

South Africa seems to be a subject on everyone's lips this Christmas with the upcoming world cup and as thousands of people fly out of UK airports to get some winter sun over the holiday period. Personally we had the prestigious South African estate Bon Courage wine dinner at Sharrow Bay last month which really enthused me further on this talked about country. I felt South Africa would be the perfect topic for my Christmas column and warm you all up!

South Africa is increasingly making better wines which usually represent good value for money at all levels on the quality scale. Although South Africa is classed as a 'new world' region, wines it produces are often nicely poised between the new world and old world styles. Look out for Pinotage reds which are South Africa's 'own' variety. Pinotage's name gives a clue to its origin, back in 1925 someone had the bright idea of crossing Pinot Noir and what was then called 'Hermitage' in South Africa (believed at the time to be Shiraz), hence 'Pinotage'. These make striking gamey and earthy-tasting wines, often with a savoury, cheesy edge to them.

The most famous regions in South Africa are Stellenbosch, Paarl and Constantia, although cooler regions such as Walker Bay are beginning to attract attention. South Africa is an extremely dynamic country and is evolving all the time these regions are increasing and the producers are constantly looking forward to adding new vineyards and developing new regions. South Africa is a country very much on the up. The reason that people are constantly looking and developing South African wine is because the diversity of the climate and the geographical situation make it a perfect country to produce a whole plethora of different grape and wine styles. Generally we all think of South Africa as a very warm country, perhaps the word 'Africa' helps with this perception. However there are a few cooler maritime areas and some really large mountain regions which suit the Mediterranean style wines. This is why you can find sparkling wine, all types of white from the driest to the sweetest, rose and big full bodied red.

The top South African white wine grapes are the Chardonnay, Sauvignon and Chenin Blanc and the Riesling. The most successful Chardonnays have some of the power and fruit intensity of the new world, yet combine this with old world complexity and minerality. The Sauvignons have richness of texture, yet with restraint -- they are quite different to the upfront gooseberry and elderflower New Zealand-style expressions of this grape, but you wouldn't place them in my native region the Loire, either. The Riesling is just as underrated in South Africa as elsewhere in the new world.

In terms of the South African red wines where Cabernet was once king Shiraz is taking over. Nowadays all the red grape variety from around the world will be found in South Africa however the one I must mention is the Pinotage. In my opinion they well all have flavours that embody their warm climate with a slightly smoky finish.

Maybe you could take advantage of England being at the World Cup by not just following the team but using it as an excuse to visit some of the superb vineyards while you are there. If not go to South Africa with a bottle in your front room whilst watching the finals!

Joyeux Noël

Nico

P.S Sharrow Bay and Cumbria Life have the perfect Christmas present this year see page... for more details.
www.sharrowbay.co.uk