

SOUTH AFRICAN WINE HARVEST REPORT 2003

Information supplied by VinPro and SAWIS

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I. GENERAL OVERVIEW

The 2003 harvest is generally considered to be one of the finest vintages in recent years and weather conditions were favourable from planting right through to harvesting. The grapes could ripen slowly on the vine and develop optimum physiological ripeness, with ideal sugar levels, good acids and prominent varietal flavours. Relatively little input was required from producers and some have described it as "almost an organic" year.

A 12.2% increase in total yield is forecast, amounting to an estimated total of 1 211 785 tons. Increases occurred in all the major wine growing regions. One of the reasons for the increased yield is the young plantings that have come into production (particularly Shiraz, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Pinotage).

Stellenbosch: The crop is almost 46% bigger than in 2002. A cool growing season resulted in quality wines with good flavours. Reds display lovely colour.

Paarl: Production increased by more than 45% in one of the healthiest wine grape seasons in years. Grapes reached optimum ripeness at lower sugar levels, which should result in lower alcohol levels. Full-bodied wines with lots of fruit.

Swartland: The biggest wine grape crop in 15 years. Cool weather, good budding percentages and even growth characterised the growing season. Good viticultural practice, e.g. regular bunch counts and crop control, resulted in high quality wines.

Robertson: A lot of young red grape vineyards came into full production in one of the healthiest growing seasons ever. Very heavy rain with widespread flood damage on 23 and 24 March. Full-bodied and fruity wines.

Worcester: A much larger red wine crop was produced. Vineyards received specialised attention and grapes were exceptionally healthy. Investments in cellar technology are now paying off. Flavourful wines.

Klein Karoo: Drought conditions resulted in a smaller crop. Flood damage to low-lying vineyards was caused by the heavy rains on 22 and 23 March. Wine quality looks very promising, the reds in particular showing intense colour.

Olifants River: The 2003 crop was the biggest ever. The region's potential for the cultivation of quality red grapes was confirmed by the substantial percentage of the crop being delivered to cellars in the Boland.

Orange River: The area was practically disease-free. Healthy grapes with good sugars were produced. Promising Colombar and Chenin blanc. The red cultivars, although limited in volume, should be very good.

II. MAJOR WINE REGIONS

STELLENBOSCH

Production trends

The crop is currently estimated at about 112 200 tons, which is 45.72% bigger than in 2002. All cultivars, Merlot, Pinotage and Chardonnay in particular, produced much bigger crops, with the exception of Sauvignon blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon, the latter being subject to rot in late ripening blocks.

Climatic conditions and influence on vine growth

The 2002 post-harvest period was characterised by high temperatures. May 2002 was particularly cold, with high rainfall. The spring of the 2002 growing season was cool with low rainfall and good budding occurred.

The chilly spring and cool soils resulted in uneven shoot growth, causing uneven ripening in certain cultivars. November temperatures were below average, causing uneven flowering and set in late cultivars. December was particularly hot and strong shoot growth occurred. However, the average temperature for the four months December to March 2003 was 21,34°C, compared to 27,67°C for the same period last year. Radiation during October was lower than usual with a lot more cloudy days. This, combined with the cooler ripening season and drier summer, resulted in smaller berries.

In January and February, the latter with the exception of a short heatwave, temperatures were cool, with hardly any rainfall. By mid-February, drought symptoms were already prevalent in certain dryland vineyards. Dry conditions kept rot and mildew at bay.

Although ripening and harvest temperatures were cool, above-average rainfall occurred towards the end of March. The rain, combined with dewy nights, caused Botrytis and rot in various cultivars, especially late Cabernet Sauvignon. In most cases, however, the March rains provided the extra time needed for the grapes to ripen sufficiently in the vineyards.

Grape and wine quality

Flavours are good and quality-wise, 2003 may be considered a good year, except for the variable quality of late ripening Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz. Smaller berries, with excellent skin to pulp ratios, gave good colour to this year's reds. However, the smaller berry set has resulted in a drop in the average recovery per ton from 750 - 800 litres to around 700 - 750 litres.

The ripening of all cultivars was slow and evenly distributed due to the cooler ripening climate. In most cases sugars reached the ideal, with high acids and pHs, probably due to the presence of malic acid.

