



COOL CLIMATE SOUTH AFRICA

**CAPE SOUTH COAST, AN EMERGING COLLECTION
OF MARITIME REGIONS, REPRESENTS THE
COUNTRY'S NEW WINEMAKING FRONTIER**

BY KRISTEN BIELER



LEFT: Paul Cluver Estate in Elgin Valley.
ABOVE: Lismore Estate in Greyton.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Snowcapped mountains behind Gabriëlskloof estate in Bot River, where Peter-Allan Finlayson now serves as winemaker.

As wine regions go, South Africa intuitively seems like a warm one. Indeed, many of the country's established regions—like Stellenbosch or Franschhoek—are sunbaked and Mediterranean. Even the more recently celebrated Swartland region features warm daytime temperatures and little rainfall, ideal for sun-loving grapes like Cabernet, Grenache and Cinsault.

But in September, as I stood in a windswept vineyard in Hemel-en-Aarde watching whales crest in the frigid Walker Bay, or drove up a mountain pass shrouded in thick, chilly fog to get to the isolated Elgin Valley, I was struck by just how cool-climate some of South Africa's wine regions in fact are. "Americans have a perception of the continent of Africa as quite hot; they assume South Africa's

wine country must be as well," says Sam Timberg of Meridian Prime, one of a handful of boutique U.S. importers that have sprung up in recent years specializing in South African wine. "But the country has tremendous diversity in climate and the cool climate zones are making some of the most exciting wines right now."

Not unlike the recent ascension of cooler regions around the globe (Tasmania and Victoria in Australia, Leyda in Chile) championed by high-acid-wine-loving sommeliers, South Africa's cool-climate zones have become hotbeds of innovation. While there's cause for excitement across the entire Western Cape (including historic Stellenbosch, still responsible for one third of the country's wine), the cool climate regions are generating an outsized proportion of buzz.

'Cape South Coast' is Born

One might question why some of the most premier grape-growing sites are just now being explored in a country that has been producing wine for 357 years? "Until 1992, the KWV wine cooperative had regulatory powers and limited planting in cool-climate zones in favor of warmer areas that were easier to farm and that produced higher yields," explains Jim Clarke, Marketing Manager for Wines of South Africa.

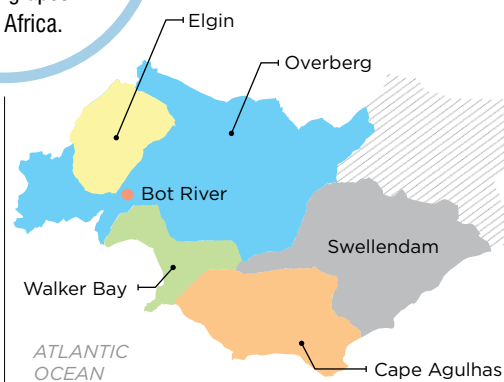
They're on the map today, known collectively as Cape South Coast. Officially defined in 2010 from a group of previously stand-alone districts located southeast of Stellenbosch, Cape South Coast is characterized by cooler temperatures and proximity to the Atlantic. "The most significant

role of Cape South Coast was to help indicate that the regions of Elgin, Bot River, Walker Bay and Elim are all influenced by the ocean," explains Paul Cluver, whose family pioneered Elgin Valley decades ago. "The biggest advantage is allowing producers to blend grapes from various sub-regions and not have to list the origin as Western Cape."

Cape South Coast producers—about 60—have more than climate in common: They are overwhelmingly small, independent and quality-focused. They are a diverse bunch, but almost uniformly they are aiming for balanced wines that emphasize freshness over fruit, oak or alcohol. There are advantages to being a new region in an old wine producing country—particularly one with a rocky past. Cape South Coast has no bulk-production cooperative culture to overthrow, and no vines carelessly planted in the wrong places that need ripping out. It also doesn't have the shameful social justice issues which still haunt South Africa's more historic regions. "It can be hard for

Cape South Coast features the highest concentration of premium wineries and the highest overall prices for grapes in South Africa.

CAPE SOUTH COAST South Africa





Koen Roose of Spioenkop in his Elgin vineyards.

established regions to change the game,” says Pascal Schildt, who founded Pascal Schildt Selections in 2011 to import South African wines. “They grow lots of grapes, traditions are in place and large estates dominate.” In other words, as South Africa’s wine industry continues to be reimagined in a post-Apartheid landscape, it could be the newer, less-explored regions that are best positioned to lead the way.

Elgin: From Apples to Wine

“In my opinion, Elgin is the most exciting region for Chardonnay,” says Schildt, who represents Paul Cluver, the region’s original winery. Topographically, Elgin (in the Overberg region) is shaped like a crater, an elevated basin isolated by mountains. It’s only an hour’s drive from Stellenbosch yet couldn’t be more different: ocean proximity and a unique cloud pattern means it is frequently covered in thick fog, and it gets twice as much rain. Apples and pears have reigned here for over a century, but a growing number of farmers are planting vines.

