

CAP CLASSIQUE

South Africa's success story

Many of South Africa's top-range sparkling wines have been frustratingly out of reach to wine lovers on UK shores, but thankfully that's changing. Here we show a selection of 20 from our expert's recent comprehensive tasting across the category

WORDS & SELECTION ANNE KREBIEHL MW

Traditional-method sparkling wine from South Africa, known as Cap Classique, has transformed itself. Both established and emerging producers now represent an effervescent, dynamic and ambitious sparkling wine scene that pulls every register in the vineyard and cellar to deliver quality. At long last, the best of these wines are making it to our shores, ready to make you sit up and take notice.

In recent years, Cap Classique has been one of South Africa's fastest-growing wine categories – a striking achievement for a country where vineyard hectareage is shrinking (from more than 100,000ha in 2012, falling steadily to 89,384ha in 2022, according to data from SAWIS – SA Wine Industry Information and Systems). Admittedly buoyed at home by so-called 'Nectar' styles that come with dosage levels between 12-35g/L (making them off-dry to medium), the turbo-charged success of South African sparkling wine is a lone positive story that flies in the face of well-documented political and economic instability and ongoing operational challenges.

It shows a transformation that is in tune with both an international trend towards lighter wines and a domestic reassessment of how to communicate quality by adding a luxury tier. That this quality can be tasted – from improvements at



Cap Classique Producers Association chairman Pieter Ferreira (see p60)

entry-level all the way to premium cuvées – is the key factor for this relatively young wine category.

Theoretically, Cap Classique is 52 years old. The late Frans Malan of Simonsig made South Africa's first traditional-method sparkling wine, called Kaapse Vonkel – or Cape Sparkle – in 1971. Practically, however, sparkling wine took years to gain momentum. The Cap Classique Producers Association (CCPA) was not founded until 1992, with just 14 members.

Being served at the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as South Africa's President in 1994, ►

Vineyards on the Bon Courage Wine Estate in Robertson, with the Riviersonderend mountains behind to the south



Weltevrede's orderly gardens and vineyards in Bonnievale, Robertson



Above: the tasting rooms building at Graham Beck winery in the Cap Classique heartland of Robertson

and for US President Barack Obama's acceptance speech in 2008 marked milestones for Cap Classique, but it is the past decade that really represents the tipping point. Today, says the CCPA, there are more than 100 members making 9.25 million bottles of Cap Classique a year. Of these, almost 864,000 bottles made their way to the UK in 2022 – double the amount of 2019.

DEFINING CAP CLASSIQUE

What is unusual is that producers ensure that quality keeps pace with the growing quantity. Widely distributed entry-level Cap Classiques benefit as ever more top wines emerge. Philip Jonker, owner and winemaker at Weltevrede, encapsulates the current spirit: 'The fact that in 1992 we decided not to just call it sparkling wine but defined it as Cap Classique made it clear to everyone that the goal was to make something of international standard: the selection of vines, learning from the best – all of that followed from the decision to define Cap Classique.'

This is in huge part due to the collaborative and ambitious spirit within the CCPA and its technical committee. A key person in this development is association chairman Pieter Ferreira, formerly long-time cellar master and now chief operating officer at Graham Beck, one of the country's most important Cap Classique producers. Ferreira has shaped this spirit by constantly pushing for improvement, fostering exchange with Champagne and other sparkling wine regions, applying for funding and delivering research and data to back legal changes.

While much of what defines sparkling wine quality is not mandated by law, CCPA members naturally employ whole-bunch pressing

(mandatory as of the 2023 harvest), as well as other exacting practices such as only using the first 450 litres of juice from 1,000kg of grapes to make the finest cuvées, and up to 600 litres for simpler Cap Classique.

As of 2021, a minimum of 12 months' lees ageing has been a legal requirement for Cap Classique – a real point of difference and a statement of intent, pitching it between the nine months' legal minimum for crémant in France or Cava in Spain and the 15 months for non-vintage Champagne. But as in all these regions, the top wines are invariably left to age much longer.

Yet there is even more ambition. 'We will develop a category for wines that age three years and longer on the lees,' Ferreira says, matching that of the three-year minimum requirement for vintage Champagnes. The aim, clearly, is to make the top tier of prestige wines stand out and position them as fine wines.

