

# 'Wines that reflect the earth': Explore the extensive variety of chenin blanc

**Looming out from my computer screen is an aroma wheel. It's big and comprehensive. Think of any fruit you like, from grapefruit and guava to watermelon and fig, and it's there. Spices, too, starting with cloves and white pepper. Plus some sensations you'd probably never expect in wine, such as custard or straw (writes Liz Sagues).**

Yet all these 60-plus aromas are found in a single grape variety, from a single country. The grape is chenin blanc, the place South Africa.

There's history here. Vines have been planted in South Africa since the mid-17th century, and the oldest survivors are more than 120 years old. Chenin is a youngster among these, from the 1940s, but it is by far the most prevalent variety in this wonderful living legacy of old vines. Not long ago most were threatened with extinction, but now wise growers rightly nurture them.

"Old vines make wines that reflect the earth and the terroir they grow in," argues Rosa Kruger, founder of the Old Vine Project. "They are a monument to the farmer's love of his or her land."

The project aims, she says, "to focus the minds of winegrowers, winemakers and all wine drinkers on the benefits that come with age in vines". Helping to do so is the introduction of the OVP Certified Heritage Vineyards seal; to carry it, wines must come from vines at least 35 years old.

Over recent weeks, I've enjoyed some fine examples of South African chenin, both from old vines and younger ones whose growers' practices are so different from the days when demand dictated massive production and



Old-vine landscape in Franschhoek, South Africa

Picture: GIDEON NEL, COURTESY OF THE OLD VINE PROJECT.

mediocre results.

Seal-bearing Bellingham The Bernard Series (£11, Tesco and independents) is splendidly aromatic and combines tropical fruit character with appealing freshness – it's excellent value; Fryer's Cove (£14.30, bcfw.co.uk) shows its close-to-the-Atlantic origin in salty minerality tempering lemon and peach

flavour, with well-integrated oak; in Kleine Zalze Vineyard Selection (£14, [www.winedirect.co.uk](http://www.winedirect.co.uk)) the oak is a little more obvious, giving the wine extra polish.

But France's Loire Valley is chenin-land as much as South Africa, and growers there show off the grape's versatility, with styles from sparkling to sweet. All can be superb, and as with South

Africa's wines they are sensibly priced. Two I love come from family producer Domaine des Forges: bone-dry Savennières Clos du Papillon, complex, elegant and utterly delicious, and richly yet uncloyingly sweet Coteaux du Layon premier cru Onnis, so much more drinkable than most sauternes (£20 and £23.50 respectively, [tanners-wines.co.uk](http://tanners-wines.co.uk))

And a surprise to end with: Esk Valley Artisanal Collection chenin blanc from Hawkes Bay (£18, [www.winedirect.co.uk](http://www.winedirect.co.uk)) – one of the still-rare examples from New Zealand. It's delicate, pure and very stylish, another example of Kiwi expertise with white grapes.

And remember: chenin wines can age graciously, just like their vines.

## Seven wines to try in autumn

**Who knows what the weather will encourage us to drink over the coming few weeks, so here's a miscellany of enjoyable bottles to suit lots of occasions. Let's start at the seaside.**

I've had much pleasure recently from wines from Australia's cool, sea-edged Margaret River region. The standards are very high, with the growing conditions and careful, non-invasive winemaking creating wines with elegant fruit character, finesse and balance. Examples include many from the region's pioneer planter, Vasse Felix.

Its Heytesbury chardonnay (2017 vintage £49, [sowhine.com](http://sowhine.com)).

co.uk) is a premier example of rich yet fresh, oak-unctuous indulgence, with great ageing potential.

More approachable in price is the delightful Classic Semillon-Sauvignon Blanc, full of flowery, citrusy aromas, dry and mouth-watering. Classic Shiraz shares similar freshness (both £12, Tesco).

Robert Oatley is another fine Margaret River grower: his so-appealing Signature Series Cabernet Sauvignon (£14-£16, [tauruswines.co.uk](http://tauruswines.co.uk), Ocado) has restrained black fruit scents and flavours, the epitome of cool-climate cabernet.

The ocean has an even bigger influence on the wines of northern Spain. Blue-

bottled Mar de Frades albariño (£16, Tesco) is a mouthful of land and sea, the salty, mineral, complex, elegantly fruited expression of a grape showing its best under the inspired handling of innovative winemaker Paula Fandiño.

And on the far south of Spain's Atlantic coast, the salty air of Sanlúcar de Barrameda filters into maturing barrels of ultra-dry manzanilla sherry, providing such perfect, appetising, value-for-money aperitifs as Barbadillo Solear (£11.20, Waitrose; half-bottle £5.95, [thewinesociety.com](http://thewinesociety.com)).

Heading inland, there's an interesting initiative underway from big France-

wide producer Calvet, whose virtual Calvet Kitchen showcases young rising-star chefs and sommeliers sharing recipes, cooking demonstrations and commentated tastings from a different wine region each month. October's wine is Calvet Fitou le Grand Roi (£10.50, Ocado), a warm, crowd-pleasing classic Languedoc blend for chilly autumn evenings.

Find the sessions on Facebook, Instagram @calvet\_wines and YouTube @Calvet Kitchen.

**September is organic month. Try the £54 everyday case by visiting [vintageroots.co.uk/](http://vintageroots.co.uk/)**



Left, Vasse Felix wines from the Margaret River. Right, Calvet Fitou le Grand Roi

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