

Merlot in South Africa and Internationally



Seminar submitted in partial requirement for the CWM Diploma
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1. OBJECTIVES:

The objectives of the assignment are as follows:

- To identify and discuss the origins and development of Merlot
- To provide an overview of terroir; its role in wine production, comparing opinions from Old and New world producers.
- To determine the characteristics and viticultural needs of Merlot
- To determine production requirements and practices in the cellar
- To review significant Merlot producing areas globally
- To trace the development and growth of Merlot in South Africa and consider the opinions of current producers.
- To investigate and determine the future of Merlot in South Africa in a two-fold approach
 - Perception of the South African Market
 - Merlot as a single cultivar or as a blending component

2. THE HISTORY OF MERLOT:

2.1 The Origins of Merlot

Merlot, or more properly Merlot Noir since there is a distinctly different variety called Merlot Blanc, is a grape that produces intensely coloured wines - soft and fruity in character but capable of great richness. It is invaluable in the Bordeaux-style blend, bringing to it lusciousness of fruit and a velvet-like quality to wines that otherwise might be somewhat hard and austere. Merlot is the main constituent of Chateau Pètrus, the very highly rated wine from Pomerol. (Atkins, S; Robinson, J)

Merlot Noir, the black grape variety that is associated with the great wines of St. Emilion and Pomerol, is the most planted grape variety for the production of red wine in the French Bordeaux region. Throughout southwest France, Merlot appears as constant companion to the more popularly rated Cabernet Sauvignon. (Robinson, J)

The origin of Merlot is not recorded. DNA profiling by Austrian researchers provided evidence that Merlot is likely to be a hybrid between Cabernet Franc and another vine that could not be identified, without any indication when this had happened. (Robinson, J)

Merlot is therefore a probable half-brother of Cabernet Sauvignon, which helps to explain why Merlot-dominated Bordeaux or Bordeaux-style wines can taste as if Cabernet Sauvignon was the dominant variety.

Despite the similarity in the names, the Merlot Noir grape was shown to have no direct relationship to the less distinguished white-berried Merlot Blanc, as is popularly believed. Merlot Blanc is also grown mostly in Bordeaux (176 ha in France in 2000).

In France and northern Italy, Merlot plantings are more plentiful than Cabernet Sauvignon. It is, indeed now so widely popular that worldwide it is competing with Cabernet Sauvignon as the most planted dark-skinned variety. (Robinson, J)

While Cabernet Sauvignon was the most popular dark variety in the 1980's, Merlot began to overtake it to become the undeniable star of the following decade, thanks largely to its widespread new plantings in California, Washington State, South America and Southern France. By 2000 it was on its way to becoming the most widely planted red grape in California; in a sense it became the 'red Chardonnay' – caught up in popular fashion as the 'wine flavour of the year', gaining much of its popularity by being a favourite wine to be sold by the glass, especially in establishments in the United States.

(Atkins, S; Robinson, J)

In Bordeaux, plantings of Cabernet Sauvignon still dominate Merlot in the well-drained soils of the Medoc and Graves – yet even in these areas that favour Cabernet Sauvignon Merlot plantings increased considerably during the 1990's, doing so largely at the expense of Cabernet Franc. Elsewhere in Bordeaux, Merlot predominates; not just in St. Emilion and Pomerol, as mentioned, but also in Bourg, Blaye, Fronsac and, importantly, in many areas qualifying for basic Bordeaux, (the Bordeaux Côtes appellation),

(Atkins, S; Joseph, R; Robinson, J)

2.1.1 Origin of the name

Jancis Robinson refers to Petit-Lafitte's *La Vigne en Bordelais (1868)* citing two related explanations for the origin of the name Merlot. One states that the name is derived from the meaning 'little blackbird' in Bordeaux patois; and the other is that the bird was in fact named after the grapes, since the bird's colour resembles that of the grapes on the Merlot vine, and it is also the grape which this particular bird prefers to eat.

Synonyms

Synonyms for Merlot, often on a regional basis include: Merlau, Vitraillie, Crabutet, Bigney, Semillon Rouge in France and Medoc Noir in Hungary. (Robinson, J)

2.2 The History of Merlot in France

By all accounts, Merlot is a relatively recent variety, which undoubtedly also contributes to its slightly parvenu image among purists. Merlot only appears in the records of the Médoc during the late nineteenth century. However, it seems to have been relatively common on the St-Emilion/Pomerol side of the Gironde as early as the eighteenth century.

(Robinson, J)

According to the historian Professor Enjalbert, in 1868 Petit-Lafitte recorded that Merlot was 'the Medoc's premier variety for blending with Cabernet Sauvignon'. Pre-dating this, Enjalbert cites a reference to Merlot in Faurveau's sub-delegate's report of 1784; with Faurveau stating that it is 'one of the better Libournais varieties'. (Robinson, J)

More recently, Merlot plantings were damaged by the severe cold of 1956, some irreparably so. However, this setback prompted a wave of new Merlot plantings to replace the lost vines. (Robinson, J)

In the 1960's a series of French vintages suffered from rot, with Merlot being particularly susceptible. The authorities sought to solve the problem by restricting new plantings in Bordeaux for the period 1970-75 to Cabernet Sauvignon only. Unfortunately the Cabernet Sauvignon clone they promoted while very good at withstanding rot was not as good at ripening. The unsatisfactory results of this action vindicated the many who had doubted the suitability of Cabernet Sauvignon for the Pomerol and St-Emilion region and during the late 1970's and early 1980's extensive new plantings of Merlot replaced the Cabernet. (Joseph, R)

Such was the increase in popularity of Merlot with vine-growers of Bordeaux, Bergerac, and Languedoc-Roussillon over this period that by 1988 Merlot was France's third most planted black grape variety, after Carignan and Grenache. (Robinson, J)

According to the 1988 census, Merlot represented more than half of all black vine varieties in the Gironde, while Cabernet Sauvignon covered only 28 per cent of vineyards dedicated to red wine. Even in the Médoc, however, where one vine in two was Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot plantings outnumbered those of Cabernet Franc by a ratio of nearly seven to one. In the greater St. Emilion and Pomerol area known as the Libournais, more than two thirds of all vines were Merlot. By 2000, according to the French vine census,

Merlot represented two-thirds of all black vine varieties in the Gironde, while Cabernet Sauvignon covered only 27 per cent of red wine vineyards.

In absolute terms, by 1988 France's Merlot plantings totaled 60,000 ha, as opposed to Cabernet Sauvignon's 36,500 ha. Twelve years later, the 2000 French vine census found that Merlot was planted on more than 101,000 ha in total, as opposed to 53,000 ha of Cabernet Sauvignon; almost a two to one ratio. (Robinson, J)

With Syrah, Merlot has been a major beneficiary when the Languedoc was replanting with 'improving' grape varieties. Total plantings of Merlot more than doubled between 1988 and 1998 to reach 18,500 ha and had increased to 23,500 ha by 2000.(Robinson, J)

The only appellations of the Midi to sanction Merlot within their regulations are Cabardès and Côtes de la Malèperes. However, much of it is made into light, fruity varietal Vin de Pays wines, whose quality is usually in inverse proportion to yield.
(Robinson, J)

3. TERROIR:

3.1 Overview of Terroir

Major components of terroir are soil, topography, geology and soil together with their interactions with each other and with macro-climate (regional climate) to determine meso-climate (site climate) and the microclimate of a specific vine.

The combination of all these is held to give each site its own unique terroir which is to some degree consistently reflected in its wine from year to year, regardless of variations in methods of viticulture and wine making. Thus every small plot, and in generic terms every larger area, and ultimately region, may have distinctive wine-style characteristics which cannot be precisely duplicated elsewhere. This concept forms the basis of all Wine of Origin systems. The extent to which terroir effects are unique is being debated; yet it is demonstrably important in the marketing of wine and thus of commercial interest, which makes the subject controversial.

The traditional importance of terroir is its role in determining the quality of the wine. The following factors are considered when analyzing the terroir of a unit of land surface area:

- Climate, as measured by temperature, rainfall, sunlight energy, and wind
- Topography, which consists of relief (angle of the slope), altitude and aspect (i.e. the direction in which the land faces)
- Geology – this relates to the minerals of the area, weathering and geological age.
- Soil, which is the nutrients, physical properties, depth, colour and water retention capabilities

Geology, often cited as a basis of terroir, has in general no more than an indirect role. To varying degrees parent rock materials contribute to the natures of the soils derived from them; they also shape local topography and therefore the mesoclimate. Soil itself, and its water retention ability play the decisive role. (Saayman, D.)

The Bordeaux environment has relatively flat topography and, as a consequence, few really major differences in mesoclimate. The soils, however, vary tremendously.

While many of the acknowledged best Bordeaux vineyards are on the Quaternary (recently laid down) gravelly soils, not all of them are. Neither geological origin nor soil texture can explain the region's best terroir, as judged by the wines they produce.

(Rigaux, J)

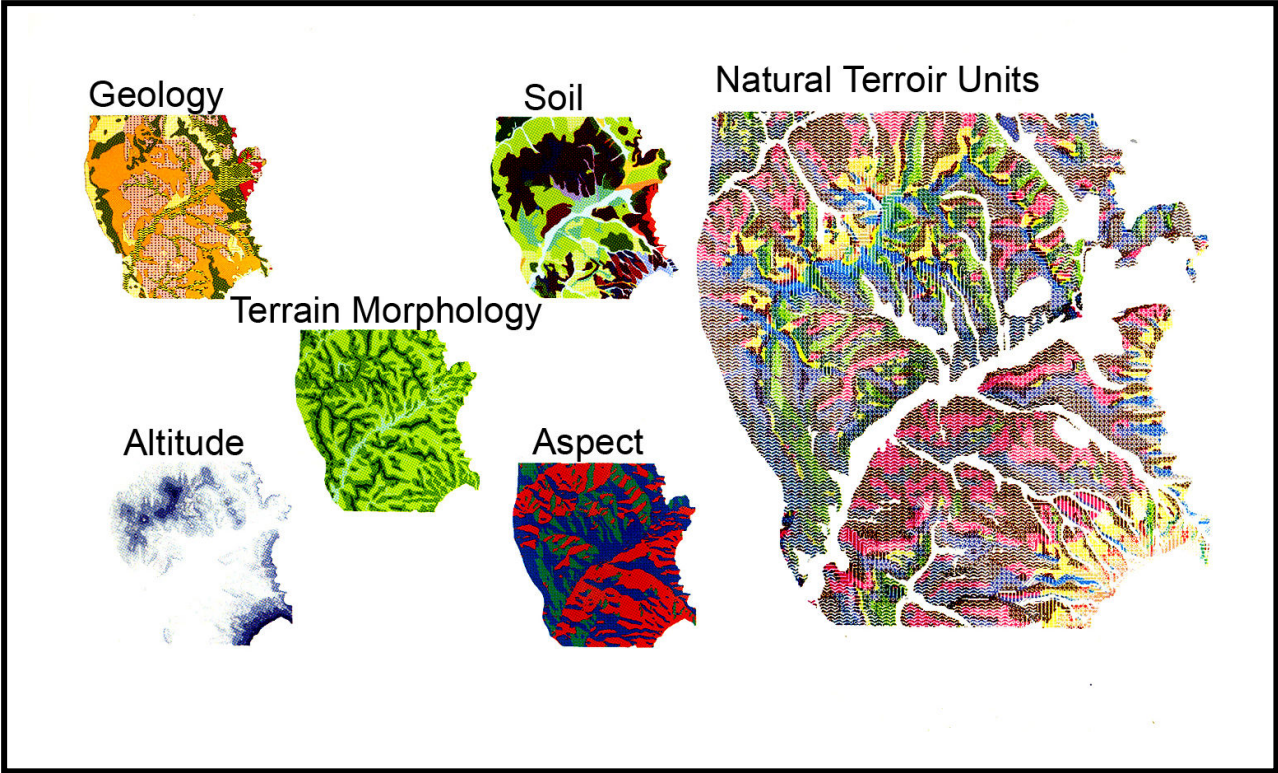
The best in fact covered extremely diverse soil textures, ranging from heavy clays, as in Pomerol, through calcareous brown soils, to sandy loams and sands over clay, to the deep, gravelly sands most typical of the Mèdoc. An analysis of the soil's chemical properties showed them also to be extremely variable. (Rigaux, J)

3.2 Natural Terroir Unit

A natural terroir unit (NTU) is a unit of the earth's surface characterized by relatively homogenous patterns of topography, climate, geology and soil. It has potential to influence any crop, which is reflected in the characteristics of its products – the concept of terroir is therefore defined as a complex of natural environmental factors, which cannot be easily modified by the producer. With the aid of various management decisions, such as whether to plant Merlot vines in a specific location, trellising, etc. this complex is reflected in the final product. This creates a distinctive wine with an identifiable character, and therefore a unique product in the market.

The identification of NTUs forms the first step of a terroir study. It is therefore necessary to look at the interaction of each of the components with wine quality and character. The Stellenbosch NTU has been compiled for an area of 25 000 ha to the west and southwest of Stellenbosch. The relatively complex topography of this area and its proximity to the Atlantic Ocean provides many different environments for viticulture. This yields a wealth of information – the basis for studying the environmental effects on the vine phenology and on production and wine character. (WOSA; 2004)

Figure1: Five terroir components used to create a map of Natural Terroir Units in the Bottelaryberg-Simonsig-Helderberg winegrowing area in Stellenbosch



(Source: WOSA)

3.3 Terroir in the Old World

The importance of terroir from the Old World point of view is expressed thus by Jacky Rigaux – author of ‘Terroir and the Winegrower’

‘The concept of terroir is therefore crucial in Bordeaux - the region that is the most extensive in France. It grew from 11,400 ha in the mid-Nineties to 124,000 ha in 2004. Due to the possibilities of continual expanse and growth, one has a better understanding of why Bordeaux cultivation tried to impose grape variety blending and the consecration of the winemaker’s craft as the key to the Chateau’s value.

However, there seems to be developing interest for the terroir philosophy, especially in the region of St.-Emilion and Pomerol. It is most likely that, by insisting that on the value of the locality rather than on technical know-how as far as vinification and maturation are concerned, the Bordeaux region will be able to face competitors with their Californian, Australian, African or Chilean imitations of Bordeaux wines with composure. For the time being, these countries prefer to favour a grape variety and brand policy rather than a ‘climate’ policy, while their strength lies only in the manufacturing process. Technically speaking world wines are all the same! The only signature of their character, their originality, what Europeans call typicity, is locality and therefore terroir. Thus one must wager that, in the end, the world’s true wine-lovers will be interested in terroir. The Bordeaux region’s vineyards must promote this philosophy. Of course, the question remains: will the world, which is currently taking shape, maintain the connoisseur tradition.’

Francois Mitjaville of Chateau Tertre Rôteboeuf in St.-Emilion says,

“We no longer express terroir according to the definition, but strict control is not as easy as the Burgundians seem to think. Vintages express themselves perfectly in our wines...CRU rather than terroir wines, and why not? It’s human expression supported by true culture...It’s a state of mind. On Tertre Rôteboeuf, just to mention Merlot, I could make two crus but it would feel like ‘splitting hairs’. I like the idea that wine expresses these different nuances. We are the children of our history; a farmer is shaped by his environment, which he expresses in a product of civilization. A winegrower is not a creator. The most poignant emotional aspect of a wine is to find the best possible fruit, bringing it to express the full spectrum of its personality and attempting to rediscover ‘ the landscape’ of its origins. (Rigaux, J)

3.4 Terroir in the New World

New World wine producers historically appear not to have taken terroir as seriously as the producers in the Old World, but the use of research and study incorporating Natural Terroir Units is becoming increasingly important. Opinions on this subject are expressed in the following quotations:

'If terroir is important, than the age of that soil and the way the soil is constructed is important. Age and the weathered character of that soil are essential to the eventual wine, whose journey started at the hair root tips of the vine. Our geology is like a craggy old sun-etched Wild West gunslinger in Hollywood – it would be impossible to cram more evidence of character and age into one face, that's us – and it makes our wines different. We call it the energy of memory. And when you can capture that spirit of place in a wine you strike something that resonates with authentic brilliance. It's something extra in the wine that you sense rather than taste.' (Bruce Jack – South African Winemaker) (WOSA, 2004)

Another New World opinion, from California, is:

"Not so long ago, in many parts of the New World, it was common to hear Grape Growers, Wine Makers and their Scientists to deny the existence of terroir. They would say that what had been known as the effects of terroir were merely the effects of climate (too hot, too cold, too dry, too wet) or the effects of (good or bad) cellar practices, and that, given free access to modern technology, unfettered by the rules of Appellation law, all wines could be made – if not anywhere, at least in many places. In the first approach, they were correct. Many excellent and similar wines have been made in many places in the world. To say that certain wines might be identical would certainly be going too far, however a semblance has been achieved. (Christopher Howell – Cain Vineyard. Quotation from Rigaux, J)

To the extent that terroir remains unique and poorly understood, it will always be a definite contributing factor to help mould the infinite varietal characteristics and individuality of the best wines, giving the special nuances of character that make wine such a fascinating study for winemaker and consumer alike.

