



## CELEBRATING CAP CLASSIQUE

This year wine lovers are raising a toast to celebrate the golden anniversary of naturally fermented sparkling wines in South Africa, writes **JARED RUTENERG**

In the early 1970s the late Frans Malan was captivated by his visit to France's Champagne region – particularly the near-magical way that the sparkling wine was produced. Returning home to Simonsig Estate in Stellenbosch he set about producing South Africa's first sparkling wine in the traditional French method, now known as Méthode Cap Classique (MCC). His first release, made from Chenin Blanc, was in 1971.

Today, the country boasts over 100 Cap Classique producers, with festivals, wine routes and tastings dedicated to sparkling wine. John Loubser, the winemaker at Silverthorn Wines, has spent decades working at several of the top sparkling wine producers in the country. He discusses the exponential growth of the Cap Classique market over the past years.

"The secret to Cap Classique's success, in my opinion, is that, historically, consumers treated it as something you only drank for a significant celebration or on New Year's Eve. With people becoming more

health-conscious, wine drinkers are becoming aware that Cap Classique is a wonderful lifestyle option – being lower in alcohol and sulphur. Cap Classique also makes a status statement, which means younger consumers love being seen with it."

This year also marked the 20<sup>th</sup> celebration of the annual Amorim Cap Classique Challenge – spearheaded by the cork producer Amorim. Every year, a bevy of bottles compete for the coveted title of Best Producer, Brut, Rosé, Blanc de Blanc, Museum Class, and Nectar Class. The awards have helped elevate the position of Cap Classique both locally and internationally.

This year's winner RJ Botha of Kleine Zalze says: "With our diversity in styles and the amazing quality on offer, we're able to produce some of the best sparkling wine in the world. Although we do it in the traditional French method, we do it with our unique South African flair. The world has noticed this, and they love it." ■



RJ Botha

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LEISURE

## SEVEN CAPTIVATING PICKS

### 1. KLEINE ZALZE MÉTHODE CAP CLASSIQUE VINTAGE BRUT 2015

This year's Amorim winner in the Brut category is Kleine Zalze's 2015 Vintage. The award comes fresh off the bat from winning the prestigious Plettenberg Bay's Top Performing Winery of the Year in 2020. RJ Botha, still brimming with pride, recounts: "It is such a big honour for us to be part of the top MCC producers. We only started producing MCC in 2009, and the award just shows that we are on the right track. It was an amazing function and the venue was out of this world ... of course, all thanks to Amorim and the Cap Classique Association. What made it even more special was that we won the award on Kleine Zalze's exact 25<sup>th</sup> birthday."

[kleinezalze.co.za](http://kleinezalze.co.za)



### 2. VILLIERA MONRO BRUT 2014

Staying in Stellenbosch, the next pick is from Villiera where the Grier family have been making and perfecting Cap Classique for over 30 years. The Monro, Villiera's flagship offering, also trailed by a host of awards, is undoubtedly my favourite in the line-up of sparkling wines. This blend of all three classic Champagne varieties (58 per cent Chardonnay, 30 per cent Pinot Noir, 12 per cent Pinot Meunier) boasts an extended lees contact of over five years, developing a seductive yeasty and almost creamy nose that follows through to a delicate palate.

In 2006, the family also acquired a 22ha vineyard in the Agly Valley in Southern France, and a tasting of the Domaine Grier wines – also made by winemaker Jeff Grier – is available when visiting the Stellenbosch tasting room. [villiera.com](http://villiera.com) >



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### 3. NEWSTEAD CAP CLASSIQUE BLANC DE BLANC 2016

One of the newest kids on the Cap Classique block, but firmly demonstrating that small is by no means insignificant, is Plettenberg Bay's Newstead, which collected last year's Amorim awards for Best Blanc de Blanc and Best Producer. While Plettenberg Bay is not often associated with wine production, Newstead is one of a handful of estates turning both heads and glasses with their range of wines.

