

Harvest 2015 update (part two)

February 2015

From the coast to further inland. Do things change? Happily, no. Andrea Mullineux of Mullineux & Leeu Family Wines in the **Swartland** kindly took off a few minutes from late-night pressing and filling of barrels to confirm that the harvest is “fast and furious”. “The harvest’s not just early, it’s compact,” she explains. “We started two weeks early but will finish three to four weeks early too!” The last grapes came in on 12 February. The fruit is concentrated, healthy and ripe at lower Balling levels. Skins of white varieties are slightly more phenolic; reds have thick skins and big tannins. Juice recovery is lower. She attributes all to a dry spring.

In **Robertson**, Graham Beck’s cellarmaster Pieter Ferreira started the cellar’s 25th harvest by bringing in Chardonnay for bubbly on 8 January; Pinot Noir from Stellenbosch followed the next day. “It is definitely the earliest harvest in Robertson for 15 years,” he confirms. “Also the first time we’ve completed our bubbly grape harvest by 30 January.” His view on quality so far? “This is the harvest to look out for ... truly spectacular,” he writes. “The look, the berry size, the taste of the grapes, all are sublime.”

John Loubser, whose Silverthorn grapes also come from Robertson, is equally enthusiastic: “Chardonnay base wines look great with low pH and good acidity.”

Turning to **Breedekloof**, Leon Dippenaar, VinPro consultant for the area, offers some opinions. He believes the warm, dry conditions from November 2014 to January 2015 have resulted in more balanced canopies with less vigour, while the excellent colour in reds could be attributed to the marked fluctuations between day and night temperatures. Dippenaar says it’s difficult to single out particular varieties because “everything looks so awesome”, but describes Sauvignon Blanc as having “very good flavour, more to the tropical side; Chardonnay ripe at lower sugars, which should produce more balanced wines; and Chenin Blanc, very fruity and healthy – a healthy Chenin Blanc year is always a good Chenin Blanc year!” If it’s too early to form judgment on reds, Dippenaar advises to “look out for Cabernet Sauvignon; it’s a small harvest but big on concentration and fruit flavours”. His parting words: “A real gooseflesh year for SA and Breedekloof?”

The views of Shawn Thomson, winemaker at Du Toitskloof Winery, echo Dippenaar’s. Fans of the cellar’s popular Sauvignon Blanc will be pleased to hear that Thomson reckons it “looks very nice, beautiful colour juice, nice analysis, extremely healthy”. Just one thing spoils this rosy picture: “Eskom, the power supplier, is a total stuff-up,” Thomson sighs. “We used 400 litres of diesel to cover 3.5 hours of load shedding. Extremely expensive and chasing up cost of production!”

Over the mountains in **Paarl**, KWV’s viticulturist Marco Ventrella is more than grateful that the vintage “seems to be proceeding in a very relaxed and orderly manner”. That’s after the more than challenging 2014 harvest. Ventrella’s responsibilities extend way beyond Paarl, so his views reflect the state of affairs throughout the winelands. He summarises varieties picked so far: “Sauvignon Blanc has text book analyses – pH levels of 2.9–3.1 and TAs of 10–13. Even from warmer regions, like Stellenbosch, Chardonnays have brightness of fruit and darn it, even chalky minerality, with awesome analyses. Chenin has forgotten how to lose acidity, get sunburn, rot or generally do anything it normally does. Early Pinotage and Merlots – yes, even Merlot – are looking fabulous.” Any spoilers to this party? “Rain or heatwaves; Eskom load-shedding could cripple harvesting volumes/speed and therefore impact on quality, which is the best I’ve seen in my time – yes, including 2009,” Ventrella concludes.

Wind has been a feature for Arco Laarman at Glen Carlou, “resulting in the vineyards drying out more than normal”. He also reports on a crop down 25–30% on 2014, explaining this against that year’s “bumper crop”. Otherwise, he believes, “reds are looking good with great physiological and phenolic ripeness”.