4. VITICULTURAL REQUIREMENTS OF MERLOT:

Viticulture is the science and practice of grape cultivation and is practiced consciously by viticulturists, often instinctively by grape-growers or vine-growers. Viticultural practices vary enormously around the world.

4.1 Preferred soil types

Merlot is sensitive to drought and stresses easily under high temperatures and dry conditions, it therefore requires moderately high potential soils with good moisture supply or supplemental irrigation and a choice of rootstocks with good drought tolerance, such as 110 Richter, Riparia or Riparia-crosses. (Teubes, A)

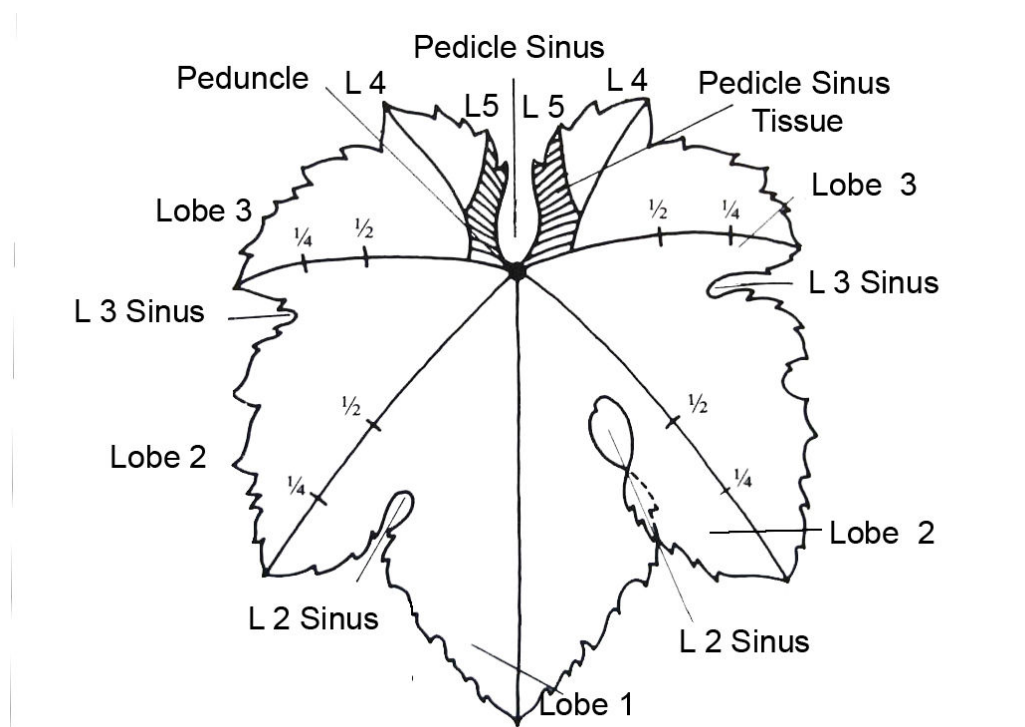
In South Africa deep red soils, with good water retention, and soft weathered shales are ideal for Merlot, such as the Hutton and Clovelly soils that are found in the district of Stellenbosch. (Teubes, A; Van Rensburg, H)

Bordeaux's Right Bank areas are slightly warmer than the Mèdoc on the Left Bank, but they have damp, cool clay soils that retain their moisture well and allow grapes to mature completely. Since it ripens early Merlot needs a relatively cool micro-climate which these soils provide by having more moisture than e.g. gravel soils, and creating a lower temperature around the vine itself. In well-drained soils, dry summers can leave the grapes undeveloped. (Wilson, J)

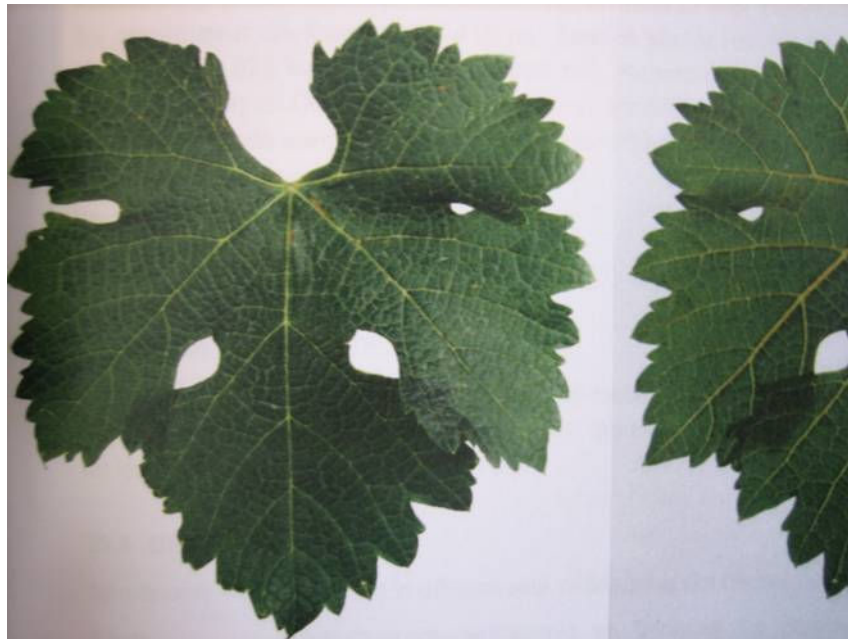
Pomerol soils sometimes have high proportion of clay and iron: but in St.-Emilion they contain more gravel and limestone – the amount of each is reflected in the wine. Clay and Iron rich soils, for example, are said to produce more full-bodied wines. (Wilson, J)

4.2 Ampelography

Diagram of a vine leaf - illustrating lobes and sinuses



(Source: Orffer, C)



Leaf of a Merlot vine (Source: Teubes, A)



Bunch of Merlot Grapes (Source: Teubes, A)

Merlot is a premium variety, planted widely throughout the world.

Merlot leaves are clearly 5-lobed, elongated, ends of lobes 2 overlapping with lobe 1, dark green colour, pedicle sinus U-shaped; teeth (serrated edge of the leaf) uneven.

The bunches are cylindrical, often shouldered and loose. The berries are round and medium large, with a deep blue skin colour when fully ripe, but much less dustily blue than Cabernet Sauvignon. (Orffer, C; Robinson, J; Teubes, A)

The skin is also much thinner than Cabernet Sauvignon. Although Merlot also ripens comparatively early, being thinner-skinned it is liable to rot in a wet vintage and requires some systemic spraying programme to prevent fungal diseases, especially in areas with high rainfall like Constantia. (Teubes, A)

The shoots hang down and there are not many tendrils. Merlot is normally trellised on a low hedge system in Bordeaux and a high hedge system in South Africa. (Teubes, A)

Merlot provides good viticultural insurance in more marginal climates such as Bordeaux, as it buds, flowers and ripens two to three weeks before Cabernet Sauvignon. This does however make it more prone to frost, as happened in 1991, when some Right Bank properties hardly produced any wine at all. Its early flowering also makes it particularly sensitive to coulure (poor fruit set in grapes in which the small berries fall off). The right choice of rootstock can help to prevent poor fruit set, such as SO4 and Gravesac.

(Visser, C)

In a warmer climate such as South Africa, the best location is on cool slopes facing south and southeast in regions with moderate summer temperatures; such as Firgrove, Bottelary, Simonsberg and Somerset West. The cooler areas are preferable, but if there is

too much wind, e.g. Cape Agulhas, this is a problem. Merlot tends to be sensitive to wind, as the shoots are long. (Teubes, A; van Rensburg, H)

Bud break occurs in early spring – March in Bordeaux and September in South Africa. Harvesting takes place in early mid season – late February to March in South Africa and late September to early October in Bordeaux.

The fruit yield potential is moderate to high (between 6 to 10 tons per hectare), depending on clones used and length of bearers. (Teubes, A; van Rensburg, H)

This vine has moderate vigour, but can quickly grow out of control and over-crop. It needs a firm hand if it is to produce low yields of good-quality grapes. Choice of site is very important, and so is the selection of the right clone – some clones have been developed to avoid over-cropping. Its canopy of leaves is sometimes cut back to expose the grapes more fully to the warm sunshine in cooler areas. In South Africa the clones of French origin are more favoured (MO 314; 343; 346 and 348) as well as the Italian clone MO 192. (See Appendix C on p 85 for clones available in South Africa.) (Visser, C)

Cool vineyards sometimes produce wines which have a leafy, green character, a subtle hint is acceptable, but too much can result in a wine tasting stalky and under-ripe. Wine makers can control this by cutting back the canopy of leaves and exposing the grapes to the sun. Conversely, over-ripeness can lead to wines tasting “jammy”, ‘baked’ and that lack complexity. (Atkins, S)

Merlot ripens in a rush towards the end of the season and is ready for picking suddenly, so growers have to keep a careful eye on it in autumn. Merlot tends to be notably lower in tannin than Cabernet Sauvignon, higher in sugars and the acidity level is relatively lower than other red varieties. The timing of the harvest is therefore crucial, as the acid level can be dangerously low if picking is delayed for too long. This is especially in warmer climates where malic acid levels are much less. If, however, the grapes are not ripe enough, the wine will taste green and stalky. (Robinson, J)

Expect the flavours of ripe Merlot (from the skin as well as the pulp) to taste of juicy red berries, particularly plums, raspberries and cherries. Often a hint of fruitcake and chocolate flavours is noticed. Alcohol levels in Merlot are usually relatively high – often 14% and above in New World countries. (Robinson, J; www.epicurius.com)

5. OENOLOGY – PRODUCTION OF MERLOT

The distinguishing feature of a full-bodied red wine is the authority it has on the finish. When young, it is often astringent and aggressive and even though the wine may be high in alcohol and have a strongly flavoured and constructed mid-palate, it will be the finish which dominates – and which must soften before the wine becomes a pleasure to drink. Even people that drink Merlot frequently, would not be able to describe its flavour with any precision. The one thing that they would agree upon is that it is 'smooth'. If any single wine promotes a texture rather than flavour it is Merlot – 'Cabernet without the pain' (astringency) or as Braam van Velden of Overgaauw stated: 'Cabernet Sauvignon with the volume turned down!' (See Section 8; Overgaauw Interview p. 65)

Region of origin, vineyard location, clones planted, vine training and trellising, age of vines and yields per vine/hectare play critical roles in determining the potential character (intrinsic personality), style and flavour spectrum of every Merlot. This potential character is something which may be subdued or highlighted in the finished wine by conscious harvesting and winemaking decisions.

Merlot is normally harvested between 24° Balling and 25° Balling. For best quality, berries are selected on a sorting table, destemmed and crushed. Moderate additions of Sulphur dioxide are administered, though only if necessary. (Halliday & Johnson)

Depending on the producer, fermentation starts with the addition of inoculated yeast, but in parts of Bordeaux fermentation often starts naturally after three or four days. The fermentation temperature can go up to 28°C. The cap, (the top layer of grape solids that floats on the liquid surface during alcoholic fermentation) has to be plunged down or pumped over three times a day and fermentation will last for about seven days. The wine is often left to macerate for up to 21 days for maximum colour extraction.

(Halliday & Johnson)

Most medium- and higher-priced Merlots are aged in oak. (Some Merlots are partially fermented in oak, to develop flavour complexity.) Oak maturation softens the wine and helps to develop its aromas. When used, new oak imparts complex aromas/flavours to the wine (toasted oak, smokey oak, vanilla, mocha, cereal grain, wheat flakes) and many accentuate Merlot's supple texture.

Maturation normally takes place in small (225l) new oak barrels, preferably French oak, up to two years for wines expected to age over the mid- to long-term, while wines intended to be consumed young may spend up to a year in refill casks that are two to three years old. (Halliday & Johnson)

Malolactic fermentation (bacterial conversion of stronger malic acid into softer lactic acid), may occur naturally or may be induced, for instance by adding *Leuconostoc oenos* as a starter culture, by the wine maker. (Halliday & Johnson)

Racking (removing clear wine off the lees or sediment in the barrels) is done two or three times during a twelve month maturation period. This also aerates, clarifies and softens the wine. (Halliday & Johnson)

Fining takes place towards the end of the maturation period in order to clarify the wine. Filtration, blending and sterile bottling then takes place. (Halliday & Johnson)

For generations, Merlot has been a major blending wine for other members of Cabernet “family” (Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Malbec and Petit Verdot). Increasingly though, these same varieties are blended into Merlot to enhance the character, flavour and/or balance the finished wine. (Robinson, J)

In the 19th century, France’s Bordeaux region established two classic models for the blended 40% - 60% Merlot, 25% - 40% Cabernet Franc (for body, spiciness) and 5% - 10% Cabernet Sauvignon (for depth, backbone), depending on vintage and producer. On the right bank for instance, in Pomerol and certain producers in Saint-Emilion, Merlot is typically 60% - 90% of the blend; the balance is Cabernet Franc and/or Cabernet Sauvignon. These two models have been widely emulated around the world. (www.vino.com)

Sometimes producers bottle mature wines for a period before releasing them on the market, depending on the style. Most Merlots are at their best within 3 – 8 years of the vintage, although some need 10 – 15 years to mature. Younger Merlots display more obviously fruity, spicy, and floral aromas, particularly from warm growing regions. Youthful Merlots from cool-climate vineyards also may be lightly herbal or vegetal in character. (www.vino.com)

Bottle aging both develops nuances of character and further softens Merlot's texture. With long-term aging (10+ years), additional aromas develop "bottle bouquet", especially humus, mushrooms, roasted nut, cigar tobacco and toffee.

(www.vino.com/www.epicurius.com)

6. SIGNIFICANT MERLOT PRODUCING AREAS OF THE WORLD

Merlot was planted outside Bordeaux in other viticultural areas as far back as the mid-1800's, but only since the 1970's has it been given its varietal independence and has come into its own. Today more than 180,000 ha are planted under Merlot worldwide, of which 85% is in Europe. Approximately 6,000 producers bottle a varietal Merlot (or merlot-based blend) worldwide. The most significant Merlot vineyards are found in the following countries and areas: (Robinson, J)

6.1 France:



Map of France (Clark, O)

This country's Merlot plantings are extensively discussed in section 2.2 on page 6. .

It is the home of Merlot and has the most plantings in the world. The most important areas for growing Merlot are:



Map of Bordeaux (Clark, O)

6.1.1 Saint-Emilion:

This area is located on the right bank of the Dordogne, 50 km east of Bordeaux. The climate is more continental than the maritime climate of the Médoc, with greater variation in daily temperatures, and less rain during the year.

St.-Emilion is situated on a plateau where vines grow at a height of 25 – 100 metres, and the vineyards are quite steep. North and west of the village the vineyards are on flatter ground. The soils are extremely complex with many chateaux spread across more than one soil type. The Côtes (slopes) are composed of limestone or clay, through sandy gravel and large stretches of sand and clay to the sables (sands).

(Joseph, R; Stevenson, T)

Skin contact usually lasts for 21 – 25 days. Production is done in stainless steel tanks for fermentation with a mixture of old and new small oak for maturation – from as little as 12 months to between 15 and 22 months.