“It’s windy and cool in Elgin, even in the summer, which means we have a late ripening season and our grapes retain lots of acidity,” says fourth-generation Paul Cluver. His family has farmed orchards in Elgin since 1896 and his father, Paul Sr., was the first to grow grapes in the 1980s. “Even a decade ago there were only a handful of wineries; today there are over 20,” he adds. “We are still such a young area—the average vine is only ten years old—and have so much to learn about

our terroir, but we know that cool climate varietals, namely Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Sauvignon Blanc and Riesling, thrive here.”

British-born Richard Kershaw—South Africa’s only Master of Wine—made wine all over the world before choosing Elgin to start his own project in 2012 focusing on clonally selected, site-specific wines. “A lot of regions describe themselves as cool climate, but it’s a relative term at best,” says Kershaw. “Elgin is without a doubt the coolest region in South Africa and comparable to Southern Burgundy and the Northern Rhône, which explains why Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Syrah do so well here.”

Making the most of Elgin’s long growing season and shale soils, Kershaw works with low-yielding Burgundian clones and employs artisan practices—hand-picking, indigenous yeasts, whole bunch pressing, a gravity-fed winery—to craft his refined, mineral-driven wines.

“Richard’s wines at \$50 a bottle compete with far more expensive wines made elsewhere,” says Timberg, who imports Kershaw. “Richard’s MW accreditation gives him great

credibility and is often our foot in the door, but it’s ultimately the wines that get people talking.”

Others in the valley are finding a similar boutique, minimal-intervention winemaking philosophy coaxes the best from Elgin terroir. Spioenkop (first vintage 2010) was founded by a Belgian couple, Koen and Lore Roose. “Terroir is important to us; we believe in ‘appellation’ or ‘wine of origin’ in its purest form,” says Koen Roose, who rejects industrial yeasts and practices biodynamics in the vineyard, to stunning effect in his Sauvignon Blancs, Chenins and Rieslings. Iona, created in the late ’90s by Andrew Gunn is another biodynamic producer that has quickly built a reputation for outstanding white wines.

Well-known producers from elsewhere—including the historic Franschhoek-based Boschendal and Thelema in Stellenbosch—have both launched an “Elgin Series” within their portfolios, proving that Elgin has built brand equity. “Elgin is becoming known as a region to watch and grape prices are increasing,” says Cluver. “I really believe Elgin will rise as one of the truly unique and super-premium wine growing regions of the world.”



Paul Cluver Sr.



Names to look for:

Iona, Paul Cluver, Kershaw, Shannon, Spioenkop

Hemel-en-Aarde: Pinot’s Promised Land

Walker Bay’s most famous subregion, Hemel-en-Aarde, translates as “Heaven and Earth” and it more than lives up to the name. Lack of a paved road into the high-lying, mountain-ringed valley kept



TOP: Creation winery in Hemel-en-Aarde
RIGHT: Hannes Storm of Storm Wines



it undeveloped for decades, but today it's no longer a secret that the maritime climate combined with shale and clay soils makes it prime Pinot Noir territory.

Timothy Hamilton Russell made the bold and prescient move to plant Burgundian varieties here in 1975. His eponymous winery, run today by son Anthony, still makes some of the region's finest examples. "Tim was stubborn—he insisted on planting vines where they were not meant to be planted," says Peter Finlayson, who was the winemaker at Hamilton Russell from 1979 to 1990. He started the Bouchard Finlayson label in 1989, and today his son, Peter Allen Finlayson, has garnered international acclaim for his boutique Pinot label, Crystallum.

"Developments in Hemel-en-Aarde over the last decade have been extraordinary," explains Hannes Storm, who made wine at Hamilton Russell before launching Storm in 2012. "When I started in 2000, we were only three producers. Today there are 35." Storm has made wine around the world and his brother makes Pinot in Santa Barbara under the same label. What makes Walker Bay Pinot so unique is "the higher clay content in our soils," he says. "Hemel-en-Aarde wines have less alcohol concentration, roundness and sweetness than many California examples, but more texture and structure."

The last decade has seen an influx of newcomers, including Kevin Grant's acclaimed Ataraxia winery, and Jean-Claude and Carolyn Martin's Creation Estate. Stellenbosch-based Bruwer Raats of Raats Family Wines teamed up with his cousin, Gavin Bruwer to launch B

Vintners. "The purity of fruit one finds in Walker Bay Pinot Noir is balanced with a distinct savory, saline element which is the signature of this area," says Gavin Bruwer. "The energy that currently grabs our whole industry, gives South Africa much of a New World feel, but resulting wines are often more Old World in character—restrained, food friendly—which is what this terroir gives us."

