

SOUTH AFRICAN WINE HARVEST REPORT 2002

Information supplied by VinPro and SAWIS, and compiled and written up by Angela Lloyd

HARVEST 2002 OVERVIEW

The 2002 wine harvest will go into the history books as offering many challenges but equally many opportunities.

A very confusing set of conditions may be made clearer by examining separately the positive features and the challenges.

The first of the natural benefits arrived with the welcome, if late, winter rains - the heaviest in 40 years - which replenished depleted dams and water tables after four years of drought.

The Cape also enjoyed a colder than usual winter, allowing the vines to go into full dormancy.

Cooler temperatures continued in spring and, unusually, lasted well into mid-February, encouraging slow ripening and build up of concentrated flavours in the grapes.

While clusters often indicated a normal to larger crop, bunch weights eventually proved to be lighter, the small berries having a greater proportion of skin and pips to juice. This further enhanced the benefits of slow ripening.

Another phenomenon of 2002, which will be applauded by many, is the frequent - but not universal - achievement of full physiological ripeness at sugar levels lower than in recent vintages; thus more moderate alcohol levels may be anticipated.

While the above reflect nature-given benefits, it would be wrong to omit the positive human influence in a year when determination, awareness, experience and the financial, physical and psychological will to succeed, played just as important a role in determining the quality of each producer's harvest.

Conditions had promised a much larger crop, with the major wine regions reporting generally good and even budding. It's significant that everywhere, bar Worcester and the Orange River, the November 2001 crop estimates have notably decreased by March 2002; the major wine regions of Stellenbosch, Paarl and Swartland have all recorded their lowest crop in five years. Disease, light bunch weight and, in some areas, exceptionally low yields on old vines are the main causes.

That the estimated total crop of 1 061 757 tons (808 million gross litres, based on a recovery rate of 761 litres/gross ton) tops 2001's exceptionally small harvest, is due almost solely to a 107% increase in the Orange River.

Undoubtedly, the most demanding challenges for which winegrowers and winemakers will remember 2002 are Downy mildew, botrytis and the abnormally long heatwave.

When the winter rains continued into spring, accompanied by relatively high humidity, conditions for Downy were ideal. Many factors determined how successful a wine grower was in getting on top of the problem; confusingly, even adjacent blocks of the same variety were affected or not, depending on flowering dates. Generally, though, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon were the worst affected. Conditions also encouraged vigorous, lush vine growth, necessitating high labour input to keep it under control.

January, traditionally warm and dry, remained cool with more rain - in some places way above average. Apart from further outbreaks of Downy affecting the leaves, serious levels of botrytis or sour rot developed in the ripening grapes, particularly Sauvignon Blanc, Chenin Blanc and Chardonnay. Pre-harvest elimination of rot-infected bunches, hand harvesting and sorting tables became the buzz terms for those who could and would.

Nevertheless, many winemakers could still see 2002 turning into an outstanding vintage. The arrival of the inevitable heatwave in the latter part of February dimmed, if not entirely dashed optimism. Whites became much fuller, many red varieties ripened at the same time (the machine harvester now proved a saviour on healthy grapes), while the heatwave's undue length caused sunburn damage and, despite adequate soil moisture, vines shut down altogether.

As the heatwave departed, much cooler autumnal weather set in, putting pressure on late varieties to fully ripen. Virus-infected Cabernet especially battled, giving poor colour and low potential alcohols.

If all this wasn't enough, the harvesting period was one of the longest!

The efforts of the best producers should be well rewarded, though quality will be at the expense of quantity. There is the promise of some excellent Sauvignon Blanc; Chardonnay, from higher yields than the past few years, is also looking good. Shiraz, apparently having withstood every onslaught, pre-heatwave harvested Merlot and some Pinotage are tipped as the best reds, although virus-free Cabernet on good sites appears to have done well too. Cap Classique and Port have strong support and, where sufficiently high sugars were achieved, there are some scintillating botrytised dessert wines.