Some noteworthy producers are:

- l'Angèlus
- l'Arrosée
- Ausone
- Figeac
- Tertre-Rôteboeuf
- Valandraud

(Atkins, S; Clark, O; Joseph, R; Lichine, A; Parker, R, Stevenson, T)

6.1.2 Pomerol:

This a small area on the western extremity of the St.-Emilion district, just north of Libourne. The climate is similar to St.-Emilion and Château Pètrus and Vieux-Certan are on a slight rise. Vines grow at 35 to 40 metres on slightly undulating slopes.

The soils are sandy to the west, and to the east where the best properties are situated, the soils are sandy/gravel. In the centre of Pomerol is a unique geological formation of sandy-clay over *molasse* (sands and gravel interbedded with marl) - the location of the world famous Château Pètrus. This property is 12 ha and produces 2000 to 3500 cases per annum. Although Pomerol as an Appellation has never been classified, the full-bodied wines from this property have enjoyed international attention since the 1940s, and fetch higher prices than any other property in Bordeaux. (Joseph, R; Robinson, J; Stevenson, T)

At Pètrus some pressed juice is added to the free run, before fermentation, because it is believed that the wine is less harsh if it matures together, rather than doing a blend after separate maturation. Skin contact lasts for 15 to 21 days and the wine is matured in small oak barrels for 18 to 20 months. (Stevenson, T)

Noteworthy producers

- l'Eglise-Clinet
- l'Evangile
- Gazin
- La Conseillante

- Latour-Pomerol
- la Fleur
- la Fleur-Pètrus
- Pètrus
- le Pin
- Petit-Village
- Trotanoy
- Vieux-Château-Certan

(Atkins, S; Clark, O; Joseph, R; Lichine, A, Stevenson, T)

6.1.3 Languedoc-Roussillon:

These vineyards are located in southern France between the Rhône River to the east and the Pyrenean Mountains to the west. The climate is influenced by the Mediterranean and also the harsh marine and mistral winds. Vineyards are found on the alluvial soils of the plains and valley slopes. (Joseph, R; Stevenson T)

While old wooden vats are still sometimes used for fermentation, use of stainless steel and maturation completed in new oak is now more common.

A lot of Merlot is blended with other red varieties. (Robinson, J)

Significant producers:

- Yvon Mau

(Atkins, S)

6.2 ITALY:



Map of Italy (Clark, O)

Merlot is important in Italy, even if total plantings declined from a previous 30,000 ha in the early '90s to 26,500 ha by 2000. It is planted in 14 of Italy's 20 regions, particularly in the northeast, alongside Cabernet Franc, where it is called 'Merlott'. (Robinson, J)

6.2.1 Northeast:

In Friuli Merlot performs better than Cabernet Sauvignon – there is even a tourist route called Strada del Merlot along the Isonzo river. Individual denominations for Merlot are found in Friuli, Veneto and Trentino-Alto Adige. (Robinson, J)

This area is bounded by the Dolomites to the north and the Adriatic Sea to the south. Vineyards are found on a variety of sites. Summers are hot and winters are cold and harsh. For red wines, vintages are important, as there are unpredictable variations in the weather from year to year.

Most vineyards are on a mixture of sand, gravel and sediment deposited during the Ice Age. Clay and sandy clay abound and the best sites are often on marl (crumbly combination of limestone and clay) and are rich in calcium. (Joseph, R; Stevenson, T)

Modern vinification techniques are used and a lot of experimentation is done with flavours derived from using oak. There is also experimentation with different grape varieties.

Noteworthy producers are:

- Felluga (Riserva Sossò)
- Gravner (Rosso Gravner is predominantly Merlot)
- Valtellina (Il Duca)

(Atkins, S; Clark, O; Joseph, R; Lichine, A; Parker, R; Stevenson, T)

6.2.2 Central Italy:

Merlot is planted on the Colli Bolognesi in Emilia-Romagna. Plantings also occur in Tuscany, Umbria and in Lazio. Wines made from Merlot may be excellent, but have to be classified as a Vino di Tavola as Merlot is not a traditional variety. (Robinson, J)

Here the summers are long and fairly dry. Winters are cold. The best vineyards are on free-draining exposed hillsides where altitude moderates the long, hot growing season.

Soils are complex; galestro (a crystalline rock soil) dominates the best vineyards.

(Joseph, R; Stevenson, T)

Noteworthy producers are:

- Avignonesi
- Castelgiocondo (Lamaione)
- Fattoria di Ama
- San Giusto a Rentennano (La Ricolma)
- Tenuta dell'Ornellaia (Masseto)

(Atkins, S; Clark, O; Joseph, R; Lichine, A; Parker, R; Stevenson, T)

6.3 SPAIN:



Map of Spain (Clark, O)

Merlot is now a permitted variety and planted in many areas. Merlot vineyards covered 8700 ha in 2004, most successfully in Penedès which has a relatively mild Mediterranean climate on the coast, becoming more continental further inland. Frost can be a hazard. Navarra has the Pyrenèes and Cantabrian mountains protecting the vineyards from Atlantic Ocean winds and excessive heat from the Mediterranean, thereby moderating the climate. Blends with traditional Spanish grapes are popular, and there are few pure Merlots on the market. (Joseph, R; Robinson, J, Stevenson, T)

Noteworthy producers are:

- Can Ràfols dels Caus (Gran Caus label)
- Miguel Torres

(Atkins, S; Clark, O, Joseph, R; Stevenson, T)

6.4 UNITED STATES:

Merlot's reputation received a boost in the 1990's as it was suddenly regarded as the 'in' variety in the United States especially in California. It was also found to do well in Washington State and Long Island in New York State. (Robinson, J)

6.4.1 California:



Map of California (Clark, O)

In 1985 California had a total of 800 ha of Merlot, which had risen to in excess of 3,000 ha by 1992. Demand in the States soared, and between 1995 and 2003 Merlot had increased from just over 10,000 ha to an excess of 21,000 ha planted in California alone. There are 375 producers of Merlot or Merlot-based wine in the USA. (Robinson, J)

However, quality suffered in the late 1990's when growers stretched their crops to increase yields for the burgeoning demand. As demand and supply leveled out after 2000, quality began to rise again. (Robinson, J)

Off-shore ocean currents cause an intermittent fog bank along the Californian coast, resulting in insufficient sunshine for grapes to ripen. The fog does not penetrate too far inland because of the 1000m high coastal mountain range, leaving the San Joaquin Valley

much warmer. This interaction between fog and terrain results in many different sub-climates. Napa, 30 km across the bay from San Francisco, is one of the warmer, drier regions on the coast. Westerly parts of Santa Barbara County, 500 km to the south are cooler and foggier than any part of Napa. Much of Mendoza, 130 km north of Napa, has hotter summers. Openings to the Pacific Ocean in the Coast Ranges indicate cool spots, while mountain barriers locate the warmer ones. (Atkins, S; Joseph, R)

Total annual rainfall north of San Francisco is 625 to 1,150 mm per annum, while from San Francisco southwards it is considerably less – 400 mm per annum and below. Drought therefore occurs regularly. (Stevenson, T)

Winters are mild, even warm, but spring frosts trouble growers more than any other region. Smudge pots (burners), overhead sprinklers and wind machines (huge fans that keep cold air moving in the vineyards) are commonly used. (Joseph, R)

Vines tend to be grown at altitudes ranging from sea level near the San Francisco bay to 125 metres. Soils consist of gravel loams in the north and fertile silt loams in the south. Most vines in Sonoma are grown on the floors or gentle lower slopes of the Sonoma and Russian River Valleys. Soils vary considerably from loams to alluvial deposits. (Stevenson, T)

Organic viticulture has grown from small beginnings in the 1980s to a full-blown movement. Biodynamic viticulture (an extreme form of organic viticulture) also has a strong following in California. (Robinson, J)

Methods of production, like the size of wineries, vary widely although boutique wineries increasingly tend to use 'European' methods, such as natural yeasts, where possible, while larger firms use the latest, high-tech methods. (Joseph, R)

Noteworthy producers are:

Napa Valley:

- Atalon
- Beringer Vineyards
- Cornerstone Cellars
- Cosentino
- Duckhorn
- Etude

- Flora Springs
- Hartwell Vineyards
- Havens Wine Cellar
- Joseph Phelps Vineyards
- Lewis Cellars
- Markham Vineyards
- Napa Cellars
- Neyers
- Niebaum-Coppola
- Nova Wines (Napa Valley – Marilyn Merlot, a very collectable icon wine)
- Pahlmeyer Winery
- Paloma
- Peju Province
- Pine Ridge Winery
- Schafer Vineyards
- St. Clement vineyard
- St. Supèry
- V Sattui
- Whitehall Lane Winery
- William Hill Winery

Sonoma Valley:

- Arrowood Vineyards
- Clos Du Bois
- Fisher Vineyards
- Geyser Peak Winery
- Imagery Estate
- Matanzas Breek (Journey)
- Pride Mountain Vineyards
- Ravenswood
- St. Francis Vineyards
- Windsor Vineyards

Russian River Valley:

- Gary Farrel (Ladi's Vineyard Merlot)

Mendocino:

- Bonterra

Rutherford:

- Frog's Leap (Rutherford)
- Swanson (Rutherford)
- Whitehall Lane (Rutherford)

Spring Mountain District:

- Robert Keenan
- Newton
- Paloma

Central Coast: North

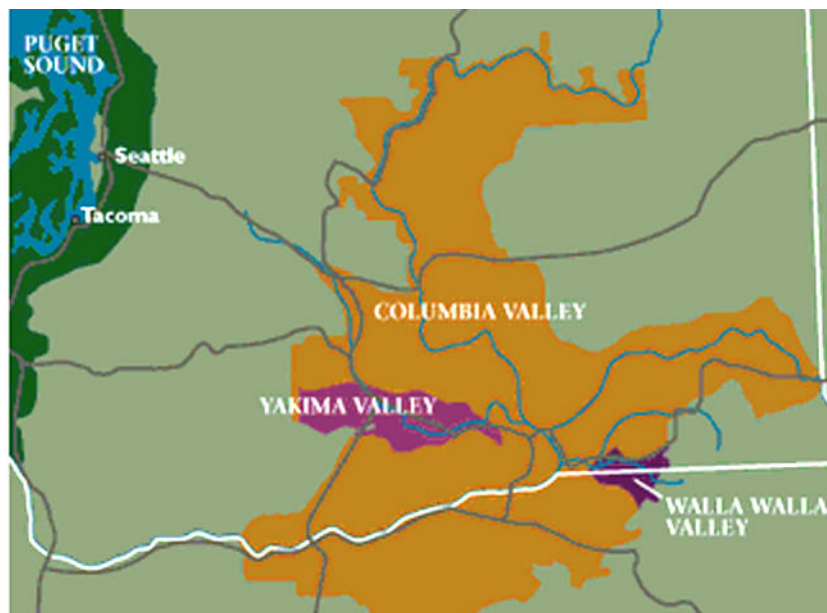
- Hahn Estates
- Heller Vineyards
- Rosenblum Cellars

Central Coast: South

- Blackjack Ranch
- Gainey Vineyards

(Atkins, S; Beazley, M; Clark, O; Jukes; M, Stevenson, T)

6.4.2 Pacific Northwest:



Map of Pacific Northwest (Clark, O)

Merlot has had little success in Oregon's vineyards, where the much cooler climate makes coulure a big problem. (Robinson, J)

In Washington's sunny inland Columbia basin Merlot has produced consistently well-structured, fruity wines and has become the state's most planted red variety. It increased from 800 ha in 1991 to well over 3,000 ha in 2005. (Robinson, J)

The climate in Washington is extremely variable – high rainfall along the coast, but vineyards inland rely heavily on irrigation. The Cascade Mountains shield eastern Washington from the rain and sea breezes. (Joseph, R)

The soils are deep, fertile, light-textured, silty, sandy or clay loams over volcanic bedrock. Most of Washington's viticultural areas are phylloxera-free and thus ungrafted. Vines are mainly located on valleys or on low-lying slopes to escape frost. (Stevenson, T)

Stainless steel is widely used for fermentation and oak for maturation. (Joseph, R)

Noteworthy producers in Washington State:

- Andrew Will Winery
- Apex Winery
- Bookwalter

- Canoe Ridge
- Chateau Ste Michelle (Cold Creek)
- Columbia Crest
- Columbia Winery
- Cougar Crest
- Distefano
- Five Stars Cellars
- Januik
- l'Ecole No 41
- Leonetti Cellar
- North Star
- Pepper Bridge
- Reininger
- Seven Hills Winery
- Waterbrook
- Woodward Canyon Winery
-

Noteworthy producers in Oregon:

- Adelsheim Vineyard
- Owen Roe
- Shea Wine Cellars
- Sineann

(Atkins, S; Beazley, M; Clark, O; Stevenson, T)

6.4.3 Other areas:

New York State's Long Island also produces some interestingly rich, fruity and rounded wines from Merlot. Some producers are:

- Bedell
- Bridgehampton
- Lamoreaux Landing
- Lenz
- Paumanok Vineyards
- Pellegrini Vineyards
- Raphael

There are also Merlot producers in Virginia such as Piedmont Vineyards and Winery Inc., Idaho, and Texas, such Messina Hof Wine Cellars.

(Atkins, S; Joseph, R; Robinson, J; Stevenson, T)

6.5 CHILE:

Merlot has become extremely important in Chile, especially for their growing export market. Vines called Merlot have done particularly well in the damper soils of the southern part of the Central Valley. There is a recorded total of 12,900 ha at the turn of the 21st century, but not all of these are Merlot. (Robinson, J)

An increasing amount of these 'Merlot' vines have been identified as Carmenère (an old Bordeaux variety that hardly still exists there). At first Carmenère wines legally had to be sold as Merlot or Grand Vidure, but are now being marketed using the varietal name. (Joseph, R)

The climate in Chile is variable with extreme fluctuations in temperature. The north is hot and arid while the south receives a great deal of rain. The area around Santiago is dry, frost-free and sunny. (Stevenson, T)

Vines are generally cultivated on flatter plains, notably coastal and valley plains, but hillside sites are also used in Chile. The soils have a good limestone base, and irrigation is widely used. (Stevenson, T)

Recent interest in wine production means that modern methods, such as the use of stainless steel fermentation tanks, new, small oak barrels for maturation, etc. are fairly widespread. (Joseph, R)

Important producers: (Names with origin and wine names in brackets)

- Canepa (Santiago)
- Carmen (Alto Jahuel)
- Casa Lapostolle (Colchagua -Merlot Cuvée Alexander)
- Casa Lapostolle (Las Condes)
- Casablanca (Casablanca – Santa Isabella)
- Casas del Bosque (Casablanca)
- Château Los Boldos (Requinoa)
- Concha y Toro (Maipo)

- La Rosa (Cachapoal)
- Montes (Curico)
- Santa Rita (Santiago)
- Valdivieso (Santiago)

(Atkins, S; Beazley, M; Clark, O; Stevenson, T)



Map of South America (Clark, O)

6.6 ARGENTINA:

Malbec is the signature grape of Argentina, but Merlot is grown in several regions, including Mendoza and the cooler, southern region of Rio Negro. Plantings in Mendoza were 2,500 ha in 1989, and have increased in recent years. (Robinson, J)

Argentina has good soils that range from sandy to clay, with a predominance of deep, loose soils of alluvial (rich sediment deposited by a river) and aeolian (sediments deposited by wind) origin. The climate is described as continental-semi-desert conditions (20 to 25 mm of rain per annum). (Joseph, R; Stevenson, T)

Like Chile, most vines are grown on flat plains, with hillside vineyards leveled to a minimum slope to allow for more efficient use of water. (Joseph, R)

Equipment, like Chile is also modern, although Argentina relies more on bulk production methods for the huge amount of wine produced in this country. (Joseph, R)

Noteworthy producers:

- Luigi Bosca (Mendoza)
- Felipe Rutini (Mendoza)
- Humberto Canale (Rio Negro)

(Atkins, S; Beazley, Stevenson, T)

6.7 AUSTRALIA



Map of Australia (Clark, O)

In 1990 there were 500 ha of Merlot planted in Australia, of which only 300 were old enough to bear fruit. Plantings have sky-rocketed since then, and similar to California's a tremendous enthusiasm has developed Merlot. By 2004 the figure was close to 11,000 ha, a third as much as total Cabernet Sauvignon plantings. (Robinson, J)

There is a great potential for Merlot in selected spots, especially cooler regions such as Victoria, Tasmania and Coonawarra in South Australia, where the prevailing tradition has been to soften Cabernet Sauvignon with Shiraz rather than Merlot. (Beazley, M)

Climatic conditions in South Australia range from very hot continental conditions of the Riverland to the cooler areas of Coonawarra and Adelaide Hills. Soils are varied, but tend to be sand, loam or limestone topsoil over red earth and limestone subsoils.