PAARL

Production trends

Production in Paarl, at approximately 152 982 tons, was up by 45.3% – the area's biggest wine grape harvest since 1997. Almost all cultivars produced a bigger crop than in 2002.

Climatic conditions and influence on vine growth

The 2002/2003 season was one of the healthiest wine grape seasons in years and normal spraying programmes provided very good control.

The season kicked off extremely well, after a winter that compared favourably with the long term figures regarding rainfall and cold temperatures. Vineyards started to bud

later, but evenly, and the budding percentages in all cultivars were better than in 2002. This also resulted in even growth early in the season.

October and November temperatures were below the long term averages, consequently shoot growth was slower than usual. This caused many shoots to be shorter than 60 cm in the flowering period. Consequently tipping and topping actions, where applicable, could not be undertaken at the usual times. In certain Chardonnay vineyards, as well as other isolated cases, there were signs of poor berry set with small, hard, green berries in bunches. Due to the cool weather, the flowering period lasted longer and was rather uneven.

From December to the end of the harvest, temperatures in Paarl were normal and vineyards were growing vigorously. Substantially less rain fell in January and February than in the corresponding months in 2002. Dry conditions kept rot and mildew at bay.

From veraison to harvesting there were no significant summer rains, causing strain in dryland vineyards in particular. Water became very limited and scheduling had to be adjusted to make ends meet with limited irrigation water. Rain towards the end of March brought relief.

Grape and wine quality

Wine quality is looking good, especially from grapes harvested in the first half of the season.

In general the quality of white grapes was better than in 2002. Full-bodied Chenin blanc wines are expected. Grapes were definitely healthier than in 2002, with better flavours. The best Chardonnay grapes were harvested between 24° and 26°B. Grape were fully ripe, with big bunches producing a much larger crop. Press juice contained more tannins and wines should be full-bodied with lots of fruit. With the correct canopy management, Sauvignon blanc grapes were better than the previous 5 – 6 years. Most of the grapes were harvested before the February heatwave, with good analyses.

The scorching heat on 10 February (temperatures above 43°C) caused acid to decrease drastically and pH to shoot up. Crushed grapes therefore required acid adjustments. Tannins in berries were softer, possibly due to the February heat, and this year most of the grapes reached optimum ripeness at lower sugar levels, which should result in lower alcohol levels in the wines.

Vineyard manipulations produced full, compact Pinotage bunches, but bearing too heavily. Merlot developed lovely flavours. Shiraz ripened very early and is showing above average colour. Cabernet Sauvignon had smaller berries with good colour. Waterberry was prevalent in ripe bunches.

SWARTLAND

Production trends

The 2003 season produced the biggest wine grape crop in 15 years. Estimated at approximately 105 474 tons, the crop is 31.8% bigger than the previous season. Almost all cultivars produced better than in 2002 and in exceptional cases a few blocks produced double the 2002 crop.

Climatic conditions and influence on vine growth

The 2002/2003 season was one of the healthiest in many years. Normal spraying programmes provided very good control.

The 2002 winter conformed with long term rainfall figures and cold temperatures. The season therefore got off to an excellent start. Good budding percentages in all cultivars resulted in even growth.

October and November temperatures were below the long term. Shoot growth was slower than usual, many shoots being shorter than 60 cm in the flowering period. Tipping and topping actions, where applicable (bush vines especially), could not be undertaken at the usual times. In some Chardonnay vineyards, as well as other isolated cases, berry set was poor with small, hard, green berries in bunches. Due to the cool weather, the flowering period was longer than usual.

From December to the end of the harvest, temperatures in the Swartland were normal. No significant summer rains occurred and irrigation had to be carefully scheduled to make do with the available water.

Grape and wine quality

Wine quality is looking good, especially from grapes picked in the first half of the harvest. Late cultivars suffered due to the drought conditions. Good viticultural practice prevailed throughout the area. Regular bunch counts and crop control resulted in high quality wines. The above-average warm/dry ripening period called for pre-fermentation acid adjustments to white and red wines.

The first crops of new cultivars in the Swartland (e.g. Petit Verdot, Malbec, Viognier) were harvested this season and the wines are eagerly anticipated.

