



STANDARD BANK CHENIN BLANC TOP 10 CHALLENGE – 2024 REPORT

- **The Standard Bank Chenin Blanc Top 10 Challenge 2024 judging and procedures**

The judging at the Standard Bank Chenin Blanc Top 10 Challenge 2024 was conducted according to strict, audited tasting protocols detailing both the logistics and tasting procedures as before. This is not only for good governance but ensures consistency and is a guarantee that the same procedures will be followed each year, even though the panel of judges are rotated on a regular basis.

This year's judging panel comprised of five judges and one associate. The associate's scores were not considered in the results, but they do contribute to the discussion in a learning capacity while also often adding valuable inputs. The associate judging position is a crucial part in the guidance and mentorship of up-and-coming young judges to give them the opportunities to gain experience.

Panel members were:

Higgo Jacobs (Chair – Sommelier and industry expert)

Ginette de Fleuriot CWM (Judge – Wine Training Manager, Vinimark)

Madeleine Stenwreth MW (Judge – International panellist and consultant)

Noncgebo Langa (Judge – Winemaker, Delheim Estate)

Shawn Mathyse (Judge - Winemaker, Ken Forrester Wines)

Shane Mumba (Associate – Sommelier Nocturne Bar & Restaurant)

The wines were tasted blind and randomly with no indication of vintage, cellar treatment or technical analysis by the five-person panel, scoring done according to the 20-point system. Panellists judged wines in different sequence, in order to give the entries a fair as possible chance in the line up (flights). Judges were allowed to request vintage and technical details if they felt it would assist them better to understand a wine.

Healthy discussions were allowed around wines with notable score discrepancies among panellists, with judges encouraged to seriously consider contrasting points of view, but not pressured to move on scores.

Where bottle faults were suspected by any member of the panel, another bottle was called for. Faults (especially TCA) were once again relatively uncommon, which is positive.

A strong and competitive 127 entries from 75 producers over more than 20 different WO's were considered for the first round of judging. This number was narrowed down, over 2 days of diligent tasting, to 25 potential Top Ten wines to be determined on the final (3rd) day – scoring above 16.5/20 average. New scores were assigned to wines in the final round of judging, and the Top 10 wines all again scored above 16.5 on average in the second round of tasting. 2 Wines with the same average on the winning margin (position 10 and 11) were re-tasted and the panel voted on the final winner (position 10).

- **Key findings and commentary**

With a large number of old vines in plantings across a diverse range of sites all over the Cape, Chenin remains SA's calling card for unique, authentic, world class white wines. A cross section of quality in this challenge shows remarkable diversity in a category ever growing in confidence.

It is this diversity in expression that is at once an exciting prospect for the exploring consumer, while also a challenge when defining the parameters of quality for an awards challenge. Due to the smorgasbord of tools and techniques available to winemakers, there is incredible variety that shows in the canvass of flavours on offer.

We leaned on the diversity within our panel to identify and champion different styles of Chenin, while sticking to universal criteria for quality like definition and balance. Chenin blanc is the most delightful, but at the same time hardest category to judge for competition.

I believe the nature of this challenge, with the only result being a place in the Top 10 (a one in 13 chance), is a strong contributor to the quality of entries received on an annual basis. Producers enter wines that they believe stand a chance to beat 130 other wines to rise to the top. They can't merely hope for a bronze medal coupled with a good value tag.

There were very few letdowns in this year's challenge. The vast majority of entries warranted a second look, as they brought something additional to simple commercial appeal. Additionally, and positively, there is a decrease in faulty wines every year.

Once again winning wines' concentration and intensity don't resonate in oak and sweetness in the wines, but rather fruit intensity and length. There are much less high RS, overtly toasty or leesy, or Botrytis character influenced wines going around than when this challenge started. This shape shift may be well documented, but it remains an impactful change.

'Rich & ripe' wooded expressions showed good integration of oak and fine lees work, with very few over-oaked wines. This style was welcomed by the panel as a legitimate expression of Chenin and judged on merit. There still are plenty of consumers who prefer this style of Chenin, and this was fully acknowledged and awarded by the panel.

However, the world's best wines are those that express their terroirs best with purity and drive.

To quote co-panellist Ginette de Fleuriet: "We were taken by the grape's ability to shine in both fresher, lighter styles with low residual sugars and the absence of obvious oak influence to wines which offered a saline quality and texture from skin contact and natural fermentation. Gone are the days of top-heavy, over-wooded wines which lack finesse. Today there is much more innovation and dexterity in winemaking – better use of fermentation vessels and better judgement. We rewarded wines of refinement, detail and complexity – and there were many."

Reduction remains an interesting tool, and a recurring topic of panel discussion in judging Chenin. With an increase in more natural farming and fermentation methods, this topic is more pertinent than ever before. Tight, nervy, savoury wines that take time to unfold from the glass are no longer a rarity.

Reduction can be intriguing and quite frankly fashionable, but careful consideration is required, and producers should be wary of unattractive mercaptans and bruised fruit characters that don't blow off.

Interesting to note that this year's Top 10 winners only have one wine under screw-cap closure. 5 Diam and 4 natural cork closure.

A few wines were identified with exotic floral, perfumed characters. This can be best allocated to varietals like Muscat or Viognier used in small blending components. Understandably this may charm some consumers, but when obvious it is a detracting characteristic. The Top 10 wines are all 100% Chenins.

Looking at the **results**, we received entries spread across the vintages of 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024, with 8 of the winners hailing from the 2023 vintage and the other two from 2022.

Retail price points of the Top 10 range between R160-R350, once again highlighting the incredible value that is on offer from SA Chenin.

Stellenbosch has strong representation with 6 winners from Stellenbosch fruit, with two more from Stellenbosch producers made of fruit from elsewhere.

A whopping 9 out of the Top 10 wines are from registered old vines, once again reinforcing the contribution to quality from older vineyards in Chenin Blanc.

The Standard Bank Chenin Blanc Top 10 Challenge 2024 winners are (in alphabetical order):

- Anthonij Rupert Cape of Good Hope Van Lill Chenin Blanc 2023
- Flagstone Paradigm Chenin Blanc Reserve 2023
- Kleine Zalze Family Reserve Chenin Blanc 2023
- Knorhoek Chenin Blanc 2022
- Liefland Old Vine Chenin Blanc 2023
- Nabygelegen Rudmatis Chenin Blanc 2022
- Stellenrust Secrets & Lies Chenin Blanc 2023
- Stellenrust (B1) Old Bush Vine Chenin Blanc 2023
- Stellenrust Next FN Level Old Bush Vine Chenin Blanc 2023
- Zevenwacht Z Collection Chenin Blanc 2023

Finally, we need to comment on the incredible, yet healthy consistency in the top performers and return winners every year, especially considering the strict protocol and regular rotation of the panel. Impressively, four producers keep their positions from last year. Once again, special mention befits Stellenrust, with another remarkable year of results!

A heart-felt thank you to Standard Bank for promoting healthy competition and excellence in South Africa's champion category – Chenin Blanc.