Vines are grown the coastal plain around Adelaide and flat interior of the Riverland district, and at altitudes from 250 meters to slopes as high as 600 metres in the Barossa Valley. (Stevenson, T)

Producers of premium wines in these areas use traditional vinification, such as natural yeasts, and use of small oak barrels is very common. (Joseph, R)

New South Wales has a climate similar to the Languedoc area in France, but high rainfall rains often promotes rot. Vines are grown on low-lying, flat or undulating sites, but in the western part vineyards are on slopes at an altitude of 800 meters. (Stevenson, T)

Soils in all areas are varied with sandy and clay loams of varying fertility. There are well-drained, alluvial sands and silts on the flat valley floors of the Lower Hunter region. (Atkins, S)

Irrigation is practiced throughout this area, and stainless steel vats are replacing wood and concrete for cooler, temperature-controlled fermentation. New oak barrels are also common practice. (Beazley, M)

In Western Australia the climate is varied, from long, hot dry summers and short wet winters of the Swan Valley, which is one of the hottest wine-growing areas of the world, to the more Mediterranean conditions of the Margaret River. This area has a higher rainfall and is much cooler in summer because of ocean breezes. (Joseph, R; Stevenson, T)

Most vineyards in Western Australia are on flat, coastal plains or river valley basins, although higher altitude sites are being used in hotter areas. Soils are rich, free-draining alluvial and clay loams. (Joseph, R)

Modern viticultural and vinification techniques, such as canopy management and meticulous cellar hygiene, are necessary in this area to combat the problems of heat. (Joseph, R)

Noteworthy producers: (Origin in brackets)

Western Australia:

- Brookland Valley (Margaret River)
- Capel Vale Wines (Southwest Coastal Plane)

- Evans & Tate (Margaret River)
- Hackersley (Geographe)
- Higher Plane (Margaret River)
- Moss Wood (Margaret River)
- Smithbrook (Manjimup)

South Australia

- Boycat Merlot by Linda Domas (McLaren Vale)
- Haan Wines (Barossa Valley)
- Hamilton (McClaren Vale)
- Henschke (Eden Valley)
- Hillstowe (Adelaide Hills)
- Irvine (Eden Valley)
- Katnook Estate (Coonawarra)
- Kay Brothers (McClaren Vale)
- Leconfield (Coonawarra)
- Parker Estate (Coonawarra)
- Shaw & Smith (Adelaide Hills)
- St. Hallet (Barossa Valley)
- Tatachilla (McLaren Vale)
- Vein Crest (Barossa Valley)

New South Wales:

- Barwang Vineyard (Hilltops)
- Casella Wines (Riverina)
- Hungerford Hill (Lower Hunter Valley)
- Rosemount Estate (Upper Hunter Valley)
- Rothbury Estate (Lower Hunter Valley)

Victoria and Tasmania:

- Best's Wines (Great Western)
- Coldstream Hills (Yarra Valley)
- Dominique Portet (Yarra Valley)
- Evelyn County Estate (Yarra Valley)
- Michelton Vintners (Goulburn Valley)
- Preece (Nagambie Lakes)

- Stefano Lubiana (Tasmania)
- Taltarni Vineyards (Pyrenees)
- Warrabilla (Rutherglen)
- Yering Station (Yarra Valley)

(Atkins, S; Beazley, M; Jukes, M; Stevenson, T)

6.8 NEW ZEALAND:



Map of New Zealand (Clark, O)

Merlot plantings have increased dramatically in New Zealand, from a mere 150 ha in 1992 to 1,590 ha by 2006. The big advantage of the variety has been its ability to ripen two to three weeks before Cabernet Sauvignon in this country's cool grape-growing climate. (Robinson, J)

New Zealand has a cool maritime climate similar to Bordeaux in areas like Hawke's Bay on the North Island that has an annual rainfall of 760 mm. More than half the country's Merlot is planted in this region. Here the riper flavours, higher grape sugars and lower acids compared to Cabernet Sauvignon. (Stevenson, T)

Vineyards are planted on a variety of clay and alluvial loams over volcanic subsoils. Drainage is often a problem, so north-facing slopes have been cultivated on the North Island, while the majority of vines are planted on flat or gently sloping hills. (Stevenson, T)

Vineyards are meticulously maintained to deliver the best quality fruit, especially for premium varieties. Mechanical harvesting and temperature-controlled fermentation in stainless steel are widely employed. New oak is frequently used for maturation.

(Joseph, R)

Merlot's was initially planted as its primary role was to add a fruity richness to the more tannic Cabernet Sauvignons. However, the riper flavours, higher grape sugars and lower acids compared to Cabernet Sauvignon have resulted in Merlot being recognized as a premium red-wine grape in its own right. (Cooper, M)

The only drawback is Merlot's erratic and sometimes low yield, due to its susceptibility to coulure. (Cooper, M)

Noteworthy producers are: (Producer with origin and wine names in brackets)

- C. J. Pask Winery (Hawke's Bay – Gimblett Road Reserve & Reserve)
- Coopers Creek Vineyard (West Auckland)
- Delegats (Henderson – Reserve Merlot)
- Esk Valley Estate (Hawke's Bay – Black Label))
- Forrest Estate (Marlborough – Cornerstone)
- Goldwater estate (Waiheke Island)
- Golwater Estate (Waiheke Island – Esslin)
- Kingsley Estate (Hawke's Bay)
- Kumeu River (Auckland – Kumeo River Village)
- Longview Estate (Northland – Mario's Merlot)
- Matariki (Hawke's Bay)
- Matua Valley (Waimauku, - Bullrush)
- Mills Reef (Hawke's Bay – Elspeth)
- Ngatara Wines (Hawke's bay – Glazebrook)
- Oyster Bay (Hawke's Bay)
- Peninsula Estate (Waiheke Island)
- Sacred Hill
- Saint Clair (Marlborough)
- Sileni (Hawke's Bay – EV)
- Trinity Hill (Hawke's Bay – Gimblett Road)
- Waimarama Estate (Wairarapa)

(Atkins, S; Beazley, M; Cooper, M; Stevenson, T)

6.9 OTHER WORLD PRODUCING AREAS:

Merlot is also planted to a lesser extent in some other areas around the world:

- Bulgaria – second most planted variety in the southern part
- Georgia
- Greece
- Hungary – known as Medoc Noir
- India
- Israel
- Mexico
- Moldova – widely planted in this country.
- Portugal
- Romania – 7,300 ha, making it the most planted red variety
- Russia
- Slovenia – mainly planted along the Dalmation coast
- Switzerland – Ticino: a white Merlot is made from Merlot Noir, with no skin contact.
- Ukraine (Crimea)

(Atkins, S; Beazley, M; Joseph, R; Robinson, J; Stevenson, T)

7. DEVELOPMENT OF MERLOT IN SOUTH AFRICA:

In 1979 there was one hectare of Merlot planted in South Africa, and Overgaauw, in Stellenbosch, was the first to release a wine made only from Merlot with their 1982 ground-breaker that was released a few years later. The Merlot grapes grown on the farm were previously used for their well-known Bordeaux blend Tria Corda.

(See interview 8 p.65)

In 1986 the John Platter Guide there are two Merlots listed: Overgaauw and Boplaas (Calitzdorp). Merlot is described as follows: 'several young vineyards are in production, but hitherto uncultivated except experimentally. In France, this soft but rich and fragrant variety provides the key to the Cabernet blends of Bordeaux and vintners are hopeful that in time it will replace Cinsaut in South Africa as a companion to Cabernet. This country's reds will achieve improved quality and distinction when Merlot is in greater supply.'

(Platter 1986)

In 1994 Jancis Robinson wrote: 'South Africa has produced some interesting varietal Merlots, as well as using it to good effect in Bordeaux blends but the variety has yet to establish a distinct identity for itself on the Cape.'

In 1996 there were almost 100 Merlot wines listed in John Platter, and a 1997 panel tasting organized by well-known writer and wine-personality, Michael Fridjhon, tried to reach some consensus about the role of Merlot in South Africa. Inspired by, and in the image of the prestigious properties of Château Pètrus and le Pin in Pomerol, Michael Fridjhon concluded that: 'This surely is where Cape Merlot should be aiming: big wines which are neither simple nor dull, voluptuous but not flabby, complex, dense and with mouthfilling amplitude'

The results of the panel were, however, varied and a lot of the comments were negative. Most of the wines were described as not being 'soft and luscious' and although some wines displayed a range of flavours, this was not the same as having 'layers of flavours'

The '96 vintages were described as too young while '95s showed some promise.

The older '93s were described as showing signs of 'drying out', the result of 'serious overwooding' and the inherent lack of fruit.

Although the more recent vintages were appealing, they were not regarded as serious wines with ageing potential. Overgaauw '95 (Stellenbosch) and Le Moutonnè '91 (Mouton Excelsior in Franschoek) scored 4 Stars

(Wine Magazine; March 1997)

In 2001 a Wine magazine panel organized by the late Tony Mossop (CWM) tasted 105 Merlots, from very young 2000s to the already mature '96 vintage. The point was raised 'what should one expect from Merlot? After all, it has this reputation for softness, supple tannins, plum and chocolate aromas and flavours, and accessibility at an earlier age than Cabernet Sauvignon. All the reasons for loving Pomerol and St-Emilion wines, and for its runaway media-hyped popularity in US markets – where, I may say, there have been more disappointments than successes, as the bandwagon has become overloaded with greedy growers and producers who over-crop, plant in unsuitably warm areas, and practice dodge winemaking.'

The consensus was that some winemakers who were totally dedicated to Merlot production in South Africa were 'getting it right' but Tony Mossop stated that; 'There is no doubt that our Merlot has not delivered as much of the hallmark plushness, plummy and soft tannins as many would have liked. Perhaps a lot to do with all the usual errors of judgment, such as planting on the wrong sites, over cropping and poor vineyard management – which makes the good ones stand out'.

Five wines, being Spice Route Flagship '99, Veenwouden '98, Hercules Paragon '98 from Simonsvlei, Vergelegen '98 and Fleur du Cap Unfiltered '97, scored 4½ Stars. Twenty-two wines scored 4 Stars.

(Wine Magazine; March 2001)

In 2002 a tasting panel, again headed by Tony Mossop, tasted nearly 100 Merlots over two sessions. He commented that the tasting held the previous year was 'rewarding' after this session: 'In fact, the standard of our Merlots seems to have taken a bit of a dip since last year, when an impressive 58% of all scored 3 Stars and above. This time the figure dropped to 44%.'

The general comments were that only a few producers had maintained a four star rating consistently, and some producers who were considered Merlot 'specialists' had been less consistent. Many of the wines, even some of the younger vintages such as '98, were described as 'browning and starting to fall apart'. Wine Magazine panelist Dave Hughes

commented that: 'I'll say what I had to say last year. Merlot is a blending grape and was never meant to stand on its own, particularly here in the Cape. And there are virtually no Merlot specialists for this reason'.

Two wines, Bilton '00 and De Trafford '00, scored 4½ Stars and three wines, namely Bredell's '98, Vergenoegd '99 and Thelema Reserve '99, scored 4 Stars.

(Wine Magazine; March 2002)

In March 2005, Wine Magazine did another Merlot tasting and out of the 75 wines from the 2002 vintage, the highest rating was only 4 Stars that applied to one wine only. This wine was Steenberg '02 from Constantia.

(Wine Magazine; March 2005)

An article in Wine Magazine, reviewing another Merlot tasting, in 2006 by Christian Eedes raised the issue whether Merlot was a 'fashion victim'. Panelist Carl Shultz, winemaker at Hartenberg and winner of the 2005 Diners Club Winemaker of the year for his Hartenberg Merlot 2004, explained that the reason that Merlot was so often unsatisfying is that it is 'the most difficult variety to work with in South Africa after Pinot Noir'.

Carl Shultz added that, for Merlot, site of the vineyard, managing the density of the vine canopy properly and correct handling in the cellar were crucial for good results.

(See interview 3 p 58)

Eedes also highlighted in this article that a body aimed at furthering the quality of local Merlot, called the Merlot Forum, had been formed in December 2005 by specialist of the variety Luca Bein.

(See interview 10 p 68)

Results from this Merlot tasting of the 2003 vintage were: Laibach received 4½ Stars and Sumaridge, Sentinel, Post House, Marklew and Spier Private Collection all got 4 Stars.

(Wine Magazine March 2006)

In the same edition, in an article entitled 'Judgement Day', Christian Eedes reports of three highly rated examples of South African Merlot, being Hartenberg 2004, Laibach 2003 and Thelema Reserve 2003, that are compared to establish who is 'king of the category'. The article discusses relevant points such as ageing potential, value for money and of course

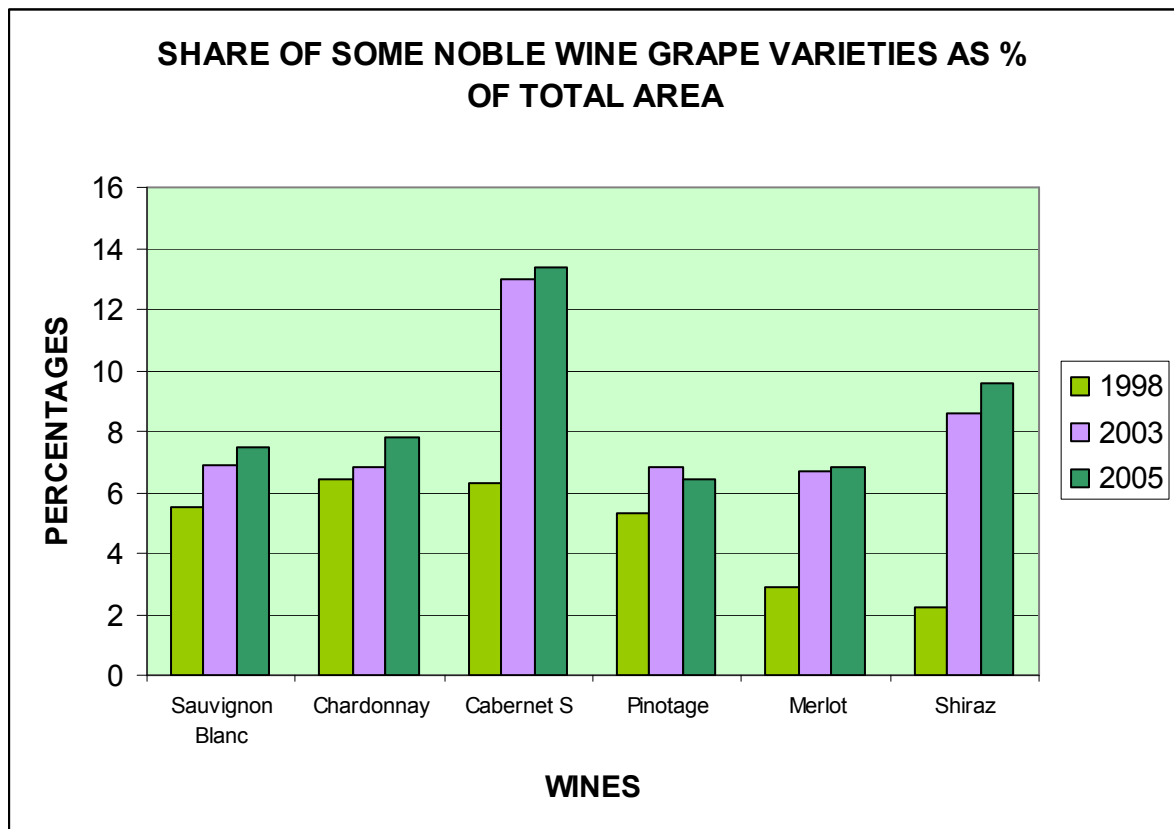
the comments of the four panelists in assessing the characteristics of an excellent Merlot relative to these three wines.