There are, of course, others who will have more mixed results. In such a varied year, probably the best advice for consumers is to look to individual producers, rather than variety or area.

REGIONAL AND PRODUCER REPORTS

NB To avoid repetition, it should be taken as read that conditions mirror those described in the Overview above, unless described otherwise.

STELLENBOSCH

Probably the most-readily recognised name of all South Africa's wine regions, Stellenbosch also has the greatest number of cellars. In vine population, it fills third place behind Paarl and Worcester, though the proportion of vineyard area to its size - just over 16 000 ha out of 43 347 ha - is greater than either of these two regions.

Apart from conditions that persisted generally, Vinpro consultant, Johan Pienaar, remarks that dry conditions after the 2001 harvest influenced a set of uneven growth and ripening patterns this season. Downy struck particularly at Pinotage bunches, as well as Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon. The crop estimate of 80 781 tons is 18% down on 2001 and one of the smallest on record. In some cases Chenin Blanc, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc recorded 50% drops in production.

‘Despite a chaotic and unpredictable year, grape quality varied from very good to excellent in some Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Merlot and Shiraz but late-ripening Cabernet Sauvignon, especially virused vines, was more erratic,’ Pienaar concludes.

‘The 2002 harvest was all about climatic conditions of extremes,’ reflect Gary and Kathy Jordan of Jordan Vineyards at the top of Stellenboschkloof. An October hailstorm damaged newly-trellised vineyards but exceptional growth conditions soon restored shoots to the wire. Botrytis-affected Chardonnay and Chenin Blanc required hand picking, though the machine harvester came into its own when the heatwave threatened to send sugar levels soaring on reds. Nevertheless, phenolic ripeness was reached at slightly lower sugar levels with good acid and pH levels. The Jordans single out Sauvignon Blanc, ‘Our best ever’, Merlot, their maiden Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon as the best performers; Cabernet was also the main sufferer of a crop around 16% down on 2001.

Helderberg

Currently bearing vineyards on the east side of the Helderberg grow on and around a ridge exposed to the full force of the southeasterly wind.

Vergelegen, with some of the most vulnerable vineyards, ‘escaped the Downy but not the wind,’ sighs winemaker, André van Rensburg. This, plus poor flowering conditions and rot devastated Sauvignon Blanc by 85%, Semillon by 25%, while the total crop - after selective harvesting and sorting on conveyor - dropped from 1200 tons in 2001 to 796 tons this year.

Qualitywise, Van Rensburg describes Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon and Merlot harvested pre-heatwave as having ‘great complexity and structure’; Shiraz and Cabernet Franc are ‘amazing wines with stunning tannins and flavours’ but he maintains, ‘only the best sites have produced very good Cabernets.’ In summary, Van Rensburg believes ‘2002 has shown that cool climates do not invariably lead to better wines, there are simply too many factors.’

Stellenbosch Vineyards draws fruit from 2 400 hectares of vineyard extending from the Helderberg’s western slopes across the southern part of the Stellenbosch district. Viticulturist, Johan Hewett and Chief Cellarmaster, Chris Kelly comment on the exceptionally small, intensely flavoured berries with very good analyses and lower than usual sugar levels. A 30% drop in average yields countered excellent quality. Hewett notes, ‘Some growers were caught by the heavy disease pressure during flowering, but those taking preventative rather than curative action, suffered little loss.’ The Stellenbosch Vineyards team predicts 2002 will be a great Sauvignon Blanc year.

Simonsberg

Marking Stellenbosch's northernmost border, the higher, more exposed slopes of the Simonsberg produce notable white wines, while the lower, more sheltered ground favours reds. Only white varieties grow in Delheim's Simonsberg vineyards; loss due to spring southeasterly gales is a regular phenomenon. 'This year the crop was reduced by half,' confirms viticulturist, Victor Sperling. Carefully timed pickings before and after the heatwave of, especially Sauvignon Blanc, 'has captured lovely fruit,' reckons winemaker, Conrad Vlok. Botrytis dessert wine, a regular in the range, will not appear in 2002: 'Sour rot set in before botrytis could develop at high enough sugars,' says Sperling.