ROBERTSON

Production trends

During the 2003 harvest 172 412 tons of grapes were pressed in the Robertson wine valley (4.3 % more than in 2002). Production of the early cultivars was smaller, with Chardonnay and to a lesser extent early Chenin blanc and Sauvignon blanc being affected. The red grape crop was fairly average, but with a lot of young red grape vineyards coming into full production, there was an increase in total red grape production.

Climatic conditions and influence on vine growth

The 2003 harvest was preceded by a cold winter with regular, but light rain showers. Budding of the early cultivars in particular was slightly later than normal. Regular strong northwesterly winds from the end of September to November hampered shoot growth. Flowering started slightly earlier, with the shoot lengths being shorter, and extended over a long period. Weather conditions during flowering were on the whole unfavourable. Uneven budding necessitated removal of green bunches.

The 2002/2003 season will probably be remembered as one of the healthiest ever. Some vineyards were affected by oidium late in the season, as well as downy mildew after the March rains, resulting in early loss of leaves. The little white snail was very active early in the season, with mealybug causing problems later in the season.

The 2003 ripening period was characterised by very hot conditions, exacerbated by heatwaves early in December and the first week in February. Different cultivars ripened simultaneously. In some instances Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz were pressed before Chardonnay and Pinotage vineyards. Sugar development was good. After the heatwave at the beginning of February, the acids were low throughout, requiring adjustments.

Very heavy rain on 23 and 24 March caused widespread flood damage, especially in the Ashton, Goudmyn and McGregor areas. Fortunately most blocks had been harvested at that stage. A few vineyards were destroyed, but most merely enjoyed a thorough

irrigation before going into the next season. Van Loveren suffered the most damage to its cellar, while Zandvliet and two co-operative producers in Montagu had one or two entire vineyards swept away. At Barrydale Wine Cellar, where the harvest begins and ends later than elsewhere, the delayed effect of the rain was felt with some vineyards becoming waterlogged.

Grape and wine quality

The wines are looking very promising, Chardonnay in particular as well as Sauvignon blanc that had been pressed before the heatwave. Chenin blanc and Colombar wines are full-bodied and fruity. The overall quality of the red wines is good, Pinotage and Shiraz in particular.

WORCESTER

Production trends

The 2003 crop is approximately 6.2% bigger than that of 2002. The bigger crop is mainly due to new plantings and favourable weather conditions, especially during the pressing season.

The premium white wine cultivars were down by approximately 3%, the biggest decrease being in Chardonnay. Sauvignon blanc was up by 6%, mostly due to increased plantings. Standard white wine cultivars (Chenin blanc; Colombar; etc.) were up by approximately 2%. The Hanepoot and Muscadel crops were more than 20% bigger.

Premium and standard red wine cultivars showed an increase of approximately 34% and 16% respectively. Cellars were under a lot of pressure as far as capacity is concerned, with some only finishing towards the middle of April.

Climatic conditions and influence on vine growth

The preceding winter was cold, with regular snowfall. On the whole budding was good.

Autumn rainfall was higher in the traditionally drier Worcester-East areas and lower in higher rainfall areas such as Slanghoek (Worcester-North). Winter rainfall was considerably lower (-30%) in Worcester-East. Spring and summer rainfall was lower, but just before Christmas showers brought slight relief. Hardly any rain fell during the harvest, but the late red wine cultivars were slightly affected by rain towards the end of March. There was sufficient water for irrigation during the ripening period.

The spring temperatures, especially in November, were initially lower, followed by slightly warmer weather in the summer months. Particularly warm weather was experienced during the first part of December 2002 and February 2003, with maximum temperatures ranging between 35° and 41 °C.

Grape and wine quality

The healthy growing season necessitated very little spraying and resulted in healthy grapes being delivered to the cellars. After the March rainfall, some oidium was present.

The quality of the wines should be above average as a result of specialised attention to vineyards (foliage and irrigation management) as well as attentive vinification (cooler, reductive techniques). Investments in cellar technology and processing capacity are now paying off. On the whole the wines develop slightly later, but the balance between flavour and structure is excellent.

The early Sauvignon blanc and Chenin blanc show good flavour development. Chardonnay consistently produces above-average wines in Worcester.

KLEIN KAROO

Production trends

The 2003 crop amounts to 41 306 tons, representing a 1.7% decrease compared to 2002. Colombar and Chenin blanc in particular produced smaller crops, due to drought conditions. Red wine production was generally higher than in 2002 as a result of young red wine grape plantings that have come into production.