Thelema Reserve 2003 was placed first, Laibach 2003 second, and Hartenberg 2004 was placed third. (See interviews 3 p 58; 4 p 59 and 5 p 61)

The development and progress of Merlot is therefore significant in South Africa since the first release in the '80s. Coverage in the South African Wine Magazine reflects opinions and controversial issues of Merlot, such as the perception of what a typical wine made from this variety should be, and the ever-varying results of the tasting-panel in searching for a really excellent South African Merlot.

Some interesting facts and figures relating to Merlot in South Africa should be considered. The latest statistics available from SAWIS indicate that Merlot has increased from 2.9% of total vineyards in 1998, to 6.8% in 2005.

Figure 2 (Source: SAWIS)



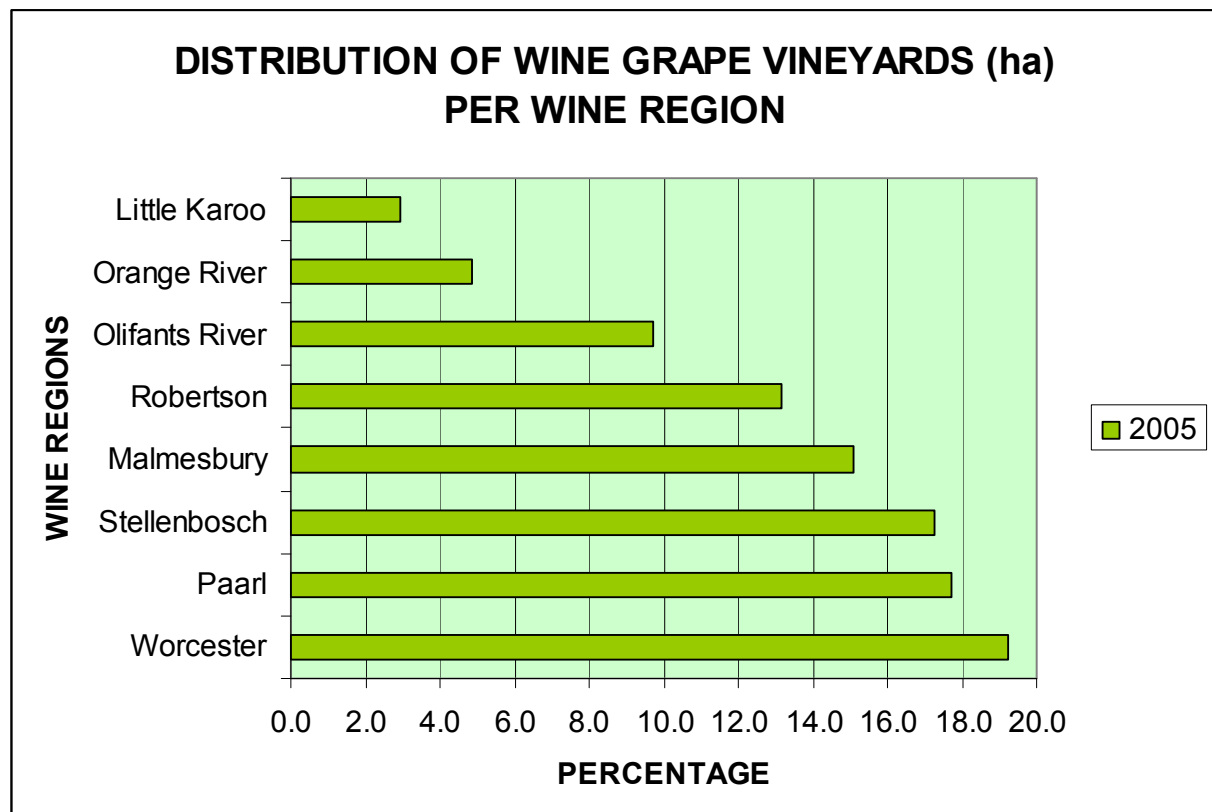
Geographic Distribution of South African Wine Grape Vineyards per Wine Region: 2005
(Excluding Sultana):

Table 1 (Source: SAWIS)

Wine regions	Number of vines	% of total vines	Area hectares	% of total hectares
Worcester	65 281 122	21.21	19 560	19.25
Paarl	55 723 856	18.10	18 029	17.74
Stellenbosch	54 203 586	17.61	17 524	17.25
Malmesbury	38 950 028	12.66	15 329	15.09
Robertson	46 258 782	15.03	13 374	13.16
Olifants River	27 668 155	8.99	9 878	9.72
Orange River	10 416 392	3.38	4 947	4.87
Little Karoo	9 281 753	3.02	2 966	2.92
Total	307 783 674	100.00	101 607	100.00

Graphically, the above is represented in the table below:

Figure 3 (Source: SAWIS)



Segmentation of wine grape varieties per wine region for 2005 is shown in the table below:

Table 2 (Source: SAWIS)

VARIETY	TOTAL HECTARES	HECTARES IN WINE AREA AS % OF VARIETY TOTAL							
		ORANGE RIVER	OLIFANTS RIVER	MALMES-BURY	LITTLE KAROO	PAARL	ROBERT-SON	STELLEN-BOSCH	WORCES-TER
Chenin blanc	19 053	5	12	20	3	19	9	9	23
Colombar(d)	11 429	24	19	4	7	5	19	1	23
Chardonnay	7 927	1	7	10	3	15	27	15	22
Sauvignon blanc	7 661	0	6	14	1	13	16	33	17
Hanepoot	2 639	12	20	3	10	5	6	3	41
Cape Riesling	1 150	0	1	5	1	30	5	9	48
Sémillon	1 070	0	6	11	0	17	8	15	43
Weisser Riesling	276	-	3	12	1	29	17	26	12
Other white varieties	4 008	8	11	11	5	13	25	8	19
Total white varieties	55 214	8	12	12	4	14	15	11	23
Cabernet Sauvignon	13 572	1	5	18	1	24	11	29	11
Pinotage	6 493	1	9	27	1	20	7	21	13
Shiraz	9 794	1	10	19	1	22	11	23	13
Merlot	6 942	1	8	14	2	20	9	31	15
Cinsaut noir	2 822	-	1	19	0	39	3	9	28
Ruby Cabernet	2 648	7	14	6	5	9	28	3	29
Cabernet franc	965	0	1	7	0	22	5	49	15
Pinot noir	535	0	3	7	1	23	15	33	17
Other red varieties	2 621	1	4	24	5	21	10	20	14
Total red varieties	46 393	1	7	18	2	22	10	24	14
Total	101 607	5	10	15	3	18	13	17	19
Sultana (Hectares)	10 983	10 052	241	228	42	134	37	-	249

Table 3

VARIETAL COMPOSITION (%) PER WINE REGION

VARIETY	ORANGE RIVER	OLIFANTS RIVER	MALMES-BURY	LITTLE KAROO	PAARL	ROBERT-SON	STELLEN-BOSCH	WORCES-TER	TOTAL
Chenin blanc	20	22	25	21	20	13	10	22	19
Colombar(d)	55	22	3	27	3	16	0	13	11
Chardonnay	1	6	5	8	6	16	7	9	8
Sauvignon blanc	1	5	7	2	6	9	14	7	8
Hanepoot	6	5	0	9	1	1	0	6	3
Cape Riesling	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	3	1
Sémillon	-	1	1	-	1	1	1	2	1
Weisser Riesling	-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other white varieties	7	4	3	7	3	7	2	4	4
Total white varieties	89	66	45	75	42	64	35	66	54
Cabernet Sauvignon	2	7	16	4	18	11	23	7	13
Pinotage	2	6	11	3	7	3	8	4	6
Shiraz	1	10	12	4	12	8	13	6	10
Merlot	1	6	6	4	8	5	12	5	7
Cinsaut noir	-	0	4	0	6	1	2	4	3
Ruby Cabernet	4	4	1	4	1	6	0	4	3
Cabernet franc	-	0	0	-	1	0	3	1	1
Pinot noir	-	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	1
Other red varieties	1	1	4	4	3	2	3	2	3
Total red varieties	11	34	55	25	58	36	65	34	46
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Total hectares	4 947	9 877	15 329	2 966	18 029	13 374	17 524	19 560	101 607
Sultana (Hectares)	10 052	241	228	42	134	37	-	249	10 983

Table 2 shows that Merlot is now the third most planted red grape variety in South Africa, after Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz. The most vines are planted in Stellenbosch (31%), followed by Paarl (20%).

Similarly, in 2002 the most Merlot was planted in Stellenbosch (32.7%), and second most in Paarl (21.2%).

(SA Wine Industry Directory 2002)

Table 2 also shows a total of 6 942 ha planted under Merlot out of total red varieties of 46 393 ha, and total plantings of 101 607 ha in South Africa in 2005.

This compares with the figures of 2002 being a total of 4888 ha of Merlot out of a total of 33 818 ha for red varieties, and total vineyard plantings of 105 566 ha.

(SA Wine Industry Directory 2002)

The table below shows wine grape vineyards planted per wine region during the period 1 December 2004 to 30 November 2005:

Table 4 (Source: SAWIS)

VARIETY PLANTED	HECTARES								
	TOTAL	ORANGE RIVER	OLIFANTS RIVER	MALMESBURY	LITTLE KAROO	PAARL	ROBERTSON	STELLENBOSCH	WORCESTER
Chenin blanc	679	72	93	101	30	64	71	26	222
Chardonnay	667	11	44	42	19	60	210	81	199
Sauvignon blanc	618	-	42	96	13	35	76	163	194
Colombar(d)	438	120	101	9	53	2	63	-	91
Viognier	103	-	-	14	1	40	5	18	24
Sémillon	80	-	3	3	-	3	3	14	54
Hanepoot	13	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	11
Other white varieties	109	3	2	20	1	22	27	7	27
Total white varieties	2 706	206	286	284	118	225	456	309	822
Cabernet Sauvignon	266	11	2	15	4	35	87	55	57
Shiraz	246	2	6	61	3	59	24	61	31
Merlot	73	10	-	9	1	13	1	29	9
Pinotage	60	-	5	10	-	4	3	30	6
Cinsaut noir	48	-	-	-	-	12	6	-	30
Ruby Cabernet	40	2	-	11	3	-	7	-	17
Cabernet franc	27	-	-	-	-	5	-	18	3
Pinot noir	23	-	-	-	1	-	4	5	13
Roobernet	3	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	-
Other red varieties	160	7	7	20	6	36	14	44	27
Total red varieties	945	33	20	126	18	167	145	243	194
Total white and red	3 651	238	305	411	135	392	601	552	1 016
Sultana	39	27	-	1	-	1	-	-	10

The following table shows wine grape vineyards uprooted per wine region during the same period.

Table 5 (Source: SAWIS)

VARIETY UPROOTED	HECTARES								
	TOTAL	ORANGE RIVER	OLIFANTS RIVER	MALMES-BURY	LITTLE KAROO	PAARL	ROBERT-SON	STELLEN-BOSCH	WORCESTER
Chenin blanc	953	28	72	208	54	180	134	77	200
Colombar(d)	406	103	72	18	34	42	76	-	61
Hanepoot	207	16	83	6	11	22	11	3	55
Chardonnay	201	7	14	22	8	70	15	52	12
Sauvignon blanc	191	-	8	31	-	59	29	49	14
Cape Riesling	70	-	-	13	-	24	12	1	20
White French	48	5	14	11	3	2	2	5	7
Raisin blanc	22	1	1	-	-	-	11	-	9
Sémillon	21	-	-	2	-	9	1	-	10
Clairette blanche	20	-	2	1	-	8	2	-	6
Weisser Riesling	19	-	-	-	-	9	3	5	3
Other white varieties	246	21	17	64	19	42	39	13	31
Total white varieties	2 405	182	284	375	130	467	333	205	429
Cabernet Sauvignon	408	4	14	35	1	111	12	214	16
Cinsaut noir	265	1	1	61	1	103	14	30	53
Pinotage	254	3	21	46	6	45	11	116	6
Merlot	173	1	26	32	-	44	-	67	4
Shiraz	140	3	15	33	1	36	3	45	4
Other red varieties	169	10	16	8	6	38	19	57	16
Total red varieties	1 408	22	93	214	16	377	58	529	98
Total white and red	3 813	204	377	590	146	843	392	734	527
Sultana	680	609	24	6	2	8	18	-	14

Table 4 shows that 73 ha of Merlot vines were planted during the period 1 December 2004 to 30 November 2005. During the same period a total of 173 ha Of Merlot vines were uprooted, mainly in Stellenbosch. (See Table 5)

The same tables, however reveal that more Cabernet Sauvignon vines were uprooted, as is the case for Pinotage. Plantings of these two varieties were also not so extensive, but a tremendous amount of Shiraz vines, relative to the amount being uprooted, has been planted.

Merlot has developed tremendously since that one hectare in 1979. The 2007 John Platter Guide lists more than 300 single variety Merlot wines. The guide awards 4½ Stars to 10 wines, and 4 Stars to 52 wines.

This clearly indicates an increased development in the variety from both a demand and supply perspective in South Africa.

There are now so many producers of Merlot in South Africa, but some prominent producers have delivered consistently good quality wines and are worth mentioning:

- Bein Wine (Stellenbosch)
- Durbanville Hills (Tygerberg)
- Fleur du Cap (Unfiltered Collection)(Stellenbosch)
- Groote Post (Darling)
- Groot Constantia (Constantia)
- Hartenberg (Stellenbosch)
- Jordan (Stellenbosch)
- K.W.V. (Cathedral Cellar) (Paarl)
- Laibach (Stellenbosch)
- Meerlust (Stellenbosch)
- Meinert (Stellenbosch)
- Nederburg (Private Bin Range) (Paarl)
- Overgaauw (Stellenbosch)
- Plaisir de Merle (Franschoek)
- Steenberg (Constantia)
- Thelema (Stellenbosch)
- Veenwouden (Paarl)
- Villiera (Stellenbosch)

Map of Wine Growing Regions in South Africa



(Source: WOSA)

8. INTERVIEWS WITH SELECTED SOUTH AFRICAN MERLOT PRODUCERS

A questionnaire was designed and made use of to interview the selected Merlot producers in the various districts appearing below. The producers interviewed were selected for being a prominent producer in a specific district. In districts where Merlot production is more plentiful, such as Stellenbosch, producers were selected from a specific ward within that district.

Winemakers were also selected for being a large producer, perceived as a specialist, or having had experience in an important Merlot producing area such as Pomerol.

The winemakers were asked to relate their personal experience and knowledge that they have gained in cultivating and producing Merlot, and which wines available in the market they considered noteworthy. Interviews were conducted personally or via e-mail.

(See questionnaire attached under Appendix A, p 83).

COASTAL REGION
TYGERBERG DISTRICT

Climate table for Durbanville/Tygerberg

Weather Station	Diemersdal
Altitude	150 – 350 m
Latitude	33° 48'S
Dominant Influence	Ocean Proximity/Aspect/Soil
Heat Summation	1907 °C days (III)
Mean February Temperature	22.4 °C
Continentality	10.3 °C
Total Rain	481 mm
Summer Rain	140 mm
Aridity Index	Na
Geology	Greywacke (Shale)
Dominant Soils	Red- & Yellow-Brown Tukulu, Oakleaf

(Source: WOSA – See Appendix B, p 84)

Interview 1:

Durbanville Hills Winery – Martin Moore (winemaker)

(A personal interview was done in April 2005)

The vineyards of Durbanville are located ten kilometers from the cold Atlantic Ocean. This creates a temperate climate with breezes from the ocean cooling the vineyards during the summer months. There are eleven wine farms in the area and eight owners of these are members of the Durbanville Hills Cellar. All members subscribe to Integrated Production of Winegrowing practices, designed to sustain natural resources.