So to **Stellenbosch**, where Gary Jordan of Jordan Wine Estate keeps the good news rolling. “The earliest harvest in history at Jordan!” he announces, although starting two weeks later than most of Stellenbosch was nothing unusual. Jordan says the dry, warm growing season and little disease pressure have seen “virtually every berry set, so bunches are extremely tight and full”. Regarding crop levels, Jordan says both Sauvignon Blanc and Chenin Blanc are down about 25% on 2014, which leaves Sauvignon near normal. He’s relieved that “Chardonnay is 30% up due to more and fuller bunches per vine. I’ve never seen such perfect, unblemished berries before.” Merlot for rosé also has intense berry fruit and great acidity; other reds have good crop load but still have a way to go. Apart from the load-shedding concerns shared with others and the considerable expense of buying a second

generator, Jordan thinks ahead to post-harvest, “when we’ll need to irrigate sufficiently to ensure reserves are built up for next year, as vineyard stress levels are already fairly high”.

“Rush hour since the start,” says an amazed Tertius Boshoff at Stellenrust. “I thought I’d be just checking whether we have all systems ready for the massive influx but on 20 January, 10 days earlier than usual, sugars on Pinotage were around 22° Balling and we harvest almost 600 tons of that variety.” What also shocked Boshoff was that such a decent rosé colour was extracted from the Pinotage without any skin contact. Another surprise was their 32-year old bushvine Chenin block ripening, with amazing analyses, a full 24 days earlier than 2014. Rush hour indeed! That’s one area of concern, “that we don’t get a bottleneck where suddenly everything is ripe”.

Just in case readers believe winegrowing happens in the Western Cape only, here’s what Laurie Smorthwaite has to say about the 2015 harvest on the family farm, Abingdon Estate, in the Midlands of **KwaZulu-Natal**. “We are in a hail belt, where dramatic summer thunderstorms, 40°C heat followed by 10°C cold fronts occur,” Smorthwaite recites local summer weather conditions. “How the harvest will turn out is almost impossible to predict.” That said, she continues: “2015 looks good so far. Yields are up and grapes are healthy.” Fruit for bubbly is already in, with Sauvignon Blanc, Viognier and Chardonnay due at the end of February. Depending on the weather, Syrah and Cabernet could be ready any time between the beginning of March and end of April.

It might seem obvious why there aren’t more vineyards in an area like this but Smorthwaite reflects: “KZN has been a topic of debate and area of consideration with the effects of global warming upon us. Being at an altitude of 1 100 metres and a cool climate, it seems an ideal candidate for the future. The biggest concern is whether global warming will bring more severe storms. This year we’ve had more hail than ever before at a crucial time. Luckily, the netting used for birds helps to shelter the vines, albeit not entirely.”

All winemakers in the Western Cape should thank their lucky stars for conditions here any year and especially, it seems, this year.

– by Angela Lloyd

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Extraordinary. It’s a word that even mid-harvest may be applied with some confidence, especially in relation to the early start. Hardly had winemakers returned from Christmas and New Year holidays than they had to don their winemaking gear, ready to receive the first grapes.

Why was the start so early? Manager of VinPro’s Consultation Service Francois Viljoen summarised the run-up to harvest 2015 in his presentation at the VinPro Information Day in January. “A good season starts with a good winter,” he explained, “and 2014 produced the third good winter in a row with sufficient rain to fill the dams and cold units in July to send the vines into full dormancy. A warmer than usual August saw the vineyards quick out of their blocks; bud break and initial growth were very even. This sequence accounts for the season being so early.”

Jordan Wine Estate’s Gary Jordan adds that in contrast to warm days, the nights were very cool, the temperature dipping to a low 6°C. Rainfall fell off dramatically from September; warm, dry weather and less strong wind than usual provided ideal conditions for good flowering and set. Temperatures have remained moderate, with intermittent really hot days.

These positive conditions have resulted in healthy vineyards and healthy grapes, ripening evenly, albeit with lighter bunch weights; higher demand for water due to stress and a season up to three weeks early that’s likely to be short and sharp. The lighter bunches with small berries suggest the overall crop will be lower than in 2014.

The following reports have been received from individuals in the various regions since early February; in the meantime, the harvest rolls on. To keep up to date with news and photos, check

<http://socialtractor.com/saharvest2015>.

