



Southern Starz Inc.

South Africa's Wine Regions

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Wine producing countries all have some kind of system to identify and differentiate their wines. Regulation is necessary to ensure that certain information is on the label, and that the contents of the bottle are in conformity with it. In some countries, regulations regarding vineyard and winemaking practices are imposed per region. Though not specifically referenced on the label, they are a matter of law and thus implicit to the information given.

South Africa's Wine of Origin system, introduced in 1972, is primarily concerned with accuracy on the label. It was initiated after producers of estate-bottled wines asked the Minister of Agriculture to protect them from fraudulent marketing. It does not regulate viticultural matters such as irrigation and yields, nor does it have specifications for which varieties may be grown in a given area.

The original demarcations have been modified and divided frequently, as distinctions of soil and climate types continue to be understood and defined.

Application for WO certification is voluntary. Without the certification, however, the producer may not state vintage, region, or grape variety on the label, and the bottle will not carry the seal which confirms the veracity of the label.

Wines must be submitted for tasting and analysis. There are about seventy-five approved varieties, which may be grown anywhere. Varietally labeled wines must be 85% from the stated variety. Blends may list their contents if each variety is separately vinified and is at least 20% of the finished wine. Vintage wines must be made from at least 85% grapes from that vintage. 100% must come from the production area on the label.

Production areas are divided into four Geographical Units: Northern Cape, Western Cape, Eastern Cape, and Kwazulu-Natal. By far the most important is the Western Cape, with five regions delineated for table wines. They are Coastal Region, Cape South Coast, Breede River Valley, Klein Karoo, and Olifants River. The sixth, Boberg, applies only to fortified wines from the districts Paarl, Franschhoek and Tulbagh.

Regions are divided into districts, which in turn are broken up into wards. A ward must have distinguishable features of climate and soil that influence wines made there. The larger areas are determined more by geographical and political factors. Somewhat confusingly, there are wards that are not contained in a district, districts which have no wards, and districts that are not within a region. Got that? For maps and details, go to <http://www.sawis.co.za/cert/productionareas.php>

Understanding regional distinctions is an ongoing process, and the multitude of soil types, maritime and mountain climate influences and other determining factors makes meaningful generalizations difficult. Most winefarms are working with many varieties, often buying in fruit and using a Western Cape or

Coastal Region WO in favor of more limited and potentially more prestigious designations. It is likely that there will be more specialization as terroirs continue to be better understood and delineated.

## Coastal Region

The Coastal region is the most prolific for well known and highly regarded wines. It contains the longest-established growing areas, which are closest to Cape Town, and extends to the north along the Atlantic coast and to the east along the curve of False Bay. It is cooled by winds from both bodies of water, and is divided into eight districts.

### Constantia

We begin our exploration, however, in the district-less ward called **Constantia**. It was first planted in 1655, three years after the arrival of the first Dutch settlers. Thirty years later, in 1685, Simon van der Stel founded the Constantia wine estate. Its Muscat-based dessert wine, known simply as Constantia, became famous and was in high demand in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The vineyards lie just south of Cape Town, on the southeast slopes of Table Mountain and Constantiaberg, which form a curve facing towards False Bay and its southeasterly winds. Soils are mainly decomposed granite and Table Mountain sandstone. The area has high rainfall and mild winters. Breezes from False Bay keep the summers moderate and the growing season long, providing excellent conditions for cooler climate whites and late harvest dessert wines. Principal varieties are Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon, and Muscat. Some Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Shiraz is grown at lower elevations which receive more sunlight. There are only a few producers here, including five located on what was the original Constantia estate. Two of them, Groot Constantia and Klein Constantia, produce modern versions of the legendary sweet Constantia Muscat de Frontignan.

### Cape Point

Adjacent to Constantia, this small district is on the western edge of the peninsula that juts southward from Cape Town to the Cape of Good Hope. The vineyards are less than two miles from the Atlantic and its cooling Benguela current, and are also touched by warmer winds from False Bay to the east. Annual rainfall is high.

