

# **Philippe Boucheron went to South Africa and spent three days tasting at 40 bottles an hour**

Next year as thousands of soccer fans fly with South African Airways to the World Cup they will be enjoying wines that I helped select. For three days at the end of August, along with eleven other judges, I sniffed, sipped, slurped and spat my way through 391 wines. Altogether our four panels of three judges each assessed some one thousand wines that had been submitted by South African wine producers for consideration by the airline for in-flight service in 2010..

For the past 15 years SAA has been using this singular method of selecting its wines that, as the rainbow nation's national carrier, have to be the best that the country can provide within understandable price limitations. My fellow judges included two others from Europe, Dr Rowald Hepp – a German vineyard owner from the Rheingau, and Bengt-Göran Kronstram – chairman of the Swedish wine writers association. All the others were from South Africa included seven young winemakers, a sommelier and Miss Yegas Naidoo, a business-lady from Durban who is a regular SAA flyer and a most knowledgeable wine enthusiast and taster.

The event was run with awesome efficiency by wine consultant Bennie Howard assisted by eight pourers, two to each panel. The whole operation was supervised by a team of three accountants from Ernst & Young who totted up the marks and ensured complete transparency by creating an audit trail of the proceedings. The wine producers submitted four bottles of each wine they had entered. These were placed in paper bags, identified by a number and colour coded to show the panel that was to taste them. This provided sufficient bottles should another be called for in case one was corked or otherwise considered faulty, as well as ensuring that there were sufficient fresh bottles for the final day when we tasted the top scorers to select the all-important trophy winners.

I had the pleasure of working with Susan Erasmus a 28 year old winemaker from Vrede en Lust (who have been making fine wines since 1688) and was one of only four white winemakers on the panel, and Tariro Masayiti, from Zimbabwe, who makes white wine wines at Nederberg where the tastings were held. Wines were poured ten glasses at a time and we had to score each one out of 100 marks, baring in mind that at 35,000 feet all the wines characteristics would be greatly magnified accentuating any overt acidity or drying-out of fruit. On average we were working our way through some 40 bottles an hour, refreshed by water as we busily filled up the giant spittoons on the floor beside us, writing our notes and entering our scores.

It is important to stress that the same careful attention was paid to the reds and whites that will be packed in 187ml bottles for economy passengers as we gave to the red and white 'wines of the month' that will be served throughout the year in business class. Since replacing their fleet of Boeing 747s with sleek modern Airbus 340s SAA has dropped first class and upgraded its business class with blissfully comfortable fold-flat seats. The airline is also considering introducing PET plastic bottles to replace glass

187ml which will save at least 20 tons of additional flying weight a year. On the second day, during a lull in the proceedings, we were all poured a sample of the same wine from both glass and plastic and were unable to identify which was which, let alone any discernable difference.

As I write this I still don't know the identity of any of the wines, but I do recall some highlights key among which was some delightfully balanced and complex white and red blends, a delightful Pinot Noir, an outstanding tawny port-style fortified wine and a crisp, fruity pink fizz. On the downside there were far too many oxidised samples, as well as reds that were dried right out and on the first day the opening flight of 21 Sauvignon Blancs included many with such massive acidity that they stripped the enamel off my teeth and gave me absolute hell from an old worn-down back molar.

It is now some 24 years since I first visited the wine lands of the Cape and I have seen many changes, all of which are very much for the better. It was refreshing to meet young black lady winemakers and to taste some absolutely excellent wines made in an unashamed South African style and not trying to ape Bordeaux or the Loire.

The size of our task was brought home to me when I learnt that next year not only will SAA be putting on some additional aircraft to carry passengers to the World Cup, but they anticipate spending some £2 million on the in-flight wines that they will be serving to them. I hope that at least some of them appreciate the tremendous effort made to make absolutely sure that they will be able to enjoy some of the very best wines that South Africa produces.

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