The wines are produced in a three tier system – the Premium, Rhinofields and single vineyard range. The grapes for the more expensive Rhinofields range i.e. selected from specific vineyards, only come from both north and south facing slopes to give respectively fruity aromas and sound structure to the wine.

Crop control is applied to limit yields and concentrate varietal flavour. For the Luipaardsberg, which is the single vineyard Merlot in the range, the grapes come from vines grown in deep, red soils on the valley of the Klein Roosboom farm. The yield from

this vineyard, established in 1991, is no more than six tons per hectare. The grapes are hand picked during March at 25° to 26° Balling and are vinified separately.

After one day of cold soaking the must is fermented on the skins for 8 days at 29° C until dry and left on the skins for an extended maceration period of two weeks to allow for maximum extraction.

Fermentation takes place in stainless steel tanks, specially designed by the manufacturer Dizio in Italy for the cellar, that allow for continuous computer-regulated pump-over cycles for maximum extraction.

After induced malolactic fermentation, the wine is matured for 12 months in equal quantities of new, second and third fills 300 liter-French oak barrels. For the single vineyard Luipaardsberg, 24 months in new French oak using a tight-grain barrel from the Sylvain cooperage. The other wines are matured in Vicard barrels.

Martin Moore prefers robust, full-bodied wines that are ideal partners for full-flavoured dishes, such as game, meat dishes and casseroles. His wines are therefore made in the style to complement food.

The Durbanville Hills range is marketed as three levels of products. The Premium Merlot is less expensive at one end of the price spectrum (about R 45 per bottle) and the single vineyard Luipaardsberg is in the super-deluxe category at the other end (about R 180 per bottle). The Rhinofields from select vineyards is somewhere in between, the idea being to cover all price categories of the fine wine market.

Using this three tier production and pricing system that yield completely different styles from one winery, Martin believes that there is definitely a future for single variety Merlot in the market .

Trends in the U.S.A. show that Shiraz is on the increase in popularity, but despite this there will always be a demand for Merlot.

COASTAL REGION
STELLENBOSCH DISTRICT

Climate table for Stellenbosch

Weather Station	Nietvoorbij
Altitude	200 – 400 m
Latitude	33° 54'S
Dominant Influence	Ocean Proximity/Aspect/Soil/Altitude
Heat Summation	1945 °C days (III – IV)
Mean February Temperature	21.5 °C
Continentality	9.2 °C
Total Rain	713 mm
Summer Rain	229 mm
Aridity Index	387 mm
Geology	Granite (Sandstone)
Dominant Soils	Red- & Yellow-Brown Tukulu, Oakleaf

(Source: WOSA – See Appendix B, p 84)

Interview 2:

Villiera Wines - Jeff Grier (Owner and winemaker)

(A personal interview was done in April 2005)

Merlot is the most planted red variety on the Villiera Estate.

The soils at Villiera are mainly duplex soils; which consist of clay, sand- and coffee-stone. Some soils are stony with high clay content, but there are more coffee stone and clay soils. In general the soils have a fairly low potential, which in the end results in wines which are delicate and softer in tannin. Selected Merlot vineyards, which produce more serious wines, are higher in clay content. These soils give better colour and fruit content to the grapes.

The average yield is 10 tons per hectare, but for the better quality grapes only 8 tons per hectare. Canopy management, keeping shoot lengths the same controls the yield, and the canopy is 4 leaves thick.

A green harvest is done, and at veraison the unevenly ripe bunches are taken off as well.

Fortunately, due to their location they hardly ever struggle with uneven ripeness. If however this happens, it results in the wines having a vegetative character. For phenolic ripeness the alcohol levels reach about 14, 5%, but still obtain softness on the palate. This style has more of a general appeal commercially.

Merlot is fairly disease resistant; even in years with high rainfall, e.g. 2005 when rain slowed down the harvest, but did not affect the quality. Mealy bugs and leaf roll virus are a problem.

The oldest Merlot vines at Villiera were planted in 1986 and these vines give the best quality grapes. It would be the lighter soils that will result in wines that are elegant and not heavy.

Personally, Jeff prefers the Saint-Emilion and Pomerol wines because they have a better tannic structure and are more appealing. For this reason, Jeff prefers to blend with Cabernet Sauvignon to give a better structure to the wine, which is the case with his Cru Monro blend. This will make the wine last longer, is more compatible with food and makes a more successful, structured wine.

From the year 2000, Jeff reduced the volume from his best blocks to give his wines a better tannic structure, and to produce a wine that is more compatible with food, and more in classic Bordeaux style.

2000 was a hot vintage, and resulted in a very attractive wine. The 2001 consisted of 52% Merlot, and won 1st prize at the Fairbairn Trophy Awards. The 2002 came second and consisted of 64% Merlot. The panel for this award was looking for a classic French style.

For the Cru Monro Jeff uses 80% new French oak barrels and prefers Mercier as his cooper, whereas for the more commercial style the use of new French oak is more discreet - about 20% to preserve the fruity components in the wines. His barrels are used for four years maximum. There will always be wine that has not been matured in wood and is used for blending to add a fruity component to the wines.

Harvesting normally starts any time from the 14th to 25th of February, depending on the block, and they usually harvest at 25° Balling. For ideal phenolic ripeness, Jeff would check the pips and the skins. If the level of ripeness is ideal, the grapes are harvested.

After crushing a cold soak is done for 3 to 4 days. Jeff inoculates with pure yeast cultures, such as NT50, W372 and NT112 (strains of *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*). Although he has experimented with extended maceration time, he avoids soaking the skins after fermentation as it makes the wines too hard.

Malolactic fermentation occurs naturally in the cellar, but the wine must be fermented dry, since as any residual sugars can cause problems with natural yeasts present in the cellar. The wines are matured for at least 24 months in wood and during this period Jeff would both macro- and micro- oxygenate the wines.

During the two-year period four rackings take place. These are done three times in the first six months and once after a year. An ongoing tasting and analysis is done. 12 000 cases are produced, of which 25% are exported. The biggest export countries are in Scandinavia, Germany, Switzerland and the U.S.A.

Merlot is a classic variety and a global cultivar that has done better in the New World, where it is the fastest growing variety and the most popular. France is the Old World benchmark and all the top clones that are grown in the world, come from France. Merlot has done very well in California; however, northern areas like Oregon are too cool. Chile produces the most commercial Merlots.

Globally Merlot is doing well commercially, despite negativities from movies like 'Sideways', similar to anti-Chardonnay sentiment that is currently being experienced. This has, however, made no great dent in the Merlot reputation, as it is still preferred for blends especially in South Africa, where Merlot remains the most preferred blending variety. The most prestigious wines of the world are blended wines; therefore Merlot will always be important.

In Jeff's opinion, South Africa is somewhere between the top Californian Merlot and Pomerol. Australia, New Zealand, especially Matua Valley Wines and Chile also produce good quality Merlots.

Interview 3:

Hartenberg Estate- Carl Shultz (Winemaker)

(Winner of the 2005 Diners Club Award for Merlot for the Hartenberg 2004)

(A personal interview was done in April 2006)

Merlot is a fairly difficult variety to grow – it prefers cooler slopes and low stress. In this way it can be considered the red equivalent of Sauvignon Blanc.

The first Merlot was planted in 1994, such as the Italian clone MO 192, several Swiss clones have been planted that do not form green clusters, often called ‘chickens’, that won’t ripen properly. There are the series 300 clones, of which MO 36A is considered the best. The French, 324, 343, 346 and 348 are also now planted.

Merlot prefers soils that have good water retention. At Hartenberg these are generally at the bottom of the slopes where there is also no chill. The vines are very sensitive to water stress and this has to be managed very carefully. An example is the 2006 vintage, when the soils were much drier and the vine stressed. It is crucial to manage the stress to veraison through administering judicious amounts of water. Over-watering will result in the berries swelling too much.

Canopy management is also very important to prevent stress. The Richard Smart approach is used, which means that the canopy is suckered to not more than 3 leaves per shoot. Yellow leaves are a sign that the canopy is too dense and that the light exposure is not ideal. Bunches should also hang free and not touch each other, as Merlot has a tendency for bunches to inter-twine.

Trellising is done in high potential soils because the growth would be more vigorous, such as the Tukulu and Clovelly yellow soils, using the double extended Perold system. Shoot lengths are 1.2 to 1.4 meters. Green harvest is done before veraison so that the ideal yield of 6 tons per hectare is picked. This often means that 50% of the crop is dropped.

Phenolic ripeness is crucial to avoid ‘greenness’. This is difficult, for instance, in the 2006 vintage when the vines were stressed due to the heat. If the vine stresses, the grapes don’t ripen properly.

The Merlot harvest is usually picked over the period of a month – depending on the age of the vines and the location. Picking of a particular block is done within one day. Every bunch is cleaned on the vine so that the sorting is already done in the vineyard. It takes five years to train vineyard workers to do this, so that pieces of the stem that may cause bitterness are also removed.

In the cellar a cold soak is done for 3 to 6 days at 12° C. One mix per day is done and CO2 also used to prevent oxidation of the must. Extraction is more aggressive with rototanks, and it is preferred to rather let the juice gently percolate through the cap – a much less harsh method. Juice is also drawn off to concentrate the must, and increase the colour intensity.

Cooling is then switched off so that the temperature may rise for fermentation to complete. Two different yeasts are used per blocks and the blocks are vinified separately.

The wine is matured in oak barrels for two years. No reds are fined in the cellar. Racking is done to aerate the wine – three to four times during the first, and two to three times during the second year of barrel maturation.

If properly managed in the vineyard and in the cellar, Merlot will always be a wine that is sought after in the market. In Carl's opinion the truly superb, or 'stellar' examples of this variety, such as the wines from Pomerol will guarantee its future.

Interview 4:

Laibach Vineyards– François van Zyl (Winemaker)

(A personal interview was done in April 2005)

Merlot is not the easiest variety to grow – one needs the 'right spot'. The vine stresses very quickly if there is not enough moisture in the soil – this is precisely why the clay content in the Pomerol soils is so ideal.

On the Laibach farm there are two 'super blocks' for Merlot and some of the best results were achieved in 2003. The best fruit comes from the vineyards that are 7 to 8 years old.

Different clones also stress differently. MO 12 has a big berry and therefore require more water, whereas MO 192, grown organically, poses a smaller problem.

South African Merlot wines are very often 'green' in character due to sandy soils and lack of irrigation. The Merlot vine also bears a lot and the wines are lean if the crop is too large. A lot of winemakers also try to produce a Cabernet Sauvignon style from Merlot grapes, which is more 'green and mean'.

To make a serious wine and prevent this 'green and mean' character, the yield should not be more than 7 or 8 tons per hectare. It is important to 'green harvest', often discarding as much as 10 tons per hectare. Merlot has the lowest malic acid and should therefore be softer – if the acids are too high the 'green' character emerges. It is also important to use a sorting table to remove any green clusters ('hen and kuikens effect' i.e. resembling a chicken with chicks) of stalks and berries.

A typical analysis for a 2000 Pomerol wine would have a total acid of 4.7 g/l. Some South African Merlots may end up with a total acid of 8.5g/l. This is what gives the SA wines an unpleasant and acidic taste.

The grapes are harvested at 25° Balling, resulting in a wine of 14, 5% alcohol. A cold soak of three to four days is also important using a lot of pump-overs for optimal extraction... A total of 30 to 40 days skin contact results in a good colour extract.

Fermentation is done at 28 to 29° C and aerated pump-overs are done. SO₂ is added as an anti-oxidant and anti-septic as South African cellar conditions are ideal for bacterial growth, with a high risk of potential spoilage.

The wine is left on the lees in the barrels and battonage (stirring up of the lees) is performed every six months. New French oak barrels used – the preferred cooper is Sylvain – with a medium to medium plus toast. Fining is done using egg white, but not done in the barrel, rather in a stainless steel tank before blending.

To make a Merlot that lasts, one needs a good tannic structure which is obtained from good quality fruit and good extraction. The maturation period in the barrel will also contribute to this - that is why a medium plus level of toasting is chosen. It is important to have ripe flavours fruit in balance with the tannin to create an extended palate on the taste and make a good food wine.

The wine is also bottle matured for 15 months before market release. The aging potential is five to ten years for Laibach Merlot, after which the wine would be soft, velvety and not

have too much fresh fruit. 2003 was an excellent year and the wines will easily last for ten years.

There is definitely a bright future for well-made Merlot as a single variety, especially in very good years such as the 2003 vintage. International icon wines, such as Château Pètrus prove this. Another Pomerol wine that François rates highly is Château Angelus.

Interview 5:

Thelema Mountain Vineyards – Giles Webb (Owner and winemaker)

(A personal interview was done in April 2006)

Good soils are important for Merlot – two vineyards on the estate having decomposed granite and red soils. The aspect of these is North facing and West. The first vineyards were established in 1986 & 1987 and the rest later. Density is about 3200 vines per hectare.

Material with very little viral infection was used. Due to the ever presence of mealy bug as a vector for leaf-roll virus it is difficult to get clean material. Medium vigour is preferred for growth, and permanent cover crops are used. Two shoots are allowed per spur, as Merlot tends to be a bit 'floppy'. Topping is done to keep the shoots more upright. Irrigation is necessary and this is closely monitored. Pressure-valves are used on the irrigation system to obtain accurate readings of water used.

Two flowers per shoot are kept that would then develop into big bunches that produce good yields. A lot of crop thinning is done in 3 stages to yield evenly ripened fruit:

- In January at the onset of veraison

- During veraison green bunches are removed

- After veraison bunches from shoots not lignified get removed

The Normalized Differential Vegetative Indexing (NDVI) system of infrared photography is used to measure vegetative growth. This has been used at Thelema for several years already to ensure a phenolic ripeness of the crop, not just ripeness based on the sugar in the grapes. An example is the 2006 harvest where the fruit was picked ripe, but at a lower sugar level than usual.

All harvesting is done by hand, using buckets that are emptied into plastic bins. The yield is about 8 tons per hectare. Sorting of the fruit at the cellar is very important and labour intensive. Merlot has little stem shoots that break off and end up in the mash, causing bitterness.

Extraction is also done very gently to prevent the risk of bitterness. The must is kept cool after crushing and undergoes pre-fermentation maceration. All fermentation is done naturally – no cultivated yeasts are added. Temperature is kept at 26° to 29° Celsius. The wine is pressed after fermentation and racked off the lees. Malolactic fermentation occurs on its own within ten days in stainless steel tanks. Racking into barrels is then done. About 10% American oak is used to add some complexity. Various coopers are used and normally 20 to 30% new wood is used.

The Reserve Merlot generally goes into new wood. Wood maturation is usually for 18 months before the blending process begins. The tanks are matured separately, and the best batches are used for the Reserve label.

According to Giles there are not too many good Merlots in the world except for the Right Bank in Bordeaux, such as Château Pètrus and le Pin. One of the best Merlots from the New World is Duckhorn from California.

Interview 6:

Cordoba – Chris Keets (Winemaker)

(A personal interview was done in April 2006)

Merlot is very terroir specific – unlike Cabernet Franc which is less site-specific. Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon are more adaptable and one can plant these vines almost anywhere. Certain pockets in and around the Helderberg are ideal for cultivating vines, but the right variety and clone has to be planted in the most suitable site.

Merlot stresses out more easily than other varieties during the ripening period and this affects balance in the grapes in terms of acid/fruit balance, colour etc. Soil is very important in determining this balance, as is altitude. Sandy soils, for instance, have a low pH resulting in poor acid, colour and flavour formation in the grapes. Vines will not be fruitful in poor soils and it is difficult to manipulate irrigation properly. A maritime influence plays a big role in producing good Merlot.

Merlot is not a very flavourful grape as it contains fewer hormones. It therefore needs to be well 'buffered' by the terroir, such as clay rich soils. Judicious irrigation is also important as the vines stress in dry conditions. Merlot is therefore area specific, and the growth has to be properly managed in the ideal terroir.