'2002 will be a fabulous year for all our premium varieties,' predicts Adi Badenhorst at neighbouring Rustenberg, singling out Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Cabernet Franc and his maiden Syrah. The cool conditions enabled sugar and physiological ripeness to occur simultaneously; though Cabernet Sauvignon required judicious irrigation and achieved full ripeness at the latest dates on record.

Selective harvesting was backed up by further sorting on a vibrating conveyer to remove smaller, unripe berries, and by 14 pairs of hands. 'The eight tons of grapes processed each hour by conventional methods drops to 1.2 tons in this labour intensive way,' admits Badenhorst.

Bottelary

Bottelary's generally west-facing slopes are recognised for producing generous red wines. Hartenberg's Carl Schultz rates Shiraz and second-crop Pinotage as very good to excellent - on a par with 2001 and 2000. Ripeness varied from high sugar levels in early varieties to 2-3 degrees Balling lower later but virus-infected Cabernet struggled to reach 12% potential alcohol. Schultz is concerned that, post-malolactic, some reds show both high total acid and pH levels. Disease reduced a naturally lower crop by 10-15%.

Devon Valley

This densely planted, fairly sheltered valley, is best known for red wines, although Chardonnay also does well.

Lorna Roos, consultant viticulturist at Sylvanvale, declares '2002 the most stressful since 1996/1997.' Intensively selective hand harvesting has given a small but satisfying result; young Cabernet Sauvignon, with its more open canopy, produced excellent grapes

Although the jury's still out at Clos Malverne, winemaker, Ippie Smit feels 2002 produced no shining stars. Sauvignon Blanc is above average; but for the heatwave, it would have been outstanding. Pinotage has good colour, but later in the season colours were problematic. Pinotage, Merlot and Shiraz all required green harvesting due to uneven ripening. The harvest was 15% down in total with yields varying between 7 and 2.5 tons/ha. 'I've never believed lower yields give better quality and this was confirmed,' says Smit. 'Balance between growth and yield is more important.'

Jonkershoek Valley

Vineyards are confined to the south-facing slopes at the mouth of this valley dominated by towering mountains. Lanzerac winemaker, Wynand Hamman believes, 'The summer rains did more good than harm, bringing cooler weather; lower yields were compensated by small, highly concentrated berries.' Hamman records excellent analyses and has high hopes for Sauvignon Blanc, Pinotage and Merlot.

CONSTANTIA

Uninterrupted exposure to on-shore breezes from False Bay and Constantia's isolation from other wine regions minimised Downy mildew infection.

The early, cool conditions promised another great vintage of the valley's signature variety, Sauvignon Blanc; rot and the heatwave diminished these prospects, though perhaps more in quantity than quality.

Klein Constantia's Ross Gower echoes the concern of many Cape producers in predicting a shortfall of quality Sauvignon Blanc towards the end of 2002.

His Sauvignon crop was down 40%, though some Chardonnay dropped by 50%. Further down the valley, Steenberg's Sauvignon was down 10-15%, due to less botrytis.

Gower describes Sauvignon quality as 'good, thanks to selective hand harvesting, the machine harvester was barely used'; new winemaker, John Loubser, labels Steenberg Sauvignon as 'full, rich and ripe - not as good as 2001 but better than 2000.'

Loubser is also pleased with Semillon and Chardonnay, while Gower's Riesling has its usual characterful brush of botrytis. Late ripening Cabernets Sauvignon and Franc struggled with the early onset of autumnal weather, however Loubser's Merlot displays 'great fruit, fullness and structure.'

DURBANVILLE

Flanking Cape Town's northernmost suburbs, these hillside vineyards benefit from the breezes blowing off both the Atlantic Ocean and False Bay.

Sauvignon Blanc performs well here and 2002's extended cool conditions suited it admirably, though more than usual attention was demanded in the vineyards. Martin Moore, winemaker at Durbanville Hills, happily reports, 'Although the crop is 15% down, all is good enough to carry the varietal label, nothing is demoted to 'dry white'.' He also identifies Chardonnay as 'a star' with a slightly increased crop.