Chris and Suzaan Alheit of the much-celebrated Alheit Vineyards are illustrating the region's potential with white grapes: Their signature Hemelrand Vine Garden bottling is a field blend Roussanne, Chardonnay, Chenin, Verdelho, Viognier and Muscat. Chris believes the potential in Hemel-en-Aarde, as well as the Overberg where the Alheits also source grapes "is still mostly unrealized." In his mind, a critical point of difference: "The majority of the wineries here are artisan producers here are trying their best to make top stuff; what makes us unique is a virtual absence of huge commodity producers." Storm agrees this is a defining aspect of the region's winemaking culture: "We are a small region that has only ever produced premium, site-specific wine; and we all share a passionate drive to better understand our terroir."

▲ **Names to look for:**

Hamilton Russell, Newton Johnson, Storm Wines, Ataraxia, Crystallum, Bouchard Finlayson, Alheit, B Vintners

**Bot River & Greyton:
The Rhône of South Africa**

Just west of Hemel-en-Aarde lies the Bot River, home to a mere 10 small, family-run wineries. A wine-producing region



ABOVE: Gavin Bruwer and Bruwer Raats of B Vintners



RIGHT: Peter Allan Finlayson of Crystallum & winemaker at Gabriëlskloof





since the 1940s (for decades mostly fortified), Bot River benefits from Walker Bay's signature cool ocean breezes and summer rain.

Sebastian Beaumont runs the wine farm his parents founded in 1974, one of the first quality still wine producers. Beaumont and winemaker Niels Verburg (who has since left to start his own brand) spent decades testing various vines to see which had the greatest potential, and determined Chenin Blanc was what Bot could excel at. "We are trying to show Chenin in a fresh, dry, light style, unlike the big, voluptuous examples you get from Stellenbosch," says Beaumont. With old vines from some of the original plantings in the '70s and '80s, he picks earlier and ferments on skins with only native yeasts.

"It's easy for us to get ripeness, but more interesting to aim for restraint," says Niels Verburg, whose wines—labeled Luddite—often clock in at a mere 12% alcohol. Verburg planted his vines on the eastern slopes of the Houw Hoek Mountains, and has been crafting spicy, high-toned Syrahs and refined Chenin Blancs since 2000.

"Aromatics are a dime a dozen: We are all trying to make chewy wines that are all about texture," says Samantha O'Keefe of Lismore Estate. A California native, O'Keefe bought an old dairy farm at the base of the stunningly beautiful and isolated Rivieronderend Mountains in 2003, becoming the first and only producer in the remote Greyton region (officially in the Overberg district). Inland from Bot



LEFT: Suzaan & Chris Alheit of Alheit Vineyards
ABOVE: Samantha O'Keefe of Lismore, the only producer in the remote Greyton region

"Aromatics are a dime a dozen: We are all trying to make chewy wines that are all about texture."

—Samantha O'Keefe

River, Greyton gets its cool climate status from elevation and mountain snow.

Extensive soil surveys convinced O'Keefe she had found the ideal spot for Rhône stars Syrah and Viognier: "Greyton looks very much like the Northern Rhône with shale soils, veins of granite, low temperatures and significant summer rainfall." Her wines—first produced in 2006—have proved her hunch correct, and developed a cult following (Robert Parker called Lismore's Syrah one of the best he's tasted from South Africa). She's now planting other Rhône grapes, Roussanne and Marsanne.

"In retrospect, I was very naive," O'Keefe shares. "I've learned a lot of hard

lessons in the process"—like the time baboons devastated her Syrah crop. But her timing was fortunate, she believes: "When I began, South Africa was just starting to embrace terroir-driven wines that were not made in a cookie-cutter, commercial style. My farm developed as a thriving sommelier culture developed here; they were the first to believe in my wines. Now the general market is increasingly looking for unique wines."

Names to look for:

Lismore, Beaumont, Luddite, Gabriëlskloof

The Cool Future

The hunt for additional cool climate zones is far from over. Stellenbosch's acclaimed de Trafford family is currently pioneering the remote Malgas region farther east than even Cape Agulhas with their Sijnn winery (debut vintage 2007) where they are experimenting with Portuguese varieties. And the small, sea-sprayed Elim peninsula is attracting more attention and producers.

Timberg believes that while basic understanding of South African wines in general may still be lacking in the U.S., the entire category will benefit by promoting "stylistic and regional diversity," which cool climate regions exemplify: "A decade ago, I often had to explain that South Africa was a country on the continent of Africa, but today there has been a shift, and there is more interest in these wines. Some of the newer regions have helped open doors for our small but powerful category." ■