Usually clay content of 20 to 30% is preferred. Adding too much Potassium Chloride can be a problem. Too much Nitrogen causes vigorous growth with excessive canopy shading, and Potassium rich soils causes a rise in pH in the berries. This is not desired as Merlot already has lower acidity than most other red varieties.

A wire trellis system with an 800mm high cordon is used. The vines are planted 1.5 by 2.5 meters apart and wider plantings where the slopes are steeper. Two shoots are allowed per spur with 150mm between spurs. This allows for good aeration.

One small block is 21 years old. The MO 36 clone planted here gives a very herbaceous, minty and eucalyptus character. The MO 192 Italian clone is very fruity and has good acidity. This is the backbone of the 'Crescendo'. French clones such as MO 343 and 346 have small berries and give good berry flavours and tannin structure.

At harvesting an analysis of the pH, sugar and total acidity is done. The sugar is usually at 24, 5° to 24, 8° Balling. Above 25° Balling the grapes acquire a 'jammy' character and the resultant alcohol will be too high. A fresh, fruity flavour is desired with an alcohol of below 14%. Tannin is very important for a well-structured wine. Smaller berries give more concentration and low yields of, for instance, 4, 5 tons per hectare from the oldest block, which gives ideal results.

Sorting of the fruit is done in the vineyard. It takes about 3 years to train vineyard workers to do this skillfully. Merlot has a brittle stalk at the end of grape bunches - called the 'sterretjie' (little green stalk resembling a star.) This causes bitterness if included with the must. These and bird-pecked grapes are discarded. Under ideal conditions Merlot yields have consistent bunches and berry set and vines are even resistant to fungi in the vineyard.

In the cellar, however, the 'feminine' side of the variety comes out. It can be very sensitive to wood treatment, and needs to be handled properly. Cold maceration is not preferred as more than enough colour is developed in the vineyard. Yeast strains NT202 and 116 are

added and the wine is fermented dry on the skin. The temperature is kept below 30° C and a pump-over is done twice a day for maximum colour extraction.

Malolactic is started in tanks by inoculation with bacteria. When completed, the wines get racked into barrels. Only about 10 to 15 % new wood is used and barrels that would be used for fourth fill Chardonnay are now used for second fill Merlot. This results in a good integration of fruit and oak – a wine that is soft and balanced.

The wine is racked every four months, providing necessary aeration. Different barrels are kept separately. Total barrel maturation is 15 to 18 months. Regular analysis of acid, volatile acidity and pH are done. Tannin is not added and fining is only done in a case of very astringent tannins.

Merlot will always have a future if made in a more serious and full-bodied style - the perfect accompaniment to a meal.

Interview 7:

Morgenster Estate – Marius Lategan (Winemaker)

(A personal interview was done in April 2006)

Merlot is planted on different aspects of the farm – some very good fruit flavours are obtained from steep slopes with well-drained soils.

More concentration is obtained from younger vines – unlike Cabernet Sauvignon. Good results are noticeable in vineyards that are only 5 or 6 years old – the flavours and tannic structure is ideal.

It is very important, though, to green harvest. This is done before veraison in about mid-December and again in January. The ideal yield should be no more than 7 tons per hectare – better concentration is obtained at 5 to 6 tons per hectare.

Viticulturally the canopy also has to be properly managed. Direct sunlight is not desirable on the bunches, and the shoots can also not be too long. This involves a lot of suckering and topping. A canopy that is too dense tends to give a vegetative character or 'stalky' character to the wine – sometimes referred to as 'rooibos' tea.

After harvesting, the batches from different vineyards blocks are vinified and matured separately in the cellar. A wood maturation period of 12 to 13 months is given in mainly second fill barrels. Sylvain and Berger are the preferred coopers. A medium toasted Never oak is preferred, as this gives a much more integrated and spicy character to the wine.

Merlot will always be a sought after variety – especially in the classic Bordeaux blends. Although the ‘Morgenster’ is the flagship and is predominantly Cabernet Sauvignon, the ‘Lourens River Valley’ which is Merlot dominated has more than kept pace with it in terms of market demand, and has consistently been excellent.

Interview 8:

Overgaauw - Braam van Velden (Owner) & Chris Joubert (Winemaker)

(A personal interview was done in June 2006)

In 1975 there were not a lot of varieties available to do a Bordeaux blend, and the original Merlot clones planted were French and obtained from Nietvoorbij. The original material available had excessive leaf roll virus.

Soon after the Merlot, Cabernet Franc was planted and the first Tria Corda blend was released in 1979. By then the quality of planting material had improved, and more Merlot was planted. Merlot is regarded as a ‘Cabernet Sauvignon with the volume turned down’, and the wine was aged in second fill barrels that had been used for Cabernet Sauvignon. The first single variety was bottled in 1982. The price was about R7.20 per case of twelve!

Today there are five different clones planted on the farm, of which the MO 36 does the best. The vineyards face southeast and benefit greatly from the cool breezes that come off False Bay. The older vineyards are higher (150m above sea level) and the younger ones lower (about 80 to 100m). The styles of wine made from these are completely different. To produce the best Merlot, it is essential to plant the correct clones in the most suitable location.

There is a variety of soils on the farm, with combinations of decomposed sandstone, granite and some deep red soils. Merlot does better in the patches where the clay content is higher – ensuring good water retention which is important for Merlot.

Trellising is important as the vines don't grow upwards, but tend to open up. The canopy management is therefore very important for Merlot, to prevent the bunches being exposed to too much sun.

The younger vines in rich soils can produce 15 to 18 tons per hectare, and green harvesting is done to reduce the yield to 8 or 9 tons per hectare. Pests and diseases are not a big problem. Botrytis and downy mildew can occur, but a proper spraying programme can prevent these.

An ongoing analysis of pH and sugar is done before picking, as an alcohol level of 13, 5% is required. The picking is done by hand, and the fruit get sorted in the vineyard. The older block higher up on the farm is vinified separately.

The wine is kept on the skins for 4 to 5 weeks, but racked into barrels as soon as possible as excessive contact with stainless steel is not preferred. Malolactic fermentation is done in the barrel, and regular racking takes place. The wine is matured for about 18 months, and the coopers used are Seguin Moreau, Vicard and François Frère being the most preferred. About 45 to 50% new wood is being used. Experimentation has been done with American oak, but the flavours were found to be too aggressive.

The Merlot production is about 25 000 litres, mostly sold locally, but some gets exported - mainly to Europe.

The accessibility of Merlot secures its future as a single variety. It can always be used as a blending partner as the Tria Corda has proved. To produce the best Merlot, it is essential to plant the correct clones in the most suitable location.

Some favourite French Merlots are Château Pètrus, especially the 1982, l'Angelus and Vieux-Château-Certan

Interview 9:

Uiterwyk Wine Estate – Daniel De Waal (Owner and winemaker) (now De Waal Wines)

(A personal interview was done in April 2005)

Merlot is a difficult cultivar. At Chateau l'Angelus, Ausone and Figeac 80% of the blend would consist of Merlot – which would be the norm for the right bank of Bordeaux. Chateau Cheval Blanc would be the exception to the rule, since they have more Cabernet Franc than Merlot in their blend. At Château Pétrus and Le Pin 95% of Merlot is used. Merlot thrives in the soil structure of Pomerol, which has higher clay content than the Médoc. The wines from grapes grown in this clay soil have much more structure.

At Uiterwyk the soil is high in clay, but too fertile, this imbalance results in poor colour development in the berries. The patches with clay and stony soils give better aeration, and therefore result in better growth. Merlot is exceptionally 'terroir sensitive.

At Uiterwyk, 3000 vines per hectare are planted, but in Bordeaux it is more dense – 6000 per hectare. Uiterwyk is planning to plant 5000 vines per hectare, which is more like Bordeaux.

In Bordeaux, that has a cooler climate, the wines that are predominantly Merlot have soft tannin, but a full mouthfeel. The age of the vineyard is also very important, and should be at least ten years and older - this results in wines with soft tannins and a well-structured palate

In Stellenbosch we should select specific sites to plant Merlot. Bordeaux has a high rainfall; therefore they have problems with rot, Merlot is sensitive to oidium and downy mildew. At Uiterwyk a lot of attention is given to canopy management and open the canopy up so that the grapes are more exposed to the sun to ensure proper development and prevent rot. A sorting table is also used to pick out all the Botrytis affected berries.

Since Merlot has a higher percentage of juice than Cabernet Sauvignon, 10%-25% of the juice should be drawn-off to concentrate the wine. Merlot should ferment at a warm temperature, 28-30° C, to get better extraction. Post-fermentation maceration of two to three weeks would also add to the complexity of the wines. Pressed juice will be vinified

separately and Daniel will later decide whether or not it should be blended back into the wine.

The Merlot benefits tremendously from maturation in small French oak barrels, as is the tradition in Bordeaux.

Good quality wines made from Merlot in South Africa are enjoyed at a young age, after about five years, but the great wines made from this grape, have greater aging potential, such as Veenwouden.

The French wine makers produce wines with good structure and mouth feel, they are not set to make wines with great aromas like the New World wine makers. It is more important for them to make a wine that will last several years. Wines will be tasted after five years, six years and then twelve years before a serious reputation as a producer is established.

Interview 10

Bein Wines – Luca Bein (Owner and winemaker)

**(Producer of Merlot only wines & founder of the Merlot Forum
www.merlotforum.co.za)**

(An e-mail interview was done in February 2007)

Merlot was first planted on the farm in 1996. The grapes were previously sold to Amani nearby, and the maiden release of the Bein Wine label was 2002.

Being a very young enterprise, they have a short history, but yearly production is naturally limited to 12,000 bottles a year, as all the grapes come from their own vineyard. No increase in production is therefore planned, but sales have been good – the 2002 – 2004 vintages are all sold out.

Site selection is very important for Merlot. Pruning is done to six bearers per running metre, and intense canopy management has to be practiced. In addition to this, vigorous crop control is performed by doing a green harvest. Manicuring of each bunch also takes place. i.e. removal of the shoulder and tips, reduction of the bunch size, and bird netting to protect the crop in the final ripening stage.

Precision viticulture is practiced using aerial imaging to reflect the degree of ripeness of the grapes. Precision sampling is done before harvesting, which takes place during the first two weeks of March.

Rigorous sorting of the fruit that already takes place in the vineyard ensures ultimate fruit quality, and the 'green' character in Merlot is therefore avoided by optimum management of the vineyard.

The must is fermented at a high temperature, followed by a long vatting period. Barrel maturation is done for one year in top quality French oak.

In Luca's opinion the medium cooler regions of the Cape such as Constantia and definitely Stellenbosch are the best for the style of merlot produced in this country

He sees the growth trend for Merlot as positive in any price category and the future of Merlot as simply being 'great'!

COASTAL REGION

PAARL DISTRICT:

Climate table for Paarl

Weather Station	Bellevue
Altitude	100 – 300 m
Latitude	33° 45'S
Dominant Influence	Ocean Proximity/Mountain Slopes
Heat Summation	2146 °C days (IV)
Mean February Temperature	23.2 °C
Continentality	11.1°C
Total Rain	945 mm
Summer Rain	273 mm
Aridity Index	322 mm
Geology	Shale, Granite (Sandstone)
Dominant Soils	Red- & Yellow-Brown Tukulu, Oakleaf, Structured Swartland, Klapmuts

(Source: WOSA – See Appendix B, p 84)

Interview 11:

Veenwouden Private Cellar – Marcel van der Walt (winemaker)

(A personal interview was done in April 2005)

Veenwouden Private Cellar has under vine 70% Merlot on soils that are high in clay and ironstone which gives the wine an unusual flavour and good structure. There are only 2% Malbec planted and the rest is Cabernet Sauvignon, where the subsoil has a high granite content. Merlot has a thin skin and gives a big yield; it has less tannin and therefore is a perfect blending partner with Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc.

Veenwouden Merlot has maximum 6 tons Merlot grapes per hectare and this is achieved by green harvesting and secondly at veraison, when they drop bunches that are lagging behind. At harvest time, when the grapes have reached phenolic ripeness, the harvest cannot take more than four days. When left too long on the vineyard the grapes become overripe and have a 'porty' character.

Veenwouden has 4,000 to 6,000 vines per hectare. Canopy management is crucial, as the leaves protect the grapes from the sun and heat. The best blocks of vines are on ridges, where the top soil is shallow and the vines fifteen years old. In 2005 the yield was 4.5 tons of per hectare, which Marcel feels gives optimum concentration of flavour.

The different blocks of grapes are fermented separately. Fermentation temperatures are between 28-32 ° C. Marcel gives 18 to 21 days skin contact, to extract more colour and tannin. Malolactic fermentation is not induced through inoculation, it takes place by means of bacteria occurring naturally in the cellar.

Maturation takes place for 24 months in medium toasted French barrels, Nadali and Seguin Moreau, of which 60%-80% is new wood.. Fining is done with egg white.

The style of wine is more complimentary with food; therefore Marcel works closely with chefs and restaurateurs. The wine should not be too rich so as to overpower the delicacy of certain dishes, and to be in balance and enhance the taste of both the wine and the food. The taste of wine is subjective and Marcel is not in favour of entering his wines in competitions, but rather to see them as a perfect accompaniment to a meal.

Marcel exports 70% of his wines to 15 different countries, with the most important countries being the U.K., Switzerland, Germany, Belgium and Holland. The remaining 30% is for the local market, approximately 700 cases. In total, 2000 cases of Merlot are produced and 1800 cases of 'Classic'.

Marcel sees the Pomerol Merlots as the benchmark, and regards Veenwouden as the closest Merlot in South Africa to a Pomerol. Marcel used to work at Château Pètrus and regards it as a great food wine. Ageing of Merlot is not understood by the general wine consumers. Merlot was only noticed in 1982 when it was an exceptional vintage for Pomerol.

Although Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon varieties remain classic, Marcel feels consumers still have to be educated about Merlot, especially as a food wine. He regards it as the best wine to accompany a meal. According to Marcel, Cabernet Sauvignon still remains the most popular, but Merlot remains fashionable and easier to pronounce!

Merlot and Cabernet varieties will always remain classic and he perceives the Italian-produced wines to be more popular in the future. Marcel feels that Tempranillo could become an international contender to be blended with Merlot in years to come, such as the Thornhill label.

Regarding New World countries, he believes that the Californian Merlots as the best, for example Duckhorn from the Napa Valley. Chile produces a significant amount of Merlot, but it is not made in a serious style.

Interview 12:

Nederburg Farms - Hannes Van Rensburg (Group Manager)

(Personal interviews were done in April and June 2006)

Merlot is considered quite a 'finicky' variety. If it is planted in a terroir that is too cool, the resultant wine has 'green' and unripe flavours, in a too warm area the flavours also do not develop fully in the wine as the ripening period is too short. Generally Southern and Southeastern slopes are more suitable.

The soil must contain all the necessary nutrients, but not have too much fertilizer added. soils that are too fertile will cause vigorous growth that will result in overshadowing of the bunches. In a young vineyard the balance between curbing vigorous growth and having

enough leaves for photosynthesis is crucial. Clay soils are better as these have better water retention capacity.

Certain rootstocks are also more suitable for Merlot. Richter '99 is one, and Riparia is preferred under dryland conditions. At Plaisir de Merle the vines are irrigated and the choice of rootstock is 101-14Mgt. This allows the crop to ripen two weeks earlier. The vines, however, bud earlier as well, resulting in the ripening period being slower in total. The desired flavours therefore develop fully in the berries.

Canopy management is also crucial for producing a good Merlot crop. Suckering is important for good aeration of the bunches. Trellising is done, as Merlot does not grow very upright. The vines are also sensitive to wind, as the shoots are long. This means that cooler areas that have the ideal climatic conditions, but too much wind. e.g. Cape Agulhas are not suitable for Merlot.

A lot of controversy exists about the different clones available. The characteristics of each should be examined and the best location selected for each respective clone. The best quality is obtained from a lower yield for Merlot. It is necessary to prune unripe and damaged bunches at veraison. The yield at Plaisir de Merle is about 8 tons per hectare.

