significant that many of the best Chenin Blanc producers have joined the OVP, including Alheit Vineyards, Anthonij Rupert, David & Nadia, DeMorgenzon, Hogan, Huis van Chevalerie, Gabriëlskloof, Mullineux & Leeu Family Wines, Reyneke and The



Sadie Family Wines. Others, such as AA Badenhorst, Beaumont, Botanica Wines, Kaapzicht, Ken Forrester, Longridge, Mulderbosch, Patatsfontein, Raats, Rall, Spier, Spioenkop and Stellenrust are outside the fold, either because they don't have vines that qualify for heritage status, or because they can't face 'another feast of paperwork', according to Forrester. The 35-year hurdle is arbitrary in some respects. Is Donovan Rall's Ava Chenin less good because it's made from 20-year-old vines? Not in my book, but you have to set the bar somewhere and 35 is still comparatively young. **Fine wine ethos** Chenin Blanc is a grape variety with many faces, capable of making wines in a variety of styles. In fact, one of its advantages as a workhorse grape is its versatility and drinkability. Chris Alheit of Alheit Vineyards says that >

Above: Chenin Blanc vineyards at Bot River estate Gabriëlskloof
Left: Chenin Blanc grapes for Alheit's Radio Lazarus cost more than twice the price of Stellenbosch Cabernet Sauvignon