The estate has garnered numerous awards of which the owner and her husband, Doug, are suitably proud. She says: "From a personal perspective, it's been really encouraging and affirming. Building something from nothing, you start off with lots of research, some calculated guesswork, a bit of intuition and loads of hope. The awards have shown us that we're doing a lot right and that we should keep on doing what we have been." [newsteadwines.com](http://newsteadwines.com)



### 4. DOMAINE DES DIEUX CLAUDIA BRUT MCC 2014

From the picturesque Hemel-en-Aarde Ridge comes an award-winning sparkling wine that blends the two Burgundian varieties the region produces so perfectly: Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Domaine Des Dieux's philosophy has always been to demonstrate the ageability of South African wines – particularly white wines. Of course, the crisp acidity of the region adds to the ageing potential of the wines, and combined with the four to five years that the wine lays on the lees, the resulting flavour profile is an enticing and elegant French-styled sparkling wine. Expect creamy citrus notes from the Chardonnay, complemented with subtle red berries from the Pinot Noir. [domainedesdieux.co.za](http://domainedesdieux.co.za)



### 5. SILVERTHORN JEWEL BOX

This roundup would hardly be complete without an offering from the Robertson Valley and its famed Chardonnay. Winemaker John Loubser joins the ranks of several other Robertson producers who have earned the nickname of the Limestone Cowboys – after the famed limestone that contributes to the area's outstanding Chardonnay. As Loubser says: "The secret is in the soil." New World wine commentator Tim Atkins certainly agrees, with all four Silverthorn wines receiving scores in the 90s – the highest being the Jewel Box at 96. It's named after the Kappa Crucis constellation, which was affectionately dubbed "Jewel Box" by English astronomer Sir John Herschel. The celestial cluster features around 100 stars, and in this terrestrial offering, you can expect a tasty celebration of around 20 million bubbles (now there's a fact for your next dinner table quiz). Do include a visit to Silverthorn's modest new tasting room when next in the region. [silverthornwines.co.za](http://silverthornwines.co.za)



### 6. GRAHAM BECK YIN & YANG 2016

Over a hill or two lies the vineyards of formidable producer Graham Beck, whose sparkling wines have been celebrated all over the world. Most notably, of course, by President Barack Obama, who followed suit from Nelson Mandela, serving Graham Beck Cap Classique at his inauguration dinner.

While most South Africans are very familiar with Graham Beck sparkling wines, many don't know that the dynamic duo of cellarmaster Pieter Ferreira and winemaker Pierre de Klerk produce a limited edition Artisan Collection of premium blends. Yin and Yang pays homage to the two headlining Cap Classique varieties, with Yin's blend of 60 per cent Pinot Noir and 40 per cent Chardonnay, and Yang's 60 per cent Chardonnay and 40 per cent Pinot Noir blend. The range is available exclusively from the Graham Beck Tasting Room in Robertson in limited quantities or directly from the Society Wine Club. [grahambeck.com](http://grahambeck.com)



### 7. BOSCHENDAL JEAN LE LONG CUVÉE PRESTIGE 2009

This year's Amorim Cap Classique Challenge winner for Best Museum Class is Boschendal's flagship MCC. The Jean Le Long Cuvée Prestige is another firm nod to the ageing potential of South African Cap Classiques: the wine spent an almost inconceivable 10 years on lees followed by a further minimum period of 12 months on the cork. This helps convey exceptional complexity with tantalising tertiary notes. The combination of 60 per cent grapes sourced from the cooler Elgin region and 40 per cent from warmer Stellenbosch adds to the flavour profile.

The wine is a fitting tribute to the estate's first proprietor – Jean Le Long – at South Africa's second oldest estate. Part of the spoil of this Cap Classique is the seductive Jewel Box that it arrives in, making it an excellent gifting option. [boschendalwines.com](http://boschendalwines.com) ■



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