As early as the harvest is, not everyone has started (or hadn’t at the time of writing). In **Elim**, Trizanne Barnard expects to start in the third week of February. She says things are looking good in South Africa’s most southerly

vineyards: “Mild temperatures, no rot and no rain: looking great!” Dirk Human of Black Oystercatcher has harvested fruit for his Cap Classique sparkling wine; Sauvignon Blanc for still wine should be ready by mid-February. “Yields are down by 10% but flavours are more intense and the grapes are very healthy,” he reports. Conrad Vlok, cellarmaster at Strandveld, agrees that Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon too are “very healthy with intense flavours”, adding that “all the red cultivars are also in good condition”.

The wind has been noticeable in the **Hemel-en-Aarde Valley** but not in a negative way. Carolyn Martin of Creation Wines describes conditions in the run-up to the harvest as “drier and breezier than 2014. The sun and sea breezes have dried out any rains we’ve had. The afternoon south-westerly acts as a fan, keeping the vineyards cool. Chardonnay was the first and, at time of writing, the only variety harvested, 10 days earlier than normal; it looks to be great quality.” Martin does caution that her husband and winemaker, JC, being a farmer, “doesn’t want to count his chickens before they hatch”.

Further down the valley, Gordon Newton Johnson at the eponymous family winery recalls that, while guests were tasting the valley’s Pinots on the first day of Hemel-en-Aarde’s Pinot Noir Celebration (31 January), their prime Windansea vineyard was being harvested. Ten days later, the last Pinot came into the cellar; according to Newton Johnson it was, in one word, “immaculate”.

Moving westwards to the cool, high **Elgin** valley, I caught up with Richard Kershaw of his eponymous winery, in “freezing, snowy Bordeaux”. He was happy to report that “conditions from bud burst, flowering and set have been fabulous. It’s been warm and dry but neither too dry nor too hot; the harvest is about two weeks early.” Friday 13 proved lucky with the first, healthy Sauvignon Blanc (not for his own label) being picked. The only downside is “a little wind damage in some vineyards”.

Down the road, Koen and Hannelore Roose, owners of Spioenkop, recorded that rainfall for winter/spring 2014 to harvest was almost half compared with the same period the previous year, with winter described as “soft”, 0°C being recorded a few nights only. This was probably the cause of millerandage on the Riesling. Pinot Noir went through veraison during the first week in January, a phenomenon that usually takes place during the third week and suggesting an early start to the harvest. A few very hot days raised concern over loss of aromas in the Pinot. To counteract this, the sprinklers were turned on for half an hour during the hottest period to cool down the bunches. They feel positive this has worked. They are also positive about the harvest generally: “2015 can be a very beautiful, legendary vintage, if the winemaker takes the job seriously and thinks deeper on what he/she has.”

Moving on to the Cape Peninsula and **Constantia**, where some are well into harvesting, others still waiting. High up at the north end of the valley near Constantia Nek Justin van Wyk, winemaker at both Beau Constantia and neighbour Constantia Glen, reckons it’ll be well into the third week of February before they start. This is in contrast to Matt Day, winemaker at Klein Constantia, who picked Chardonnay for Cap Classique on 24 January, about a week earlier than usual. “But the huge eye-opener was Sauvignon Blanc,” says this young winemaker. “The first block came in on 29 January with a sugar of 23° Balling; that’s the earliest since the maiden 1986 vintage.” Day reckons that “...90% of Sauvignon Blanc will be in by 13 February. This compares with last year, when we finished with the same blocks at the same sugar levels on 18 March.” He’s excited at how amazing the single-vineyard Sauvignons are looking. Even in this wind-prone area, Day recalls: “There was no to very little wind, thus we had a really good set.” If he does have concerns it’s that with lower sugar levels there won’t be phenological ripeness, “so we’re harvesting everything on taste and not analysis”.

Around the coast to **Durbanville**, where Durbanville Hills cellarmaster Martin Moore, who already has Chardonnay in the cellar, foresees “a smaller harvest than the previous two but one ... of great quality. I also foresee much pressure and lots of tension in the cellar [as] the picking season is going to be short, punctuated by intense peaks.” For a cellar taking in 6 000 tons power is crucial but, realising that there will be an inconsistency in supply, they’ve reduced dependence on electricity wherever possible. There’s plentiful natural light since installing sunlight harvesters in the roof. There’s the obligatory generator, which can power most equipment during harvest, and cooling compressors, which are run only during off-peak periods.

– Angela Lloyd