

# WANDER THE WESTERN CAPE

Explore South Africa's top spots for exceptional wine.

BY LAUREN BUZZEO

With its expansive mountains, rolling hills, indigenous vegetation and lush, verdant vines cut by meandering rivers or pristine bays, there's no arguing that South Africa is home to some of the world's most beautiful wine regions.

Yet, with over 250,000 acres of vines across a range of wine-growing areas—including 24 diverse districts and 67 smaller wards within the Western Cape region alone—it's easy to get lost in the vast array of the country's wine choices.

We're here to help. This guide offers snapshots of the Western Cape's best appellations for world-class wine, including calling-card grapes and producers to watch. Dive in to the beautiful diversity that each wine district has to offer.

## Franschhoek

**Region:** Coastal Region

**Wards:** None

**Prominent Grapes:** Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc, Shiraz

**Recommended Producers:** Anthonij Rupert Wines, Boekenhoutskloof, Black Elephant Vintners, Chamonix Wine Farm, Leeu Passant, Topiary Wines

Afrikaans for "French Corner," Franschhoek was first settled in 1688 by French Huguenots, who brought experience in farming and agriculture. Many of the original Cape Dutch-style farms and houses remain superbly preserved throughout the district.

About an hour east of Cape Town, it's enclosed by mountains on three sides, with the Wemmershoek Mountains in the north and the Groot Drakenstein and Franschhoek Mountains to the south. The soils are composed mainly of alluvial sandstone, and numerous streams flow down to the valley floor and form the Berg River.

Though the region is warm, the mountains provide shade and protection as well as trap cool southerly winds. This tempers the heat and results in terroir that is suitable to growing a variety of grapes, including traditional Bordeaux varieties. The region is also known for the production of Méthode Cap Classique sparklers.

"Franschhoek receives a high annual rainfall, and combined with these deep alluvial soils, the plants receive deep penetrating water on a regular basis, enabling them to withstand the usual panoply of pests and diseases that beseech the vine annually," says Adam Mason, owner/winemaker of Raised by Wolves, who produces two Sémillons from the appellation's famed La Colline Vineyard.



## Stellenbosch

**Region:** Coastal Region

**Wards:** Banghoek, Bottelary, Devon Valley, Jonkershoek Valley, Papegaaiberg, Polkadraai Hills and Simonsberg-Stellenbosch

**Prominent Grapes:** Cabernet Sauvignon, Chenin Blanc, Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc, Shiraz

**Recommended Producers:** Craven Wines, DeMorgenzon, De Toren Private Cellar, Kanonkop Wine Estate, Raats Family Wines, Reyneke Wines, Tokara

Stellenbosch is home to nearly 31,000 acres of vines and is perhaps the best known of South Africa's wine regions. Winemaking here dates to the end of the 17th century, and preserved Cape Dutch architecture still abounds. Many top viticulture and oenology research centers and institutes are based in the town of Stellenbosch, the country's second oldest settlement.

Just 25 miles east of Cape Town, the district is bordered by

various formations, including the Simonsberg, Stellenbosch, Helderberg and Jonkershoek mountains. There is an array of soil types throughout, though those heavy in decomposed granite and sandstone are most common. While the climate is warm and dry, cooling breezes from False Bay temper the heat and cool the vines from late afternoon until morning.

"The granite and sandstone soils provide very unique conditions for growing quality

grapes and also bringing out wonderful delicacy, elegance and good acidity," says Bruwer Raats, proprietor/winemaker at Raats Family Wines. "I am a sucker for the decomposed dolomite granite soil from Stellenbosch, and that is why my farm is situated in Polkadraai, which is a decomposed dolomite granite hill, sub south-facing and a cool slope."

Wards and other unofficial subregions lend greater understanding to the different

characteristics and typicities of the region's wines. For example, wines from the clay-rich soils of Simonsberg-Stellenbosch are often bold, ripe and firmly structured, while those from Jonkershoek Valley tend to show a bit more minerality and nuance, with spicy, earthy characteristics and fine-grained tannins.

Stellenbosch's sweeping diversity represents high quality, most notably in Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and

Bordeaux-style red blends, but it may be difficult for consumers to get a handle on.

"Although some people may say such diversity could lead to a lack of identity, we feel it gives the region an amazing ability to show numerous expressions of different wines and styles," says Mick Craven, co-owner/co-winemaker of Craven Wines along with his wife, Jeanine.

"As we generally make wines in a 'lighter' style, per se, we find

the lovely granite soils we work with enable us to make this style of wine with good intensity and vibrancy, which granite can give. But even though we generally work with one soil type, we think a really special quality of Stellenbosch is the vast diversity of microclimates and geology in a relatively small region."

To that effect, many producers are now highlighting individual wards of production, where applicable, for greater consumer benefit.