It was first planted in 1996 and was made a district two years later, but at this writing there is only one winery there, called Cape Point, with about thirty hectares planted mostly to Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon. Merlot, Shiraz, and Cabernet Sauvignon came into production as of 2000. The focus, however, is Sauvignon Blanc with citrus and stone fruit character rather than the herbaceousness and green pepper so often manifested by this variety.

## Stellenbosch

The second-oldest town in South Africa was founded in 1679 by Simon van der Stel shortly after he arrived in Cape Town from the Netherlands, having been appointed Commander of the Cape (a title which was later changed to Governor) by the Dutch East India Company. Traveling east about 30 miles from Cape Town, he came upon a river valley where he made camp. This beautiful and fertile spot became “van der Stel’s bush”, or Stellenbosch.

The town grew into a center for agricultural studies, with Stellenbosch University, the Elsenberg School of Agriculture, and the Nietvoorbij Institute of Enology and Viticulture providing modern facilities and cutting-edge research. The Wine and Spirits Board, which is the main regulatory body for the industry, is in Stellenbosch, as is Distell, the country’s largest wine and brandy producer. Though Stellenbosch accounts for only 14% of South African wine, it has a higher concentration of premium wineries than any other district.

Stellenbosch is best known for Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet-based Bordeaux style blends, but its varied soils and climate conditions support plantings of many cultivars from Pinotage to Chardonnay, and even Pinot Noir on cooler sites. The Simonsberg, Stellenbosch, and Helderberg mountains exert strong influences, as does proximity to False Bay.

Soils are ancient, with alluvial loam over shale on the valley floors to decomposed granite and sandstone on the hillsides. Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc are the most planted varieties, with Merlot, Shiraz, and Chenin Blanc also important.

There are seven wards.

**Simonsberg-Stellenbosch** was the first ward to be delineated in Stellenbosch, in 1980, and is the furthest from False Bay. The dramatic sandstone peaks of Simonsberg Mountain rise starkly between Stellenbosch and Paarl, and the foothills nurture vineyards on all sides. The southwestern, Stellenbosch side yields structured, ageworthy Cabernet Sauvignon, spicy, earthy Pinotage, and other red varieties including Sangiovese, Mourvedre, and Petit Verdot. The oldest Pinot Noir vineyard in South Africa was planted here in 1927. White grapes are grown at the higher elevations.

**Banghoek** is one of the newest wards, just east of Simonsberg-Stellenbosch. Mist, high rainfall, and southeasterly winds lend cool climate character to the primarily red wines.

Jonkershoekberge (Jonkershoek Mountain) divides Banghoek to the north from **Jonkershoek Valley** to the South. Rainfall in the valley is high, and strong winds are frequent. Sunlight hours are curtailed on the steep, elevated southwest facing vineyards, which produce refined Cabernet, Merlot and Shiraz, with greater emphasis on varieties than on blends. Elegantly-styled, floral whites are made from Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc.

In the Bottelary Hills there are four small adjacent wards. In the center, **Bottelary**, the largest of the four, is home to the oldest commercial Pinotage vineyard, and is also well-regarded for Shiraz and

Cabernet Sauvignon. To the Southeast, **Devon Valley** is planted mostly to red varietals, especially Shiraz. **Polkadraai Hills** is at the east side of Bottelary, and tiny **Papagaaiberg** lies west of Devon Valley.

## Paarl

Paarl (pearl) is named for an outcrop of three white granite domes that are known as Paarl Rock or Paarl Mountain. About 35 miles northeast of Cape Town, the town is the largest in the Cape Winelands, and is South Africa's third oldest European settlement, after Cape Town and Stellenbosch. The district's wards include Wellington, the newer Simonsberg-Paarl and Voor Paardeberg, and Franschhoek Valley until it became a district on its own in 2010.

Well inland and removed from maritime influence, the climate is Continental, with long hot summers necessitating irrigation even in some of the higher rainfall areas. Many varietals are planted but it is primarily a red wine region. Full-bodied, powerful reds grown in clay-rich soils are warm and broad on the palate, with softer acidity. Shiraz shines here, and richly-textured Chardonnay is the featured white. Port-style wines are also produced.