Nitida's Bernhard Veller echoes Moore's Sauvignon comments, and is pleased with his Semillon. Shiraz, with cool climate pepper and spice, Pinotage and selected blocks of Merlot have all yielded good colours and flavours.

Veller sums up 2002 as, 'a very frustrating and complicated harvest, also very long.' Moore pinpoints success to, 'being patient, but wide-awake. It was definitely not a year for 'when in doubt, pick.'

PAARL

Paarl, with the largest area under vine of any region, sprawls across a multitude of meso climates, soils, altitudes and aspects.

Feed back from Vinpro consultant, Dricus van der Westhuizen highlights restored water tables in the many dryland vineyards and minimum irrigation required otherwise.

Some farms were unscathed by Downy, others - especially smaller producers, often under financial pressure - suffered up to 95% damage. Overall, selective harvesting prior to the heatwave produced excellent quality grapes with good analyses.

Paarl's estimated 2002 crop is 97 745 ton as compared with 123 572 tons in 2001, the biggest decrease of any region. It is also a major drop on the November 2001 estimate of 123 813 tons, accounted for by disease but especially significant decreases on older Chenin Blanc, the variety which makes up a quarter of Paarl's vineyards. Reds, apart from Cabernet Sauvignon and Cinsaut, showed increases on 2001.

Villiera's Jeff Grier, who farms a wide selection of varieties on the Stellenbosch border (**NB since this report, Villiera has become part of Stellenbosch**) believes 2002 is on a par with 2001 for white varieties, only Chenin being average, but less good for reds, with Shiraz and Pinotage the exceptions. 'Chardonnay and Pinot Noir for bubbly and still wines were analytically perfect,' says Grier, a major sparkling wine producer. Villiera's overall crop was down 15%, with some old bush vines off 30%.

For organic farmers, the season brought extra stress. However, African Terroir's viticulturist, Thys Greef reports, 'Our spray programme and canopy management ensured neither our conventionally farmed nor organic vineyards were as badly affected as one might expect.' Traditional copper sprays gave way to other organic products when copper build up became a danger; botrytis was combated with a biological fungicide. The organic Paardeberg vineyards yielded a ton per hectare less on average. 'The white wines are looking better than the grapes suggested,' says Greef; 'early-ripening reds are also promising, but later varieties have high alcohols without physiological ripeness.'

Simonsberg-Paarl

On the north-facing slopes of the Simonsberg, Glen Carlou winemaker, David Finlayson's biggest problem was botrytis in the Chardonnay just prior to harvesting. Opening canopies on the morning sun side, selective and repeated pickings and a final sort at the cellar limited its presence in the wine to 2-3%, at the expense of quantity. New bearing vineyards have accounted for a larger harvest than 2001. Finlayson is pleased with Pinot Noir, Merlot and an 'awesome' Shiraz; Cabernet Sauvignon is somewhat hard. Verdelho was crushed for the first time.

Franschhoek

Although this valley gets extremely hot in summer, it also receives the benefits of the southeasterly wind, especially along the slopes of the high mountains that confine it. New plantings are taking place here, rather than on the fertile, hot valley floor.

La Motte's Jacques Borman, an early exponent of Franschhoek reds, especially Shiraz, remarks, '2002 has produced lots of fruit, concentration and extraordinarily high extracts, up to 40 grams/litre.' Great balance in Merlot compensates for yields down 30-40%; Sauvignon Blanc suffered similar loss but Borman is enthusiastic about its 'beautiful varietal flavour'.

Marc Kent of Boekenhoutskloof considers the January rains helped red varieties in their high lying vineyards achieve a longer hang time, without ill effects from the heat. Cabernet is good and he is 'thrilled' with maiden crops of Syrah. Kent picked probably the last grapes of the 2002 harvest: botrytised Semillon on 15th May!