Speaking about sharing knowledge in the technical committee and formalising a prestige category over the coming years, Pierre de Klerk, cellar master at Graham Beck since January 2022, says: 'We pave the way for those who are truly serious about Cap Classique. I really believe it will be super-advantageous for the entire category.'

SUNSHINE, LIMESTONE & CHARDONNAY

You may think that there is an elephant in the room, namely climate. How do you achieve the tension, freshness and essential light-footedness required for quality sparkling wines in such a sunny country?

The answer lies in soils, oceanic influence and farming. Viticultural decisions – such as vineyard



John Loubser, Silverthorn (see wine notes, p64)

layouts that favour exposure to the cooler morning sun, exploiting altitude or south-facing slopes, training vine canopies to provide shade for grapes, and night-harvesting during cooler temperatures to achieve less oxidation and easier extraction of juice – are crucial for the quality of base wines and have a huge influence on pre- and

'These boutique specialists age their wines for extended periods, and it is ageing rather than vintage-dating that denotes quality'

post-disgorgement ageing. This is where the biggest collective strides have been made.

While Cap Classique is produced from fruit across the Cape winelands, Robertson is a key region and Chardonnay the key grape. Robertson is prized for its calcareous soils, formations of hardened limestone that lend much elegance and definition to the wines. While Robertson lies inland, it is framed diagonally by the Langeberg and Riviersonderend mountains, north and south respectively, that funnel cool air from the ocean.

'We do appreciate our natural acidity,' says Jonker, based in Bonnievale, a sub-region of Robertson. 'We are definitely not cool-climate, but geology overrides the climate here. We are arid and chalky, and have an extreme diurnal swing.' This means that temperatures of 8°C in the morning can turn into 30°C by the afternoon. Ideal pH levels of 3.0-3.1 in the grape must are achieved when yields and ripening are calibrated.

But other cooler areas are also prominent. Elgin, Overberg, Walker Bay, Darling, Durbanville and Plettenberg Bay all benefit from cooling ocean influences and often supply the Pinot ▶

Noir that is used in Cap Classique blends alongside Chardonnay. The wines have the expressive fruit that goes hand in hand with sunshine, but they have freshness, too.

Currently there is no varietal restriction for Cap Classique. Chenin Blanc, South Africa's most-planted white variety, carries its apple and wax flavours into the wines, but only one made it into my line-up of top recommendations (*50 in all: see panel, right*). It is clear that most of Cap Classique's success is down to well-farmed Chardonnay, with Pinot Noir in second place, far ahead of other varieties.

STYLISTIC DIVERSITY

Big producers have long led the way, such as Graham Beck with its long-aged, super-smart top cuvées, or Krone, a label from the Twee Jonge Gezellen estate, which debuted South Africa's first single vineyard-designated Cap Classique in 2021. Inspired by the individuality of grower Champagnes, the 2016 vintage Blanc de Blancs was from Kaaimansgat, a Chardonnay vineyard at 700m elevation on sandstone soils. Today, Krone boasts three single-vineyard wines, each with its own distinct personality.

Away from the big names, the industry is immensely enriched by the emergence of numerous small Cap Classique specialists using various techniques to hone individual styles.

These include: fermenting in stainless steel, barriques, foudres and amphorae to tease out different textures; creating perpetual reserves (keeping aside a portion of a harvest for use in future blends) to lend depth; blending wines from various origins to achieve both ripeness and linearity, or creating exciting expressions of single regions, sites and sources.

This equals thrilling stylistic diversity and a number of outstanding small-production wines which are absolutely ready to take their place in international line-ups. All these boutique specialists age their wines for extended periods, and it is ageing rather than vintage-dating that denotes quality.

Enduring freshness and ageability seems to have been the test of many Cap Classiques. Some still show signs of premature evolution – a golden colour and intensely mature notes just a year or two after disgorgement – which may have prevented some fizz lovers from laying these South African sparklings down. But all the wines in my recommendations (here and on *decanter.com/premium*) passed with flying colours.

The 20 wines I've highlighted in the following pages are among the best of the current releases. They showcase the diversity and quality of Cap Classique, and all represent excellent value. The industry is ripe with ambition, as these wines demonstrate – seek them out.

