



Despite producing wine for more than four hundred years, the South Africa is actually a relatively new player in the wine world. When apartheid ended, in the early 1990's, the first wines to the US were difficult to enjoy. After forty years of isolation, the producers lacked almost every modern advancement in grape growing and winemaking. The wines were decidedly rustic and had no where to go but up in quality. To complicate matters, for the first decade the grape growers planted too much Pinotage, and winemakers worked to produce drinkable wines from that difficult variety. What they learned the hard way is that Pinotage is a fickle variety and needs to be grown, and farmed, in a specific way. After a few years most wineries abandoned the grape to focus on more interesting, and marketable, international varieties. It helps that they now understand their climate, soil and growing conditions better too. Since then the quality of wines from South Africa has risen by leaps and bounds.

This month I have selected two wines that show the amazing range and quality of the South African producers. They are from two wineries I visited where I really enjoyed the wines, because they struck me on a cerebral level for their complexity, and as a consumer for their great value. After this month I hope that you are convert too.

2013 Bradgate Syrah (\$16)

A great example of the quality, and value from South Africa is this bottling from the Jordan winery under their second-label, called Bradgate. The Jordan winery is well established as one of the quality leaders in South Africa, producing wines that display world-class quality. The name Bradgate comes from proprietor Gary Jordan's great-grandfather Alfred, who, when he settled in the area over a hundred years ago, named his estate Bradgate. Alfred was a cobbler and eventually made a fortune in the shoe business, which became the third largest in Africa.

In 1982 one of Alfred's descendants, Ted Jordan, along with is wife Sheelagh, purchased a 400 acre farm high in the hills above Stellenbosch. They immediately began planting vineyards, matching different grape varieties to the undulations and slopes of this steep, hilltop property. With spectacular views of Table Mountain, False Bay and the town of Stellenbosch, the Jordan's knew the estate had great potential. Then in 1993 their son, Gary, a trained geologist, and his wife, Kathy, an economist, both received masters degrees in Enology from UC Davis. After a six month stint at Iron Horse Vineyards in Sonoma, they returned to the family estate to launch the Jordan winery. (At this point I should note that they use the name Jardin in the US, as there is already a Jordan winery in Alexander Valley.)

Since the mid-1990's the Jordan's have been producing amazing wines from their vineyards, which to me resemble the Willakenzie vineyards in the Willamette Valley of Oregon. The property sits at the crown of a steep hill, so their vineyards face all directions with vines stretching down the slopes. Their soils are the result of weathering of 600 million year old Cape Granite, so the vines extract extraordinary minerality which reflects in the wines. This is particularly obvious in their Syrah, which is a variety that, like Pinot Noir we will examine next, is great for displaying a sense of where the vines grow. This is what the French call, *terroir*.

Several years ago, when I was trying to figure out the wines of South Africa, I spoke with my friend, and their biggest local advocate, George Miliotes, Master Sommelier. He told me to forget Pinotage, which the producers were trumpeting as "their" grape, and focus on wines made from Syrah. He was right then, and now, a decade (or more) later, it still holds true.

The grapes for this wine come from their estate vineyards, from vines growing in some of the cooler spots. Their unique exposition allows the Syrah to ripen very slowly, due to the cool breezes of False Bay, producing a staggering level of complexity. To build further dimension, this wine is also aged in small French barrels for ten months before bottling.

When you open this wine, splash it into the decanter for a few minutes before serving. Once you do it opens to reveal a complex combination of black raspberry, cooked blueberry, oil cured black olives, dried thyme and toasted bread crumbs. In the mouth it has a big feel, with rich fruit and smooth tannins. Drink this wine over the next two years with seared skirt steak with olive tapenade, or steak fajitas.

2016 Paul Cluver Pinot Noir "Village" (\$19)

One of my favorite visits during the trip was to the region of Elgin, tasting the wines of the various wineries in the region. This is considered the epicenter of cool climate grape growing in South Africa and the wines of Paul Cluver are at the forefront. For 125 years the Cluver family have been major farmers in the Elgin region, but their crop of choice is apples, not grapes. In the early 1990's, Dr. Paul Cluver, a renowned neurosurgeon and current proprietor of the estate, recognized the potential success for cool climate grape varieties and converted some of the existing orchards to vines. Encouraged by their success he launched the Paul Cluver wines in 1997. Today the estate is managed by his son, Paul Cluver IV, along with three of his four siblings. The winemaker, Andries Burger, is also married to Dr. Cluver's oldest daughter, Inge.

One of the things that draws me to the Cluver wines is not just their quality, but their understanding of how the estate must work in harmony with nature. At 6,00 acres, the Cluver's farm is one of the largest apple farms in the southern hemisphere. Traditionally, apples are a crop that demand a lot of chemicals, for fertilizer, to prevent disease and protect the crop. The Cluver's recognize their farm is surrounded by some of the most delicate eco-systems in South Africa, the Kogelberg biosphere, which is also a registered UNESCO site. To protect the indigenous flora of the area they are moving to remove all man made chemicals from their farm. Paul is the inaugural signature of the Biodiversity and Wine Initiative, BWI, which is commitment by many Cape wineries to farm in a method that protects this amazing natural biosphere.