Wellington

This Ward, hugging the warm slopes of the Hawequas mountains, is another emerging as a producer of notable red wines. Linton Park's Hennie Huskisson 2002 harvest has yielded 'Good quality Cabernet Sauvignon and exceptional Shiraz.' All varieties increased in volume.

SWARTLAND

This west coast wine and wheatland region has few irrigated vineyards; the wettest winter in 40 years thus brought welcome relief to the deep, moisture-retentive soils but, regrettably, also significant Downy mildew. Vinpro's Johan Viljoen notes it ranged from negligible to as much as 90%, where spraying was insufficient; often, the full extent of the damage became apparent only during the harvest. Among the reds, Cabernet Sauvignon suffered most. Chenin Blanc, 33% of the area's plantings, also cropped much lower than normal, particularly the older vines. The harvest should total 73 046 tons compared with a November 2001 estimate of 87 134 tons; 2001 produced 79 745 tons.

More positively, Viljoen has observed good analyses and more flavour intensity than 2001. Shortfalls aside, Abe Beukes, cellar master at Darling Cellars, was pleased with the very slow even ripening period, with full ripeness reached 'without overly high sugar levels.' He concludes, '2002 promises elegantly balanced wines,' nominating Shiraz as a standout variety.

In the Groenekloof, Darling Hills area, Lukas Wentzel of Groote Post echoes Beukes comments, describing his whites as having 'depth and concentration.' The reds were a greater challenge, and high rainfall produced bigger berries in the Merlot.

ROBERTSON

Traditionally, this inland region's vineyards have been dominated by Chardonnay, for table wine, with Chenin Blanc and Colombard brandy industry stalwarts. The trend is now shifting to red varieties. Thus, annual crop fluctuations are mainly driven by up rootings and new plantings. According to Vinpro's Brian Stipp, both newly bearing vineyards and better yields on established white varieties account for an estimated 2002 crop of 161 751 tons, a 14.5% increase on 2001.

Apart from conditions noted elsewhere, Stipp reports isolated hail damage during the early growing season; that Ruby Cabernet was also affected by Downy but generally it caused much less damage than in coastal regions. Chardonnay especially is outstanding, Chenin Blanc and Colombard generally satisfying. Reds have produced good quality with very good colour.

Graham Beck's Pieter Ferreira, a Cap Classique specialist, notes, 'good acid and optimum alcohol levels' in his base wine. For Abrie Bruwer, the vintage with its February rain allowed the yet unique opportunity to make both Springfield Wild Yeast and Methode Ancienne Chardonnays. Sauvignon Blanc, often a controversial performer in this region, again achieved excellent results at Springfield, though from the smallest ever crop. Ferreira find his style overly tropical.

The tables are turned with reds: Bruwer struggled with his Cabernet, but Ferreira rates Shiraz as the pick of 2002; 'The use of controlled deficit irrigation produced tiny berries with great fruit concentration,' he says. The farm's maiden Sangiovese was harvested this year. Beck's 38% crop increase should be seen a normal yield. Springfield's harvest was down on 2001, itself unusually small.

Bonnievale

'Good overall colour, flavour and quality of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah resulted from perfecting management of the water deficit strategy, itself helped by achieving desired vine canopies so easily,' comments Philip Jonker of Weltevrede. Selective harvesting according to grape flavour intensity resulted in rich, concentrated Chardonnay, tropical Sauvignon Blanc and Gewurztraminer with lovely rose petal flavours. A 15% crop increase was still slightly under average.

WORCESTER

From being a major supplier to local wholesalers and of distilling wine, this high-yielding region with the second largest area under vine, today feeds a broader domestic market as well as international customers. These factors are effecting a dramatic change towards noble varieties, with careful site selection and viticultural practices geared for quality. These improvements, as much as climatic conditions, will determine the success of a harvest.

One of only two regions recording a larger harvest than in 2001, the estimated 2002 crop is 272 092 tons. Vinpro consultant, Schalk du Toit attributes this to newly bearing vineyards, good budding, adequate rainfall and limited disease damage. He mentions autumn being drier and slightly warmer than the long term average; LTA rainfall in spring and summer increased by 40% and 200%, except in the Slanghoek valley.