Decanter
PREMIUM

In addition to the 20 wines shown here, for scores and tasting notes on 30 more excellent Cap Classique sparkling wines tasted for *Decanter* by Anne Krebiehl MW, go to decanter.com/premium

Krebiehl's pick: 20 top Cap Classique sparklers to enjoy

① **Graham Beck, Cuvée Clive Brut, Western Cape 2017** 96

£45.50-£49.95 *Frontier Fine Wine, Vinvm*
Graham Beck's absolute prestige bottling is not made to a recipe. The 2017 iteration is from a special block of estate Chardonnay which was oak-fermented, a smaller portion of Chardonnay from Darling and some Pinot Noir from Durbanville. It's a class act that has a striking tautness, offering subtle notes of Seville orange on the nose while the precise, concentrated body is sleek, with lemon and white pepper. The mousse is ultra-fine, and it shows its autolysis with a hint of maize meal. Linear and strait-laced, its low dosage of 3.3g/L only underlines its essential raciness. This is smooth and bright now but will hit its stride with another year of bottle age. Exquisite. **Drink** 2025-2040 **Alcohol** 12%

② **Le Lude, Vintage Cuvée Brut, Western Cape 2013** 96

£150 *Hard to Find Wines*

Aged for nine years on lees and disgorged in November 2022 with just 3.5g/L of dosage, this is a supremely elegant and fine-boned wine. Just 5% of the base wine was aged in used barriques. The nose opens with a serene notion of cool polenta and wet stone. The palate is totally youthful and super-bright, underlined by the finest, creamy mousse. With more air and temperature, notions of grapefruit peel sea-breeze and ozone appear enticingly. This is utterly precise and finishes with a mouthwatering sense of salt and lemon. Superb. **Drink** 2023-2035 **Alc** 12%

③ **Pieter Ferreira, Blanc de Blancs Extra Brut, Robertson 2017** 95

£44 *Rakq*

An immediate hit of wet chalk on the nose here is accompanied by a herbal, mossy savour. With grapes sourced solely from the Robertson region, the wine spent five and a half years on lees and was disgorged without dosage, which underlines its

beautiful purity, its white pepper spice and its real drive. The palate unfolds into immense saltiness with gentle autolysis expressed as fine oatmeal, highlighted by ripe Amalfi lemon. Resonant, impressive and really long. **Drink** 2023-2040 **Alc** 12% ▶



SOUTH AFRICAN SPARKLING

④ Charles Fox, Cipher Blanc de Noirs Brut, Elgin 2017 94

£42 WoodWinters

Made from a blend of Pinot Noir and Meunier, this 64-month-aged wine opens with hints of green citrus on the nose. The wonderfully taut and concentrated palate shows off its Pinot power in very sleek, elegant fashion. The inherent generosity brims with saltiness while autolysis is expressed as lemon-laced sourdough rye crumb. The citrus focus intensifies and echoes with wet stone and saline energy, coming to a compelling, mouthwatering finish. **Drink** 2023-2035 **Alc** 12.5%

⑤ Silverthorn, Jewel Box Cuvée Kappa Crucis Brut, Robertson 2018 94

£27.50 Carte du Vin

Initially shy, but a little air reveals aromas of almond paste and subtle oak spice. The Pinot Noir portion of the blend makes itself felt with Red Delicious apple flavours, countered by lemony creaminess from oak-matured Chardonnay. A 15% addition of reserve wines, permitted in vintage-dated wine, from a perpetual reserve of Chardonnay started more than a decade ago, adds depth. Wonderfully creamy and elegant. **Drink** 2023-2035 **Alc** 12%

Silverthorn, The Green Man Blanc de Blancs Brut, Robertson 2017 94

£48.99/magnum Carte du Vin

Fresh grapefruit flesh, tart whitecurrant and green apple are vividly bright on the nose of this wine served from magnum. Green apple also plays on the creamy, sprightly palate where the wine expands. With 61 months on lees, there is a lovely

streak of cold, raw shortcrust pastry, much creaminess from a very fine mousse and a luminous apple and citrus purity that lasts and lasts. Elegant, youthful and only hitting its stride now. **Drink** 2023-2035 **Alc** 12%

⑥ Twee Jonge Gezellen, Krone Kaaimansgat Blanc de Blancs Brut, Elandsbloof 2020 94