Growers in Wellington and Voor-Paardeberg have provided grapes for some very high-profile wines made by wineries located elsewhere. Now, wines bottled by these growers under their own names are attracting the spotlight to their prime, under-the-radar vineyards.

Northeast of the town of Paarl, **Wellington** is the longest-established ward, dating from 1989. Rainfall is lower than elsewhere in Paarl. Known for high quality olives and table grapes, it is gaining a reputation for bold red wines, especially Shiraz. High average temperatures and the fertile soil of the Berg river plains have supported bulk production, but areas away from the river with higher quality potential are enjoying increased vineyard planting and winery construction. Very importantly, most vine cuttings for grafting throughout the Cape come from about 30 grapevine nurseries in Wellington.

Simonsberg Mountain defines two wards bearing its name, one in Stellenbosch and the more recently acknowledged one in Paarl. The north and east facing foothills of **Simonsberg-Paarl**, warmer than the South and West facing hills of Simonsberg-Stellenbosch, are prime terroir for red blends

Northwest of Paarl is **Voor Paardeberg** ("in front of two mountains"), defined as a ward in 2003. Shiraz and old vine Chenin Blanc grow on rocky granite slopes cooled by southwesterly winds, with Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinotage, Merlot and Viognier also of note.

## Franschhoek Valley

This long-established ward of Paarl was awarded district status in May of 2010. Settled by French Huguenots in 1688, the valley was originally named Oliphantshoek, or Elephants Corner, for the elephants who favored its abundant vegetation and the safety provided by the surrounding mountains. It was renamed Franschhoek in 1805, though the village did not acquire the name Franschhoek until 1860. It is a center for fine restaurants in addition to beautiful landscapes, Cape Dutch architecture, and high quality wine.

The narrow valley is enclosed by high mountains on three sides, and conditions differ greatly moving up the slopes from the valley floor. Mountain shadows limit sunlight at higher elevations, where there is also more wind and rain and higher clay content in the soil. Red varieties grown include Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz, Merlot, Pinot Noir and Pinotage; the most important whites are Chenin Blanc, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon. High quality sparkling wines are made at several properties.

### **Swartland**

Swartland (black land) is named for the renosterbos, the prevailing vegetation whose foliage darkens after rain. This elevated plain grows wheat and provides grazing land for cattle and sheep. Co-ops have long dominated its wine production. The Swartland Winery, with 60 members and two million cases annually, is one of the country's largest.

However, much of the grape produce comes from untrellised, unirrigated bush vines, which can give concentrated fruit and wines of great intensity. Robust reds, mainly Shiraz and Pinotage, have been the hallmark of this region, but there is also a treasure of old Chenin Blanc vines. Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and white Rhone varieties are increasingly planted.

Though mitigated by Atlantic breezes and wide temperature swings between day and night, high temperatures create a short window of optimal ripeness for picking.

With its sweeping plains, harsh climate and large output wine co-ops, Swartland is less glamorous than Stellenbosch, Constantia, or Franschhoek, but it has attracted some of South Africa's most innovative winemakers. They are reinventing the district, crafting cutting-edge wines from Mediterranean varietals, as well as Chenin Blanc used on its own or in blends with other grapes such as Viognier and Grenache Blanc.

Two wards, Malmesbury and Riebeeckberg, are delineated in Swartland, but some of its best producers are in an unappellated area between Malmesbury and Paarl's Voor Paardeberg ward. West of the Perdeberg mountain, in Swartland, is Charles Back's pioneering Spice Route winery, and to the north, towards Malmesbury, is a cluster of recently established properties, none dating further back than 1997.

### **Tulbagh**

Northeast of Swartland, in the bowl of a volcanic lake, is Tulbagh, an isolated valley surrounded by mountains on three sides. An earthquake destroyed much of the town of Tulbagh in 1969, and the restored main street is now a tourist attraction with many buildings of historical significance.