When it comes to growing grapes, the Elgin area is the ideal site for making wines with something of an old world sensibility. The heart of the region is seventy miles east of Cape Town, and ten from the coast. It is the only region in South Africa that is surrounded by mountains on all four sides, making it something of a bowl. The center of the valley lies at almost 1000 feet above sea level and most of the vineyards lie around that elevation. Being surrounded by mountains it is protected from the coolest winds from the south, but temperatures rarely reach 90 degrees. The vines love this cool, dry climate and the growing period is quite long. This yields grapes with great acidity and full ripeness almost every year.

The grapes for the 2015 Pinot Noir "Village" come from vines growing on their estate that are 6-25 years old. All of the grapes are hand-harvested and destemmed before going into the small fermentors. During fermentation the skins were punched down by hand, two to three times per day, to extract color. Once dry the wine was racked to a combination of French oak barrels and stainless steel tanks, where it underwent malolactic fermentation. After nine months the components of the wine were blended and bottled.

When you are ready to serve this wine, decant it for fifteen minutes and give it a light chill. The first thing you will probably notice is the wine is fairly light, the result of a long, cool, growing season. The bouquet begins with a spicy note of Szechwan peppercorns, followed by hints of fresh strawberry, raspberry, pomegranate syrup and vanilla wafers. On the palate this wine has a bright, lively texture to start, but stretches out a bit in the middle. Although not a real deep expression, the fruit components are beautifully pure and articulate. This is the type of Pinot I could drink for days as long as enough sushi was in front of me. Serve over the next year with, sushi (big surprise), poached or grilled salmon, or roast chicken.

Cauliflower soup

I love to make soup. If you check my freezers, at home and store, you will find pint containers of frozen concoctions that I microwave and eat for lunch Tuesday through Thursday. This recipe has become one of my favorites for cauliflower because I like how it incorporates two ways of cooking this cruciferous veggie to build more complex flavor. It also freezes well and is away to eat my veggies without too much fat. Serve this with either wine but it works particularly well with the Pinot Noir.

1 head cauliflower (2 pounds)
8 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 8 pieces
1 leek, white and light green parts only, halved lengthwise, sliced thin, and washed thoroughly
1 small onion, halved and sliced thin
Salt and pepper
4 1/2 – 5 cups water
1/2 teaspoon sherry vinegar
3 tablespoons minced fresh chives

1. Pull off outer leaves of cauliflower and trim stem. Using paring knife, cut around core to remove; thinly slice core and reserve. Cut heaping 1 cup of 1/2-inch florets from head of cauliflower; set aside. Cut remaining cauliflower crosswise into 1/2-inch thick slices.

2. Melt 3 tablespoons butter in large saucepan over medium-low heat. Add leek, onion, and 1 1/2 teaspoons salt; cook, stirring frequently, until leek and onion are softened but not browned, about 7 minutes.

3. Increase heat to medium-high; add 4 1/2 cups water, sliced core, and half of sliced cauliflower; and bring to simmer. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer gently for 15 minutes. Add remaining sliced cauliflower, return to simmer, and continue to

cook until cauliflower is tender and crumbles easily, 15 to 20 minutes longer.

4. While soup simmers, melt remaining 5 tablespoons butter in 8-inch skillet over medium heat. Add reserved florets and cook, stirring frequently, until florets are golden brown and butter is browned and imparts nutty aroma, 6 to 8 minutes. Remove skillet from heat and use slotted spoon to transfer florets to small bowl. Toss florets with vinegar and season with salt to taste. Pour browned butter in skillet into small bowl and reserve for garnishing.

5. Process soup in blender until smooth, about 45 seconds. Rinse out pan. Return pureed soup to pan and return to simmer over medium heat, adjusting consistency with remaining water as needed (soup should have thick, velvety texture but should be thin enough to settle with flat surface after being stirred) and seasoning with salt to taste. Serve, garnishing individual bowls with browned florets, drizzle of browned butter, and chives and seasoning with pepper to taste.

Alton Brown's Flank Steak on Coals

As a social media follower of Alton Brown I am always intrigued by his unusual methods of cooking. Here is a recipe that is ridiculously simple and the results are amazing if you have a charcoal grill. Read and follow the directions closely because this one is all about technique. For a better explanation Google the video. Serve this with the Bradgate Syrah.

2 pounds inside skirt steak,
cut into three equal pieces
1 teaspoon kosher salt

1. Remove the steak from the fridge and lay over a cooling rack set in a half sheet pan and season the steak with salt. Rest for 45 minutes at room temperature.

2. Fire up one chimney starter of natural lump charcoal. Once white and ashy, distribute evenly in the lower level of your charcoal grill. Using a blow dryer, blow the charcoal clean of ash.

3. Immediately lay steaks directly onto the hot coals for 35 to 40 seconds, then flip

and repeat. When finished cooking, place the meat onto heavy duty aluminum foil, wrap, and rest for 15 minutes. Remove the meat from the foil, reserving foil and juices. Slice thinly across the grain of the meat. Return to meat and toss with the juice. Serve immediately.