£37 Heritage Cellars

Krone Kaaimansgat was the first-ever single vineyard-designated Cap Classique in South Africa, first made in 2016. The Chardonnay is from a steeply sloping, east-facing site at 700m and surrounded by forest. Fermented entirely in seasoned, large foudres, this opens to notions of cream, subtle hazelnut and dried corn husk. The palate is vivid with juicy Meyer lemon and seems to become rounder and richer while lacy mousse fizzes away gently. Very elegant, and at just 4g/L dosage a beautifully bone-dry wine. This will benefit from bottle age. **Drink** 2025-2035 **Alc** 12%

⑦ Bon Courage, Jacques Bruère Cuvée Rosé Brut, Robertson 2012 93

£17.95 Alexander Hadleigh, Frontier Fine Wines

This five-year-aged pink Cap Classique is a picture of pristine Pinot Noir with its notions of Red Delicious apple and tangerine peel, highlighted with lemon from the 20% Chardonnay in the blend. More air allows it to shimmer with dark cherry. The palate is rounded with generous Pinot fruit, yet silky and pliable with very fine mousse. There is something deeply harmonious about fruit, body and freshness here, delivering on flavour while remaining elegantly on tiptoe. **Drink** 2023-2030 **Alc** 11.5%

Charles Fox, Reserve Gold, Elgin NV 93

£21 WoodWinters

Sitting in the extra dry category, with its 17g/L of residual sweetness, but blocked malolactic fermentation means that this wine strikes a most unusual yet super-fresh balance. The extra sugar enhances the fruit rather than the sweetness, and thus we encounter candied tangerine notes next to rye bread pepperiness. Full of fruit and verve coming to an off-dry, salty and savoury finish, happily defying flavour boundaries – this will be a huge winner at the table. **Drink** 2023-2028 **Alc** 12.5%

⑧ Colmant, Blanc de Blancs Brut, Western Cape NV 93

£29.99 Museum Wines

Chardonnay is sourced from Robertson, Bonnievale, Elgin and Franschoek and malolactic fermentation is avoided. The wine gains extra depth from 18% of reserve wine from a perpetual reserve going back to 2006. Inviting aromas of crunchy yellow apple, a lovely hint of nuttiness and waxiness adding richness. A frothy mousse supports green apple and lemon against a backdrop of subtle chalkiness. This spent 44 months on lees and was disgorged with 3.8g/L of dosage. An elegant combination of fresh fruit and aged complexity. **Drink** 2023-2030 **Alc** 12%

Graham Beck, Pinot Noir Rosé Brut, Western Cape 2018 93

£25 Harvey Nichols

Pinot Noir and Chardonnay were pressed together, fermented in stainless steel and aged on the gross lees before spending four and a half years on tirage. Fresh redcurrants and an edge of pepper spice on the nose, more air revealing rhubarb and blood orange peel that become stronger as the wine warms. Beautifully light, almost ethereal, yet shows a lovely concentration of tart red flavours. Very elegant with lots of mileage. **Drink** 2023-2035 **Alc** 11.5%

⑨ Laborie, Blanc de Blancs Brut, Western Cape 2018 93

£15.95-£17.99 Booths, Carruthers & Kent,

Perold Wine Cellar, Slurp, South Downs Cellars, Taurus Wines, The Dorset Wine Co, The Whalley Wine Shop, TJ Wines

A classy and sleek wine of simply outstanding value. This current release spent 60 months on lees, lending it much ▶



finesse and a very fine, creamy mousse. Malolactic fermentation was prevented so briskness is centre-stage. The nose charms with immediate notes of lemon and cream, while the palate is slender, bright and super-fresh. Light-footed but very elegant, this is made to be sleek, citric, vivid and fresh – yet with depth and length. Beautiful. **Drink 2023-2030 Alc 12%**

Pieter Ferreira, Birdsong Extra Brut, Western Cape 2018 93

£36 Rakq

Made with Pinot Noir from Durbanville and Elgin, and Chardonnay from Robertson and Darling, this spent four and a half years on lees. Just 2,990 bottles were made. Expressive, crisp Cox's apple aromas are mouthwatering, and the palate is vivid, with bright freshness supported by a soft and gentle but lively mousse. Brisk and precise, its ripe fruit speaks of African sun. Textured, full-flavoured, elegant and ripe with lovely substance and just 3.8g/L of dosage. **Drink 2023-2035 Alc 12%**