Daytime temperatures are very high, but drop precipitously at night and stay cool for much of the morning while air remains trapped in the enclosed amphitheater. Night harvesting was pioneered in Tulbagh in the 1980s, in order to minimize damage to the fruit from excessive heat.

Most of the district is covered with a thin layer of sandy soil, resting on sandstone and granite on the west side and shale in the east. The fertile alluvial riverbed soils had until recently been the only place to plant fruit trees and grapevines, with the shallower soils being used for grains and grazing. Modern farm

machinery able to break up the mineral-rich impacted rock layers is now literally unearthing the potential for new plantings on less fertile sites. Primarily a producer of white and sparkling wines, warm climate notwithstanding, Tulbagh is now drawing attention for its rich red wines, particularly Shiraz and Rhone-style blends which are well-suited for rocky, low-vigor locations.

### **Tygerberg**

Tygerberg's **Durbanville** ward borders on Cape Town's northern suburbs, in the hills to the northeast, and is historically a producer of wheat and dairy products. Most vineyards are at elevations of up to 1100 feet, planted on drought-resisting rootstocks and dry-farmed, as there is little access to irrigation sources. The deep soils are well-drained, but contain enough clay for good water retention. The growing season is longer than most areas of the Cape, with strong night-to-day temperature variation.

Durbanville is best known for Sauvignon Blanc having characteristic greenness along with tropical fruit notes and dusty minerality. Darkly-fruited, well-structured Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon are foremost among the red wines.

**Philadelphia** is a newer ward north of Durbanville, making its mark with Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and red blends. It, too, is hilly, with many vineyards at higher elevations, and benefits from slow ripening afforded by the cooling Atlantic influence.

### **Darling**

Once considered part of Swartland, Darling was demarcated as a district in 2003. Its only ward, **Groenekloof**, a former ward of Swartland, is now more properly aligned with the much cooler climate west of Malmesbury and closer to the Atlantic coast. Weather is consistent, and the deep, well-drained, red decomposed granite soils provide good water retention.

Groenekloof is known for distinctive Sauvignon Blanc showing tropical fruit finely focused by tangy acidity, with a lingering finish. Chardonnay and Chenin Blanc also exhibit ripe fruitiness. Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Shiraz and Pinotage are the main red grapes.

### **Cape South Coast**

Until November 2010, **Overberg, Walker Bay, and Cape Agulhas** were stand-alone districts, not assigned to a region. On the coast southeast of Stellenbosch, they have pioneered the ongoing exploration of cooler growing areas. The newly defined region includes these three districts and continues east through **Swellendam**, formerly a district of Breede River Valley, to **Plettenberg Bay**, crossing into the Eastern Cape province. It shares the coast with the well-traveled Garden Route, a popular tourist drive featuring pristine beaches and consistently mild weather.

## Walker Bay

Once a ward of Overberg, Walker Bay was awarded district status in 2004, and now is divided into five wards of its own. It is cool and windy here, with more summer rain than elsewhere in the Cape.

Walker Bay is a world destination for land-based whale watching. Rare Southern Right whales congregate in the shallow water near the coastline from August to November, and can be observed from Hermanus village.

In the hills above Hermanus, the Hemel-en-Aarde (heaven and earth) Valley is home to refined, elegant Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Timothy Hamilton Russell planted these Burgundian varieties here in 1975, a radical move at the time. Twenty years later, a small wave of new properties began to take hold, and now the area has some 35 producers of Pinot Noir. Pinotage and Sauvignon Blanc are also notably successful. Increased plantings upvalley from Hamilton Russell have led to the division of the valley into Hemel-en-Aarde, Upper Hemel-en-Aarde, and most recently, Hemel-en-Aarde Ridge. West of Hemel-en-Aarde, Bot River also has sea winds and summer rain, but less cloud cover. The additional sunshine favors red varieties, especially Shiraz, and rich, deeply colored wines with soft tannins are becoming the hallmark of this ward.