## Elgin

**Region:** Cape South Coast

**Wards:** None

**Prominent Grapes:** Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Sauvignon Blanc

**Recommended Producers:** Downes Family Vineyards, Iona Wines, Paul Cluver Wines, Richard Kershaw Wines, Sutherland Vineyards



Roughly an hour southeast of Cape Town, this small, high-elevation district packs a serious punch despite being home to only about 1,900 acres of vineyards.

Elgin is nestled in the Hottentots Holland Mountains, around 1,100 feet above sea level. Originally an orchard-fruit-growing region, the soils vary, but they're mostly composed of Bokkeveld shale with underlying clay, gravel or sandstone.

The region also boasts close proximity to False Bay, with ocean breezes contributing to a tempered climate and creating a unique maritime environment ideal for cool-climate varieties that might not thrive in other areas of South African wine production.

"We have greater diurnal temperature differences, thus moderate days and cool nights," says Andries Burger, cellar master at Paul Cluver Wines. "Added to that, the prevailing wind in summer is a south-easterly wind covering the valley in a blanket of clouds while the sun is shining in other areas like Stellenbosch. This gives us longer natural hang time of the grapes without running the risk of over ripening the grapes."

While Elgin's calling-card grapes are Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, the district's most widely planted variety is Sauvignon Blanc. Interest in Riesling has been on the rise; on the red front, don't overlook the district's cool-climate, earthy and peppery Syrah offerings.



## Swartland

**Region:** Coastal Region

**Wards:** Malmesbury, Riebeekberg, Riebeeksrivier and St. Helena Bay

**Prominent Grapes:** Cabernet Sauvignon, Chenin Blanc, Pinotage, Shiraz

**Recommended Producers:** A.A. Badenhorst Family Wines, David & Nadia, Fram, Mullineux, Porseleinberg, Rall, Sadie Family Wines, Silwervis, Testalonga

About an hour's drive northeast of Cape Town, Swartland is largely covered by vast wheat fields. The district's name, which translates to "black land," refers to the now-endangered indigenous vegetation called *renosterbos*, or rhinoceros bush, that used to paint the landscape a dark color during certain times of the year, mainly in winter or after rain.

A hot and dry district, Swartland's topography and vineyard elevation are both quite varied. Sites can range from steep, mountainous slopes to swaths of rolling hills. Though much of the soil is composed of Malmesbury shale, granite-heavy sites are also common in the mountains, especially around Paardeberg Mountain, which divides Swartland and Paarl.

As the Cape's traditional breadbasket, the region's wine quality was previously overshadowed by that of other historic winegrowing areas. Buzz about the appellation started slowly within the wine industry itself, in the mid-1990s. But once the Swartland Revolution started, everything changed.

The idea was to have an awesomely irreverent yet

supremely geeky weekend to celebrate and spread awareness of the district's high-quality wines. Starting with the first unprecedented event in 2010, these annual festivities forever changed the global perception of the quality of wines and caliber of producers from the appellation, turning producers like Badenhorst, Mullineux and Sadie into South African legends akin



to Lafite, Latour and Margaux in Bordeaux, France.

Though the Swartland Revolution event officially ended in 2015, the district continues to spread its gospel through the Swartland Independent Producers (SIP) organization and its annual Swartland Independent Heritage Festival.

Swartland is now home to more than 25,000 acres of vines,

many of which are dry-farmed and classified as old, meaning they're 30 years old or more.

Chenin Blanc is the most widely planted grape, followed by Shiraz, Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinotage. Though well known for distinct single-variety Chenin and Shiraz bottlings, many producers also craft superb blends or focus on unique small-production wines from old-vine vineyards.

## Paarl

**Region:** Coastal Region

**Wards:** Agter-Paarl, Simonsberg-Paarl and Voor Paardeberg

**Prominent Grapes:** Cabernet Sauvignon, Chenin Blanc, Pinotage, Shiraz

**Recommended Producers:** Avondale Wine, Babylonstoren, Backsberg Estate Cellars, Fairview Wine Farm, Glen Carlou, Noble Hill, Villafonté



Paarl has a rich winemaking history, with French Huguenots having planted vineyards as early as the 1680s. The district was also once home to the headquarters of KWV, the historic government-sponsored wine co-operative that dominated the South African wine scene until the early 1990s. Paarl is about 35 miles from Cape Town, just north of Stellenbosch, with over 22,000 acres of vines.

The Berg River runs through the district, and much of the landscape is characterized by numerous mountainous formations, creating a topography that helps to temper the warm climate. The majority of the vineyards can be found on the northern side of the Simonsberg Mountain, in the Berg River Valley or on Paarl Mountain, also known as Paarl Rock.

Due to the various geological features, slopes and proximity to water, the terroir can vary significantly throughout Paarl. The mountainous terrain is composed of granite and shale soils that are well-drained and suitable to high-quality wine production, while the valley offers more sandstone-based soils that allow for greater vine rigor and higher yields.