'Viticultural changes inaugurated in 1999 showed positive results this year,' says A B Krige, winemaker at Overhex Vineyards, particularly beneficiaries are Chardonnay, Chenin Blanc, Merlot, and Ruby Cabernet.

Slanghoek

This Ward, hugging the eponymous mountain range, experienced much lower spring rainfall than the rest of Worcester. According to winemaker Kobus Rossouw, this encouraged a healthy,

though 8% lower crop at Slanghoek Winery. Rossouw singles out Sauvignon Blanc, Chenin Blanc, Semillon and Cape Riesling as 'fruity wines with good acid and pH balance'. Cabernet Sauvignon is the best red and a maiden Touriga Nacional has made a well-structured Port. Some whites, reds and jerepigos would generally have benefited from more heat.

TULBAGH

The warm, landlocked Tulbagh valley is yet another area turning an image as white wine country only on its head.

On the valley floor, Rijk's Pierre Wahl reports little spring rain with minimal Downy mildew. Closer to the mountains, plentiful dew and the occasional shower meant success depended on 'Intuition and keeping a finger on the pulse of nature,' according to Twee Jonge Gezellen's Nicky Krone.

The heatwave and rain arrived here at the end of January, resulting in botrytis and all varieties ripening simultaneously.

Krone mentions his signature Cap Classique sparkling base wines as showing great potential with Sauvignon Blanc, Chenin Blanc and Chardonnay having 'finesse and flavour', while Wahl nominates Pinotage, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon but especially Shiraz, as 'exceptional' with good extract and soft tannins. Rijk's harvest was 20% down.

OVERBERG

Walker Bay

The threat of spring disease is no stranger to this southern coastal region, where the prevailing southeasterly wind often brings rain. Producers are thus prepared for and coped with even the past season's high disease pressure. January rains, around 300% above average, encouraged sour rot and determined birds. Gordon Johnson of Newton Johnson, records, 'the Hemel en Aarde Valley became a war zone of shotgun fire', as farmers tried to scare them off.

Crops vary widely; any variety may be up on average for one producer, 50% down for his neighbour.

The valley's signature variety, Pinot Noir benefited from a cool January and early February. Hamilton Russell's Kevin Grant describes his as having 'tight, focussed, bright berry fruit with good natural acid levels.' Johnson's looks 'like a stunner – with elegance and power!' while Peter Finlayson says his Bouchard Finlayson 'has good colour but is less full bodied.' The jury is out on Chardonnay, except from the high Kaaimansgat vineyard in nearby Villiersdorp, which Johnson enthuses, 'produced a higher yield of the best quality fruit.' Sauvignon Blanc, Pinotage and even Cabernet Sauvignon have also produced some good wines.

The Beaumonts in neighbouring Bot River are very happy they captured all that is best about a cool vintage across the varietal spectrum.

Elgin

Paul Cluver Estate is leading the change to vines in this renowned apple growing area, some 240 metres above sea level. Winemaker, Andries Burger, believes the cooler growing season has shown the area's true potential, commenting, 'The moderately warm days and cooler nights enhanced colour development and, with excellent skin to juice ratio, fuller flavours.' Burger is exceptionally enthusiastic about Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Sauvignon and botrytised Weisser Riesling with Chardonnay promising. Pinot Noir proved more difficult due to uneven ripening. The crop is 10% up on 2001.

OLIFANTS RIVERVredendal

Although this northern wine region has the second smallest area under vine, the Olifants River has traditionally produced one of the largest crops due to its many high yielding varieties. Vinpro's Jeff Joubert maintains 2002's estimated 164 689 ton crop reflects an ongoing downward trend, due in part to the introduction of low yielding, classic varieties.