## Overberg

Overberg's principal ward is **Elgin**, an elevated basin surrounded by mountains, with gravelly soil derived from sandstone, shale and granite. A well-established area for apple and pear orchards, it is now hosting an influx of vintners drawn to its unique climate. Elevation, ocean winds, mist, high rainfall and significantly lower nighttime temperatures combine with abundant sunshine to allow an extraordinarily long growing season, producing wines with restrained alcohol levels and high acidity. Crisp, minerally Sauvignon Blanc with complex character is already defining a regional style. Graceful reds with fine tannins, made from Shiraz, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir, are emerging as well.

## Cape Agulhas

At the southern tip of the continent, Cape Agulhas is the official dividing point between the Atlantic and Indian oceans, and the colliding currents create strong winds and hazardous waters. Soils are primarily sandstone and shale-derived. Persistent wind curtails vine vigor, giving low yields of concentrated fruit. Not far from the coastline, near the Moravian mission village of **Elim** which gives its name to the sole ward of the district, a handful of wine producers are making flinty, aromatic Sauvignon Blanc and peppery but restrained Shiraz, along with Semillon and Cabernet Sauvignon.

## Plettenberg Bay

Plettenberg Bay is a seaside resort village on the Garden Route, with white sand beaches and the world's largest free-flight aviary, at the eastern end of the Cape South Coast region. Currently there is only one estate, making a singular Cap Classique sparkling wine from Sauvignon Blanc. Chardonnay and Pinot Noir have also been planted in the sandy, carbon-rich loam soil. Cool but mild weather and evenly

distributed rainfall promote slow ripening at relatively low sugar levels, giving good potential for the high acid fruit that is best for sparkling wine.

## **Breede River Valley**

This warm, dry inland region is comprised of three districts. It churns out much bulk wine, but has always had pockets of fine wine production, and these are multiplying, as in other regions, with better vineyard practices and more ambitious growers and winemakers. At its western edge, sloping down from the Slanghoek and Du Toitskloof mountains, there is plenty of rain, but moving east the rainfall declines, and almost all vineyards are irrigated.

### **Breedekloof**

Encompassing the upper reaches of the Breede River Valley, this district is the westernmost of the region. Primarily a producer of easy-drinking, upfront-styled table wine, wine for distillation into brandy, and dessert wines, it is gaining a reputation for Pinotage, Chardonnay and Semillon. The Slanghoek and Goudini wards, just east of the Slanghoek mountains, are enjoying success with Sauvignon Blanc and botrytized wines. Rainfall is high, and the sandy, alluvial soils do not need irrigation.

### **Worcester**

The hot climate here requires vineyard irrigation from the Breede River, with rainfall diminishing from west to east. Soils are mainly shale and sandstone derived. This ward has the largest area of vines in the country, and produces about 25% of the crop. Much of it is Columbard and Chenin Blanc on alluvial soil, making wine for distillation and quaffable, commercial table wines. Fortified dessert wines are also made with several varieties of Muscat.

### **Robertson**

This is the valley's leading area for high quality wines, with its sandy, lime-rich soils, morning mists and moisture-laden southeasterly winds, combined with judicious irrigation. Known as "the valley of vines and roses", Robertson was once famous for its ostrich farms, which were supplanted after World War I by wine and fruit. It is also home to Thoroughbred race horses, fed on the bone-strengthening grasses grown on the limestone soil. Its leading wine is ripe, minerally Chardonnay, with Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon not far behind. Sparkling wine and fortified dessert wines are also prominent.

A stand-alone ward separated by mountains from Worcester, Breedekloof and Tulbagh, **Ceres** is named for the Roman goddess of agriculture. Famed for deciduous fruit, it currently produces very little wine. Apple and pear orchards often precede vineyards, however, as their requirements are similar, so it is likely that more winegrowing will take hold in this area.

## Olifants River

Northwest of the Coastal Region, the Olifants River valley flows northward from the Cederberg Mountains. On the sandy alluvial soil near **Citrusdal**, orange groves line the riverbank. To the north is the Clanwilliam dam which provides much of the water for the towns and farms. Fields of rooibos tea bushes are grown here. Further north are **Vredendal** and **Lutzville Valley**, where the output of industrial-sized wine co-ops make Olifants River the second largest-producing South African wine region.