The 2003 Harvest was especially good. Downy mildew can be a problem in vineyards. A suitable spraying programme of lime copper-sulfate is necessary. This is usually done six times during the growing season.

Merlot will always have a future as an individual variety as well as a blending partner. Well-made examples are soft, velvety wines that will always have an appeal. Due to the fact that the wines are also accessible at a young age, producers are able to release them into the market at an earlier. For a producer, this guarantees a better cash flow situation and more immediate return on investment.

Interview 13:

Plaisir de Merle – Niel Bester (Winemaker)

(An e-mail interview was done in January 2007)

Merlot was first planted at Plaisir de Merle in 1985/86 and again in 2001 and 2004. Initially the wines were made at Nederburg but since 1993 about 45 tons are harvested at the Plaisir de Merle cellar. The first Plaisir de Merle Merlot was bottled in 1995.

The brand has a very static demand for Merlot – approximately 25 000 to 30 000 litres per vintage. The style is medium to full-bodied and has proved to be an attractive alternative to Cabernet Sauvignon. Niel does not foresee any immediate increase in volumes.

Approximately seventy percent of the production of Plaisir de Merle Merlot is exported – mainly to Germany and Denmark.

When asked his opinion as to whether Merlot should be used as a blending partner or produced as a single variety in South Africa; Niel replied that if grown in the right areas where full ripeness and good colour development is achieved, Merlot is an excellent wine. Merlot has good blending potential and it adds initial fruitiness and softness to a blend. He therefore concludes that Merlot can be produced successfully as a single variety or used as a blending partner.

Niel believes that Merlot can be produced to be sold as a premium wine and very competitive to popular Cabernet Sauvignon.

Plaisir de Merle usually harvests Merlot late February, early March at approximately 25 degrees balling. Yield per hectare is approximately six to eight tons. Bester removes all under developed bunches as well as bunches that have insufficient colour development. Bester believes that water management is critical as Merlot can stress easily.

In the cellar, Merlot is handled the same as Cabernet Sauvignon as follows:

The grapes are destalked, crushed and pumped directly to the fermentation tank. The must is cooled down to approximately 18° C and yeast is added. Sufficient Nitrogen is also added to ensure a healthy fermentation.

Pump-overs are carried out twice daily at three hours per pump-over. Tannin is added to stabilize colour, as well as an extended skin contact period of about five days after fermentation.

The juice is then transferred to 30% new and 70% older barrels for malolactic fermentation. The wine is raked and transferred back to barrels after malolactic fermentation. SO₂ levels are adjusted and a further 14 months maturation takes place in barrels. Egg-white fining is done and one diatomaceous earth (bulk) filtration. The wine is then bottled.

Niel indicated that it is imperative to give the Merlot grapes time to ripen properly in order to eliminate the green character. When areas are too warm, the accumulation of sugar may be too fast which results in unripe tannins. At Plaisir de Merle, the Merlot is planted at 350m above sea-level in a relatively “cooler” spot. The grapes can then ripen slowly and thus avoid the green character, or the overripe “jammy” character.

Niel is of the opinion that certain parts of Durbanville, which is regarded as cool area because of the proximity to the sea, are in fact quite hot. Stellenbosch and cooler parts of Paarl are producing good Merlot. These areas benefit from soils with good water retention and higher slopes where it is generally cooler. Areas that are too cool can produce Merlot wines that have a “green” or “minty” character.

When asked his opinion regarding the future of Merlot in South Africa; Niel responded; ‘There will always be a demand for well made wine, especially Merlot. Although some consumers may explore alternatives to the popular varieties, Merlot is generally a fruitier and softer wine, and as a result suits more palates. Bulk Merlot is ideal for fruity, young easy-drinking blends at a reasonable price.’

**COASTAL REGION
DARLING DISTRICT**

Climate table for Malmesbury/Swartland

Weather Station	Malmesbury
Altitude	100 – 300 m
Latitude	33° 28'S
Dominant Influence	Ocean Proximity/Soils
Heat Summation	2058 °C days (IV)
Mean February Temperature	23.3 °C
Continentality	9.4 °C
Total Rain	523 mm
Summer Rain	154 mm
Aridity Index	559 mm
Geology	Shale, Granite (Sandstone)
Dominant Soils	Structured Klapmuts, Swartland, Red- & Yellow-Brown Oakleaf, Tukulu Structured Swartland, Klapmuts

(Source: WOSA – See Appendix B, p 84)

Interview 14:

Groote Post Vineyards – Nick Pentz (Owner)

(A personal interview was done in January 2007)

Groote Post first planted Merlot in 1996 with the first production in 1999. Groote Post presently has 23 ha of Merlot.

Merlot is produced in three categories:

- Category A – Single cultivar Merlot with one bunch per bearer which equates to 7 tons per hectare. Currently Groote Post produces 2700 cases (of 12) of the single cultivar. Their aim is to increase this to 5000 cases per annum.
- Category B – Produced for the red blend “The Old Mans Blend” at 9 tons per hectare. Production is currently at 8500 cases.
- Category C – Bulk Merlot for the local co-op.

Nick believes that Merlot can be produced as a single variety as well as for blending purposes. Both these options are currently being achieved successfully under the Groote Post label. The Merlot sells at approximately R 65 per bottle at most retail outlets.

At Groote Post Merlot requires clay rich soils which alleviate stress. Merlot requires a sufficient quantity of water and therefore irrigation is suggested. Groote Post started with MO 12 grafted on to Richter '99, which resulted in very vigorous growth. Nick believes that the most successful clone is MO 192.

How to avoid the green character in Merlot?

Nick indicated that it is vital to have the right balance in the vineyards with the correct fruit / foliage balance. Six to eight bearers per vine is recommended.

Nick is of the opinion that the successful Merlot producers in South Africa lie in the cooler areas and producers such as Steenberg are the forerunners of good quality Merlot.

**BREDE RIVER VALLEY REGION
WORCESTER DISTRICT**

Climate table for Breede River Valley

Weather Station	Robertson
Altitude	150 – 500 m
Latitude	33° 50'S
Dominant Influence	Aridity/Soils
Heat Summation	2181 °C days (IV)
Mean February Temperature	23 ° C
Continentality	11 °C
Total Rain	280 mm
Summer Rain	116 mm
Aridity Index	446 mm
Geology	Shale, Tertiary/Quaternary Alluvial Deposits
Dominant Soils	Alluvial Dundee; Red-Brown, Calcareous Gamoep, Etosha, Swartland

(Source: WOSA – See Appendix B, p 84)

Interview 15:

Du Preez Estate – Hennie du Preez (winemaker)

(A personal interview was done in April 2006)

The soils on the estate are alluvial soils without a lot of nutrients or water retention. This results in a low yield, although irrigation is therefore necessary. About 18 hectares are under Merlot vines that are about eight years old. The vines are left to grow naturally and only trellised once. Tipping is only done – no topping.

In January a green harvest is done to remove unripe bunches – about 5 tons per hectare are 'dropped'. It is crucial to control irrigation from this pea-berry stage to veraison. The hot and dry conditions of 2006 meant increased irrigation. Good canopy management is essential and tipping is done about 8 times. Yellow leaves can cause the pH to drop and are therefore also removed.

Generally yields are about 9 to 10 tons per hectare. Hand picking is preferred but mechanical harvesting is also done. The grapes are picked at 24,5° Balling. Cold soaking is done pre-fermentation and the must is inoculated with yeast strains such as RG 12 and 372.

Fermentation temperature is 28°C, and once completed the young wine is left for an additional day on the husks. Malolactic fermentation is then induced at 20°C and starts after about 4 to 5 days.

The wine is then racked and the SO₂ is added before barrel-maturation. Blending is done before wood maturation. Barrel-aging is done for about 18 months to give the wine a good tannic structure.

For some vintages the wine spends less time in oak, as was the case with the 2003 vintage. About 30% American oak is used, and preferred coopers are Nadali and Seguin Moreau. A medium toast is used.

Fining is done using egg white – about one and a half per 300 litre barrel. The style that Hennie wants is spicy and more vegetative – not the overripe styles produced in New World countries that seem to sell well.

The wine should have aging potential and a good structure to be enjoyed with a good meal. Hennie sees the future of Merlot to be produced as a single variety, not as a blending partner, and that it will become the 'next big cultivar'. Hennie has had great success with his Merlot and he feels that as a variety it is 'easier than a woman – what you put in is what you get out!'

9. CONCLUSION:

It is undeniable that Merlot has developed, from rather obscure origins in Bordeaux as a blending partner for Cabernet Sauvignon, to becoming a globally significant variety.

The attention that Merlot has received has been largely due to the growth of demand and supply that developed during the 1980s in New World countries worldwide.

This demand has grown tremendously, not only for producing prestige wines but also for very easy-drinking wines that are served by the glass, especially in the United States. It is, however, interesting to note that most of the plantings are in Europe, and the biggest amount of these is in its native France.

Merlot has been called the 'red Chardonnay' and as with anything that is at one point fashionable, has had to bear the scorn of being in that position. A movie like 'Sideways' in which Pinot Noir is exalted at the expense of Merlot did not do much for its image and popularity.

One cannot, however, prescribe or dictate to people what they should drink, and Merlot is ever-popular. One of the reasons from a consumer point of view is the soft texture. Wine tasting is all about mouthfeel, and Merlot, if properly produced, has a much less astringent taste than e.g. Cabernet sauvignon. If anything, the soft, juicy, fruit-driven Cabernets that are now on the market are being made like a Merlot! When one asks someone why they like drinking Merlot, the answer is inevitably 'because it is soft.'

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From a grower's point of view, it is popular because of the early-mid season ripening especially for climates that have high rainfall, leading to the danger of rot. It can also bear prolifically if not controlled, and for a grape grower who gets paid per tonnage, this option may seem very attractive.

Most consumers, however, are not that knowledgeable when it comes to wine, and choices become more confusing with so many new suppliers entering the market. It is therefore very important to educate consumers about the Merlot variety, and having continual discussions and tastings is one way of keeping a focus on Merlot. Establishing a body like the Merlot Forum is a great way of doing just that.

Understanding the cultivation of the grape is also very important, so that a consumer realizes the challenge faced by a serious producer to make a really good Merlot, and what the distinguishing characteristics such a wine should be. This study has shown how terroir sensitive Merlot is, and how meticulously procedures have to be followed in the cellar to guarantee success.

Unfortunately, the cultivation, as we have seen, can be very erratic, as can be the consistency of the products of the many producers. This again makes Merlot appear unreliable and due to the huge amounts of poor quality produced in the late 1990's possibly resulted in people shying away from it. It can therefore in many instances not be taken seriously, and can be dismissed to its role as a grape cultivated for blending only.

There will, fortunately, always be those who are dedicated to Merlot, and commit themselves to making really top quality wines. These producers will see to it that Merlot remains a variety that IS taken seriously, and from which really excellent, easy drinking and serious wines that can last, are made.

Icon Merlots from France, such as Château Pètrus, will always be revered and command high prices, but New World creations are just as important. This is reflected in a wine such as Marilyn Merlot from Nova wines in California. Not only is the association one of voluptuousness, but also of an instantly recognizable symbol of allure, and something which has been immortalized. This to me is Merlot!

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11. APPENDICES

APPENDIX A:

QUESTIONNAIRE: MERLOT IN SOUTH AFRICA

1. When did you first plant Merlot and when was the first Merlot produced?
2. What has the demand trend been for your Merlot over the past five years? What are the future plans in terms of production?
3. In your opinion, should Merlot be used mainly for blending or as a single variety wine in South Africa?
4. What are the trends regarding Merlot from a customer demand perspective? (Please include price.)
5. When do you harvest Merlot? What viticulture practices are used beforehand? Yield per hectare?
6. Please give brief detail regarding the handling of Merlot in the cellar as well as barrel maturation.
7. How do you avoid the green character in Merlot?
8. Which South African regions, in your opinion, produce South Africa's premium Merlot and why?
9. What is the future of Merlot in South Africa?

APPENDIX B:

Reference to the Winegrowing Areas Climate Tables.

Heat Summation	Winkler Region	
Mean February Temperature	23.0° C	- very hot
	22.9 – 21.0° C	- very hot
	20.9-19° C	- warm
	18.9-17° C	- cool
	16.9° C	- cold
Continentality:	Mean Feb. Temp to Mean July Temp.	
	17.5° C	very continental
	17.4–15.0° C	continental
	14.9-12.5° C	moderately continental
	12.4-10° C	moderately maritime
	10° C	maritime
Aridity Index	Difference between 0.4 standard USA class A-pan Vaporation and seasonal rainfall (Sept – March)	
	500 mm	very arid
	499-350mm	arid
	349-200mm	moderately arid
	199mm	not arid

(Source: WOSA)

APPENDIX C:

CULTIVAR AND CLONE	OWNERSHIP OF SOURCE PLANT		JR		2 BUD SCIONS X 1000		SOURCE PLNT VIRUS		# ISEM	VITICULTURE DATA		WINE DATA		GENERAL INFORMATION	
			SEL	IMP	2006	2010	PLNT VIRUS	STATUS *				QUA LITY	REMARKS	L	LOCAL
														F	FOREIGN
MO 36 A	KWV VITITEC	1981		14	79	FREE				AVERAGE PRODUCTION AND ABOVE AVERAGE VIGOR	P3	BERRY GOOD COLOR VRIESENHOF	L	GOOD, BALANCED CLONE WITH GOOD WINE QUALITY	
MO 182 D (MO 181)	KWV VITITEC	1981		147	215	FREE	YES			AVERAGE PRODUCTION AND VIGOR	P3	BERRY	F	COMMERCIALY WIDELY PLANTED PYRAZINE LEVELS, MOST WIDELY PLANTED CLONE IN FRANCE	
MO 192	KWV VITITEC	1974		501	3	FREE				AVERAGE PRODUCTION AND VIGOR	P3 K3	BERRY/GRASS LABORIE, SIMONSIG, ALTYDGEDACHT & VRIESENHOF GOLD MEDAL, JWS	L	GOOD, BALANCED CLONE COMMERCIALY WIDELY PLANTED	
MO 314	KWV VITITEC	1987		97	0	GS3; NN3				AVERAGE PRODUCTION AND VIGOR	P3	BERRY COMPLEX FLAVOURS	F	AVERAGE PRODUCTION, LESS VIGOROUS, BALANCED WINE	
MO 343 A	KWV VITITEC	1989		1027	0	GS3				AVERAGE PRODUCTION AND VIGOR SMALLER BERRIES	P3	BERRY EXCELLENT WINE	L	GOOD, BALANCED CLONE WITH SMALLER BERRIES AND VERY GOOD WINE	
MO 346 B	KWV VITITEC	1981		521	665	FREE	YES			AVERAGE PRODUCTION AND ABOVE AVERAGE VIGOR	P3	TYPICAL	F	HIGH WINE QUALITY, LOWER PRODUCTION HIGH POLYPHENOLS, AGES WELL	
MO 348 A	KWV VITITEC	1989		2544	4365	FREE	YES			AVERAGE PRODUCTION AND VIGOR	P3 K3	BERRY VERITAS GOLD HAVANA HILLS	L	GOOD, BALANCED CLONE WITH EXCELLENT WINE	
													F	AVERAGE PRODUCTION, BIG BUNCHES, HIGH IN POLYPHENOLS, WIDELY PLANTED CLONE IN FRANCE	

MERLOT

* Virus status of nucleus plant. Virus status of material from foundation and mother blocks can't be guaranteed due to the potential of re-infection.

GS -	STEM PITTING	
VL -	FLECK	
NN -	VEIN NECROSIS	
3 -	STRONG SYMPTOMS	
2 -	MILD SYMPTOMS	
1 -	WEAK SYMPTOMS	
# ISEM	ISEM tests types I, II, III and GVA	
ABBREVIATIONS		
JR -	YEAR	
SEL -	SELECTED	
IMP -	IMPORTED	
WINEDATA		
SAJWS -	SA YOUNG WINE SHOW	
SJWS -	REGIONAL YOUNG WINE SHOW	
K -	COMMERCIAL	
P -	EXPERIMENTAL	
3 -	EXCELLENT	
2 -	GOOD	

Source: KWV Vititech

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