Vredendal Winery, now amalgamated with Spruitdrift, took in a crop of 83 630 tons from their combined vineyards, which stretch from the cooler coast and warmer valley to inland mountainside sites. Red varieties rose from 7145 tons in 2001 to 11917 tons, with Shiraz, Merlot, Cabernet and Pinotage vineyards coming on stream. Viticulturist, Pieter Koegelenberg records, 'a perfect ripening season, one of the coolest in years' until the abnormally long heatwave adversely affected especially Sauvignon Blanc and Merlot. Cellarmaster, Pieter Verwey describes whites harvested pre-heatwave as, 'Well balanced with good acid and lots of fruit. Reds should produce good quality and colour.'

Citrusdal

In the southern part of the region, Goue Vallei Wines' Johan Delpont records a good 2002, with 'no varieties affected by mildew and a larger crop than 2001'. Tonnage of Shiraz and Merlot doubled. Pinotage looks promising, after bleeding off juice but Sauvignon Blanc is presently going through a dip.

LITTLE KAROO

Proving that the Cape isn't one big vineyard, this semi-desert, inland area experienced a fairly dry winter and no January rain. Vinpro consultant, Willem Botha says Calitzdorp experienced some Downy mildew but with limited negative effect. Oidium pressure was, however, particularly high throughout the season. Nevertheless, the estimated 41 026 ton crop reflects a 12.4% increase on a small 2001 harvest. This can be attributed to newly bearing vineyards of Colombard and red varieties. Pre-heatwave harvested whites look good after a slow start; reds have good colour and are developing well.

Calitzdorp

'The earliest harvest in 15 years combined with the coolest summer in five years produced excellent quality grapes until the mid-February heatwave struck,' remarks Boets Nel of Die Krans. Both he and his cousin, Carel Nel of Boplaas, single out red varieties as being well structured with good extract and fruit. In this area recognised for its quality ports, Touriga Nacional has Boets Nel optimistic that 2002 'could be a reserve year.'

ORANGE RIVER (NORTHERN CAPE)

Orange River Wine Cellars, a five-winery co-op fed by vineyards along the irrigated riverbanks, is the biggest producer in this region. The 2002 harvest produced a record 172 000 tons of grapes, mostly due to new bearing vineyards but also favourable weather conditions. The wine division (table wine and distilling) took in 123 000 tons, the balance going to the juice section.

Notwithstanding the record crop, Vinpro's Dirk Malan reports October hail destroyed around 2000 tons of grapes and rain during the harvest resulted in a greater proportion of sultanas being crushed.

Production Manager, Matthee van Schalkwyk says the white wines in particular are very fruity and well balanced.

Other new or small quality areas:

Cape Point: Cape Point Vineyards' three separate blocks face the Atlantic Ocean on the southern part of the peninsula. The fourth, 2002 harvest totalled half the original estimate. Sauvignon Blanc, already highly regarded, is starting slowly; Semillon is promising, while Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon have great depth of colour and flavour.

Cederberg: David Nieuwoudt's solitary vineyards, 1100 metres up in the Cederberg Mountains, experienced exceptionally low spring temperatures but no Downy! Although the crop is down between 5-10% on 2001, with Sauvignon Blanc 40% off, Nieuwoudt claims the quality is 'outstanding'. Chardonnay, Chenin Blanc, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon stand out. Nieuwoudt mentions harvesting the last Cabernet on 9th April, two days after the first winter frost!

Elim (and surrounding areas): disease and birds also ravaged Africa's most southerly vineyards, close to Cape Agulhas. Around a quarter of Sauvignon Blanc was lost; the remainder still leaves Flagstone's Bruce Jack claiming, 'the concentration and fruit weight make it the most exciting wine I've yet made.' Reds, especially Shiraz with a cool climate character, are full of promise.

Tradouw: Exposed to Indian Ocean breezes, the Tradouw Valley is a cool outpost in the warmer Karoo. Meyer Joubert, winemaker at Joubert-Tradouw, believes disease and drought notwithstanding, 2002 will be better than 2001. Dry, hot days and cool nights have produced excellent reds with good colour and analyses. Joubert describes Merlot as 'absolutely delicious.' The heat produced a fuller, more tropical style Sauvignon Blanc.