Smaller, quality-driven properties are springing up along the coast and on high-altitude sites further inland. Large scale organic farming is being done, made possible in dry areas by low humidity and controlled water sources, which minimize vine diseases.

Two notable stand-alone wards are situated on either side of the region. To the west, on the Atlantic coast, is **Lambert's Bay**, showing great promise for Sauvignon Blanc in particular. To the east, in the Cederberg Mountains at elevations up to 3300 feet, is the **Cederberg** ward. Here, there is no coastal influence and the climate is cool Mediterranean, with dramatic temperature shifts between day and night. Varied soils and aspects provide good conditions for a range of red and white varieties.

## Klein Karoo

The Klein or Little Karoo is a semidesert basin parallel to the coast of the Indian Ocean, surrounded by mountains on three sides. The Langenberg and Outeniqua mountains form the southern border, running continuously west to east and blocking marine influence. Parallel ranges north of Calitzdorp separate the Klein Karoo from the vast Great Karoo. It has extreme climate variations, with very hot areas producing some of the country's finest sweet and fortified wines, and very cool mountainous sites still being explored and identified.

At the west end is the town and ward of **Montagu**, where sweet wines are made from Muscat à Petits Grains and Muscat de Frontignan, both known here as Muscadel. Continuing east along the mountain slopes are most recently declared ward **Tradouw Highlands** and **Tradouw**, its lower-lying neighbor. **Langeberg-Garcia** is a small district following the contours of the Langeberg mountains.

In the region's center, the rural village of **Calitzdorp** gives its name to the district known as the Port capital of the Cape. Although use of the word "Port" has been prohibited on labels since 2005, wines made in vintage and tawny Port styles from traditional Portuguese grape varieties have achieved high levels of quality here. Conditions have much in common with Portugal's Douro region, with less rain. Summers are hot, winter nights are cold, and soils are well-drained but poor and rocky.

The **Upper Langkloof** ward, a narrow strip on the northern slopes of the Outeniqua Mountains which separate the Klein Karoo from the Cape South Coast, is also a low rainfall area, but much cooler. At its western tip is the cool and mountainous **Outeniqua** ward.

On the north side of the Swartberg mountains are two stand-alone wards, **Swartberg** and **Prince Albert**. The latter is a bit of a gourmet center, with a cooking school, an abundance of fruit trees, and artisan cheeses and ham, at the foot of a spectacular mountain pass.

## **Boberg**

Boberg is classified as a region, but it overlaps Paarl, Franschhoek and Tulbagh, and refers to fortified wines from those areas.

## **Northern Cape**

Large and sparsely populated, the Northern Cape geographical unit has three wards and one district, but no region. It includes the hottest and most northern growing areas and accounts for about 12% of production, mostly in bulk wine, with some notable fortified dessert wines. The Orange River is the chief water source, since there is usually little rain, though most of it falls in spring and summer. White grapes predominate, but as elsewhere, red plantings are increasing. The principal ward is **Lower Orange**, and the northernmost is **Hartswater**. Near Kimberley, where diamonds were discovered around 1870, is **Rietrivier Free State**. Southwest of Rietriver is the Douglas district, where the Douglas Cellar cooperative is the only winery.

## **KwaZulu-Natal**

Home of the Zulu Nation as well as Durban, South Africa's second-largest city, the province of KwaZulu-Natal was defined as a geographical unit in 2005. It has no regions, districts, or wards. Its rainy, humid climate, summer hailstorms and the remoteness of likely vineyard locations are obstacles to wine production, and initial plantings in the early 1990s were not very successful. Renewed experimentation began in 2000 to determine the best varieties and viticultural practices. Higher altitude sites show promise for Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, while in other areas hybrids are being tried.

## **Eastern Cape**

Defined as a geographical unit in October 2009, Eastern Cape, like KwaZulu-Natal, contains no other production areas. There is one wine producer at Jeffrey's Bay.

Joanna Breslin  
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