

Chenin is less forgiving than some people imagine – the picking window can be as narrow as two days in some sites – and that the best examples need to be handled like any fine wine. For that, in essence, is what top Chenin has become in the space of a decade.

Chenin now commands some of the highest prices (up to R20,000 a ton in the case of Alheit's Radio Lazarus, which is more than twice the rate for Stellenbosch Cabernet Sauvignon) and is slowly changing the game. 'People are all over old-vine Chenin Blanc like spider monkeys,' he says.

Talking to some of the best Chenin growers, it's clear that this is not before time. South Africa's wine industry is in a parlous state right now because of low yields (partly due to the drought of the last three years) and equally low grape prices. No wonder farmers are desperate or switching to other crops, such as citrus fruit or rooibos (redbush) tea. Even a famous grower such as Henk Laing, who sells to Botanica Wines, Fram and Savage from his farm on the West Coast, says, 'I couldn't survive from selling grapes alone'.

Christa von La Chevallerie, who is the most awarded grower in the Swartland, supplies

grapes to Alheit, Rall, Chris and Andrea Mullineux, Peter-Allan Finlayson and Leon Coetzee of The Fledge & Co – as well as making a sparkling wine and (since 2017) a still Chenin Blanc called Nuwedam under her own Huis van Chevallerie brand. She told me that one farmer in Villiersdorp in the Overberg makes more from windfall pears than grapes. Von La Chevallerie gets a much better price for her sought-after Chenin, of course, but even she says that what she's paid barely covers her costs, so low are the yields on her farm.

People who buy from von La Chevallerie might disagree, but Kruger thinks Basie van Lill is the best Chenin grower in South Africa. 'It's like he knows each of his vines personally,' she says. Small, wiry and devoted to his wife and business partner, Rita, Basie would be a millionaire if he lived in Napa or Burgundy, but here on the West Coast, he lives a simple life. His 22ha on Citrusdal Mountain supply grapes for two of the country's most celebrated whites: Sadie's Skurfberg and Alheit's Magnetic North Mountain Makstok. The celebrity hasn't changed his approach: hard work, long hours, filigree attention to detail.

What makes this site so special? It's partly

WINE TASTING

'Old-vine Chenin seems to have an extra dimension of flavour, focus and intensity'



Right: Chris Alheit makes Magnetic North Mountain Makstok from old-vine Chenin Blanc



Right: one of the top Chenin Blanc growers, Basie van Lill, and wife Rita

diurnal variation, partly altitude (550m) and partly the marked ocean breezes. The soils here are sandstone over clay, the vines dry farmed, naturally fertilised and very old. But taste the Sadie and Alheit wines side by side, produced from blocks that are a few hundred metres apart, and you can see that the hand of the winemaker plays a role too. Skurfberg uses grapes from two other sites, so it's a less pure expression of the van Lill farm, but they are both remarkable old-vine whites.

Golden age

The quality of the best Chenin Blancs has never been better. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that we are living in a golden age for this most distinctive South African import and that Chenin, along with Chardonnay, is one of the Cape's two best white grapes. The key areas, where many of the oldest vines are to be found, are Citrusdal Mountain, Stellenbosch and the Swartland, but I've had outstanding Chenins from Bot River, Bredekloof, Elgin, Montagu, Olifants River, Piekenierskloof and Robertson over the past 12 months.

Many of these are made from old vines – well, old for South Africa – but that's not their only defining feature. Soil type (sandstone, granite, shale, ferricrete and clay among others), altitude, oak source and age, picking dates, proximity to the ocean, lees contact and residual sugar levels all have an influence too, as does the thumbprint of the winemaker. And yet, all things considered, old-vine Chenin seems to have an extra dimension of flavour, focus and intensity. Mrs Anna Kirsten, who passed away in April 2015, will live on, both in the Stellenbosch vineyard that bears her name and in the timeless, world-class wine it produces. >

'Chenin now commands some of the highest prices and is slowly changing the game'

Tim Atkin MW is an award-winning wine writer and leading commentator on the Cape. He publishes an annual report on its wines at www.timatkin.com

Below: winemaker Donovan Rall works with growers in Swartland and Stellenbosch



Photographs: Tim Atkin (3)