Climatic conditions and influence on vine growth

The 2003 season was preceded by a very cold winter. High snowfall occurred regularly throughout winter until September. This resulted in sufficient accumulation of reserves. Although winter rainfall was sufficient, the soil water was not entirely replenished and the growing season kicked off with relatively dry soils.

Initial growth of the vineyards was very good. Heavy and regular wind conditions occurred during the flowering period, resulting in unevenness, in the late cultivars especially.

The Klein Karoo was generally very warm and dry and some parts, especially in the vicinity of Montagu, suffered the worst drought conditions in years. There were serious heatwaves with no rain in February.

Good rains fell throughout the Klein Karoo on 22 and 23 March, towards the end of the pressing season. In Montagu, from 70 mm to more than 300 mm was measured, causing flood damage to orchards and vineyards in the low-lying areas along the Kingna River. In the rest of the Klein Karoo erosion and wind damage were recorded.

Grape and wine quality

In general it was a very healthy season, characterised by the absence of diseases and pests.

Wine quality looks very promising, with the red wines in particular showing very good colour.

OLIFANTS RIVER

Production trends

The total crop will probably amount to more than 198 061 tons, the biggest ever in the region. Colombar, Chenin blanc and Hanepoot produced excellent crops, new plantings started bearing and optimum weather conditions reigned throughout the growing season. Like last year, Chardonnay fared extremely well, due to winter chill at the right time.

Red grape production increased from 14% in 2002 to 17% in 2003. More than 8 600 tons were delivered to cellars in the Boland, approximately 6 100 tons of which were red grapes, once again confirming the region's potential for the cultivation of quality red grapes.

Climatic conditions and influence on vine growth

The cooler ripening period caused cultivars to ripen more slowly, which enabled cellars to cope with the record crop. At 22.48°C the average February temperature was almost 2°C lower than last year's average of 24.23°C. In places, average temperatures of below 19°C were recorded.

Bunch masses of red grapes were considerably lighter than the long term averages, especially in Shiraz and also certain Pinotage blocks. Large numbers of small, hard, green berries occurred in Pinotage and Shiraz especially.

Organic production increased significantly, with approximately 1 000 tons more than in 2002. A large percentage of these grapes was delivered to cellars in the Boland.

Grape and wine quality

The quality of the red and early white cultivars in particular is expected to be very good. Wines of above-average quality should be produced.

ORANGE RIVER

Production trends

The Below Orange River area pressed approximately 141 320 tons, which is 18.5% less than the record crop of 2002. A considerably smaller volume of Sultanas was pressed, due to a poor crop and ideal drying climate. The yields of the wine grape cultivars, Hanepoot in particular, were also a lot smaller.

Climatic conditions and influence on vine growth

Late downy mildew and frost early in May caused poor accumulation of reserves. Delayed budding and growth arrest were common. During the flowering period, conditions were very warm and windy, resulting in poor set. Temperatures were high from end December to February, which had a negative influence on berry development during veraison. Bunches were lighter than they seemed.

Sporadic rainfall occurred throughout the area from 11 to 24 February and there was never any shortage of irrigation water. The cellars at Hartswater, Landzicht and Douglas were affected by frost damage in October, resulting in smaller crops.

Grape and wine quality

The area was practically disease-free. Grapes were healthy with good sugars and quality. Colombar and Chenin blanc in particular look very promising. The red cultivars, although limited in volume, should be very good.

III. VINTAGE GUIDE

The number of wine regions, their geographic distance and climatological diversity defy generalisation, but the overall characteristics of the previous five vintages may be summarised as follows:

2002: Pay attention to individual cellars, rather than general trends. Downy mildew caused widespread havoc. Good Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Shiraz, Merlot, Pinotage and new clone Cabernet Sauvignon wines.

2001: The summer was very hot and dry with few diseases. Wines were high in alcohol, with very concentrated flavours.

2000: The crop was small. Some excellent red wines that will keep well. Big, alcoholic white wines.

1999: Large crop, warm summer. Excellent ripening conditions. Reds high in alcohol, will develop in time. Fruity whites.

1998: Small crop. Both the ripening season and the harvest were characterised by hot weather. Powerful red wines with lots of fruit and tannins. Will last well. Whites less aromatic.