Boschendal, Grande Cuvée Brut, Elgin 2016 92

£19.95 Winoship

This 2016 spent six years on its lees, five of them 'sur pointe', meaning that it was riddled so that the yeasts collected in the bottleneck to reduce the contact surface between lees and ageing wine. The result is a still very fruity wine with restrained autolysis that complements the fresh and aromatic notes of crisp, juicy yellow apple flesh. Light, with good apple-scented length, supported by a dosage of 5g/L. **Drink 2023-2030 Alc 12.5%**

⑩ Domaine des Dieux, Claudia Brut, Cape South Coast 2016 92

£19.95 Stone Vine & Sun

The honour of having been the first Cap Classique producer in the Hemel-en-Aarde Valley goes to Domaine des Dieux. The golden colour suggests some evolution on this 72-month lees-aged and Chardonnay-dominated wine, but the nose is resolutely fresh and youthful with its hints of oatmeal, lemon and ozone. The palate is superbly fresh and wonderfully sleek, with a refined, delicate mousse and lovely oyster shell depth. The finish here is truly lip-smacking and just calls for seafood. **Drink 2023-2030 Alc 12%**



Charles Hopkins,
De Grendel

Kleine Zalze, Vintage Cuvée Brut, Western Cape 2015 92

£27.95 Bentleys of Ludlow, Harrogate Wines, Islington Wines

Kleine Zalze only makes a vintage-dated Cap Classique in great years and allows it to age for three years on lees. The fruit was sourced mostly from Robertson and supplemented with Stellenbosch. The nose opens with generous apple and butter and the palate is just as fruity. Lemon and green apple brim with freshness and gentle foam. This strikes a lovely balance and comes with remarkable focus and a real sense of chalk on the finish. **Drink 2023-2030 Alc 12%**

Le Lude, Reserve Brut, Western Cape NV 92

£35 Hard to Find Wines

Made with fruit sourced from Robertson, Elgin and some coastal vineyards, this pale wine opens with a subtle hint of Viennoiserie followed by lemon, green apple and ozone.

The palate is super-brisk and super-fine, with real lemon focus and gentle autolysis from 36 months on lees. It's very seductive with all its ocean-like, invigorating briskness. **Drink 2023-2030 Alc 12%**

⑪ Babylonstoren, Sprankel Brut, Simonsberg-Paarl 2017 91

£36.99-£37.95 Cape Wine & Food, Cellar Door

Wines, Islington Wine, The Somerset Wine Co
Sprankel means 'sparkle', and this Chardonnay-dominated blend with 55 months of lees ageing came from various parcels in the granite and sandstone soils of the Simonsberg. The nose immediately sends forth juicy, yellow peach and ripe yellow apple, as befits the riper, more inland situation of this farm. The palate is light and has bright overtones of lemon that complement the ripe fruit and creamy, smooth style. Fruit-driven, bright and fresh with immense juiciness: a joyful aperitif. **Drink 2023-2028 Alc 12%**

De Grendel, Brut, Cape Town 2018 90

£20-£23.55 Port2Port, Rakq, Vino Fandango

Made from 80% Chardonnay and 20% Pinot Noir grown on the shale soils of the slopes of the Tygerberg overlooking the Atlantic, this has overtones of juicy, lime-tinged green apple and guava. The palate has a lovely mellowness, a roundness that comes with a very yeasty backdrop, lending texture and countering a lovely streak of lemon freshness. The 6g/L dosage sits well with the style, helped along by very smooth foam, achieved by 30 months on lees. **Drink 2023-2028 Alc 12.5%**

De Morgenzon, Vintage Cuvée Brut, Stellenbosch 2019 90

£24-£26 Frontier Fine Wines, Honest Grapes, Rakq, Wine Direct

De Morgenzon is a specialist in Chenin Blanc, hence this Cap Classique is one of the few made exclusively from this variety. It ferments partially in oak and spends 24 months on lees. Much of Chenin's character is shown, with intense notes of lanolin, candlewax, honey and quince on the nose. The palate has a similar waxy note and a subtle edge of apple pip bitterness, the mousse accentuating the citrus focus and the full-flavoured mid-palate of the wine. Grapes were harvested at different ripeness levels to achieve both freshness and full fruit flavour. **Drink 2023-2028 Alc 12.5%** **D**