Paarl's most widely planted variety is Chenin Blanc. Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz are the most prominent red grapes, though the district is also home to significant amounts of Merlot and Cinsault, the latter of which is increasing in popularity.



## Walker Bay

**Region:** Cape South Coast

**Wards:** Bot River, Hemel-en-Aarde Ridge, Hemel-en-Aarde Valley, Upper Hemel-en-Aarde Valley, Sunday's Glen, Stanford Foothills

**Prominent Grapes:** Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Sauvignon Blanc, Shiraz

**Recommended Producers:** Ataraxia, Beaumont Family Wines, Bouchard Finlayson, Creation, Crystallum, Hamilton Russell Vineyards, Storm Wines

Walker Bay is one of South Africa's most stunning districts. About 60 miles southeast from Cape Town, it's situated around its namesake bay, surrounding the seaside town of Hermanus. It's also one of the coolest winegrowing parts of the country, with an unmistakable maritime climate that is ideal for the production of fresh, elegant and well-balanced wines. Sauvignon Blanc is the most

widely planted grape throughout Walker Bay, though the most prominent varieties are arguably Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, the calling cards of the Hemel-en-Aarde Valley. These cool-climate varieties benefit from the oceanic influence and cooling breezes, which allow them to retain vibrant natural acidity throughout ripening.

Hemel-en-Aarde, which means "heaven and earth" in Afrikaans, is divided into three distinct wards: Hemel-en-Aarde Ridge,

Hemel-en-Aarde Valley and Upper Hemel-en-Aarde Valley. The soils are predominantly composed of sedimentary rocks, like clay- and iron-rich Bokkeveld shale commonly found on the valley floor and lower slopes, and sandy soil derived from Table Mountain sandstone, more common on the upper slopes and mountain peaks. Most of Hemel-en-Aarde's vineyards are planted 650–1,300 feet above sea level.

"The picturesque and pristine

environment coupled with the unique terroirs of the three Hemel-en-Aarde appellations make it a very special place to craft Pinot Noir and Chardonnay," says Hannes Storm, owner/winemaker at Storm Wines. "The transition in soil types and elevation between the three appellations can be very rewarding for a winegrower/winemaker, especially when your goal is to express the true soul of the terroir in bottle."

"'Terroir' is everywhere if one

cares to search for it," says Kevin Grant, co-owner/winemaker of Ataraxia Wines. "Hemel-en-Aarde producers are some of the most sensitized individuals to this concept that I know, and it has been embraced especially over the past decade. Because of it, less and less wines are being 'made' through a force of a winemaking will in the cellars. Rather, the wines are expressions of site and inherent style that are derived from an understanding

and respect for the [appellation's location and climactic] factors."

The Bot River ward is situated farther inland, though it still shares a relatively cool climate and benefits from Walker Bay breezes. The ward borders the Kogelberg Biosphere Reserve, and the landscape is dense in fynbos scrubland that may contribute herbaceous undertones to the final wines. Beyond Sauvignon Blanc, notable varieties for Bot River include Shiraz and Chenin Blanc.

## Robertson

**Region:** Breede River Valley

**Wards:** Agterkliphoogte, Bonnievale, Boesmansrivier, Eilandia, Hoopsrivier, Klaasvoogds, Le Chasseur, McGregor and Vinkrivier

**Prominent Grapes:** Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Chenin Blanc, Colombard, Sauvignon Blanc

**Recommended Producers:** De Wetshof Estate, Excelsior Wine Estate, Graham Beck Wines, Mont Blois, Robertson Winery, Springfield Estate



About two hours east of Cape Town, this beautiful valley is home to around 32,000 acres of vines. It sits near the Breede River, which, along with cooling southeastern winds, serves to temper the warm, dry region.

Nicknamed the "Valley of Vines and Roses," Robertson's limestone-rich soils have long been prized for sparkling and white wine production. Beyond the high limestone content, the soils can also vary from sandy and loamy alluvial soil, to red clay loam and Karoo clay.

White cultivars are the most-planted varieties—Colombard (known locally as Colombar, traditionally used for base wine in brandy distillation), Chardonnay, Chenin Blanc and Sauvignon Blanc, in descending order—followed by Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz for reds.

"Robertson has loads of beautiful limestone soils resulting in wines with great freshness and minerality," says Peter de Wet, Owner of Excelsior Wine Estate as well as the current chairman of the Robertson Wine Valley. "It is also a very dry region, so we have to irrigate. This enables us to control vigour and berry size."

"With Robertson's high-pH soils, we get great chemistries in our wines and high natural acids," says Johann de Wet, CEO of De Wetshof Estate. "The wines are very stable and age well. The area also has lots of pockets with different soils, so a wide variety of site-specific styles can be produced."

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