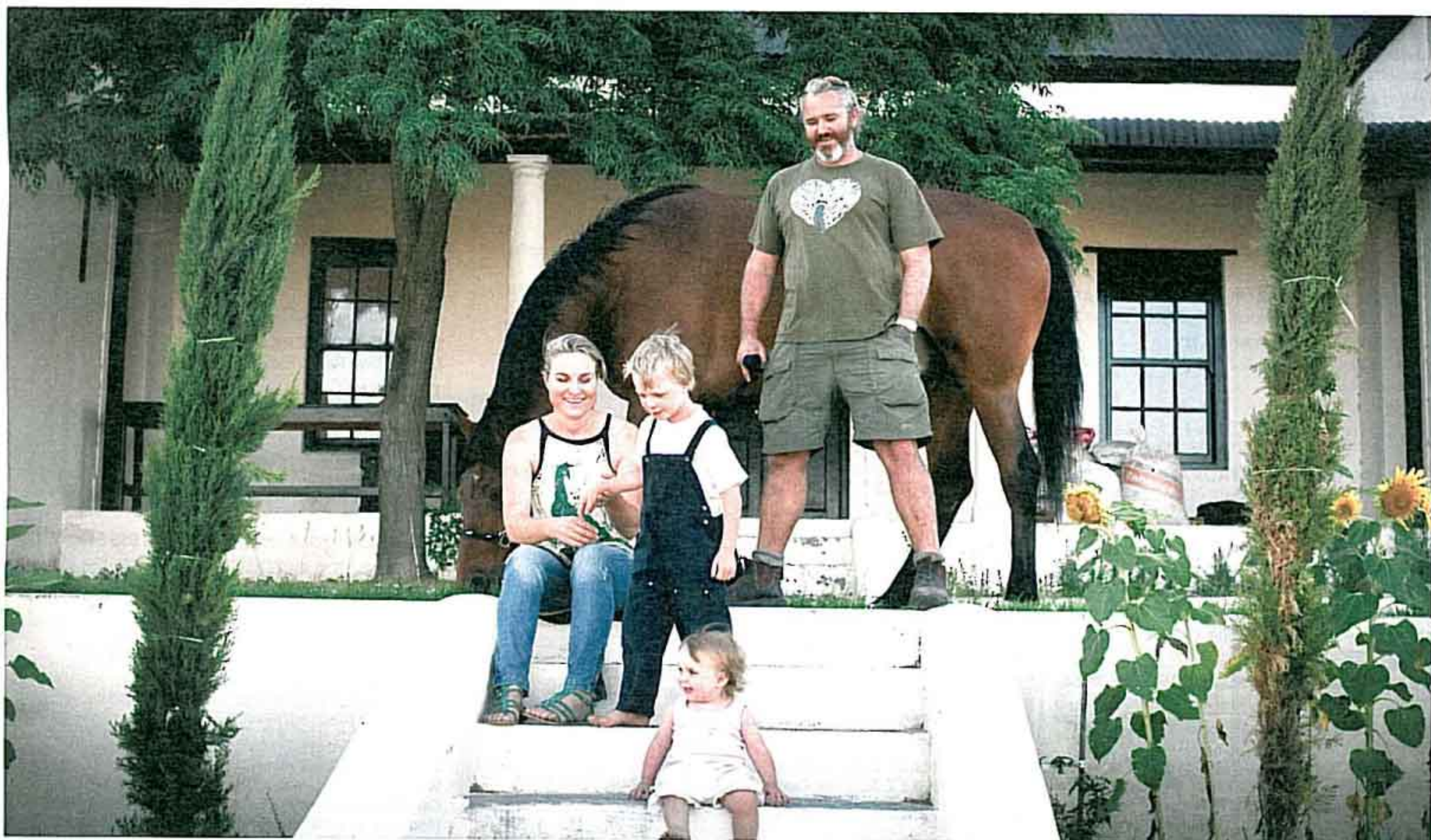


Quietly CLIMBING

QUALITY AND DIVERSITY ARE ON THE RISE, BUT SOUTH AFRICAN WINES STILL STRUGGLE FOR RECOGNITION

[BY JAMES MOLESWORTH]



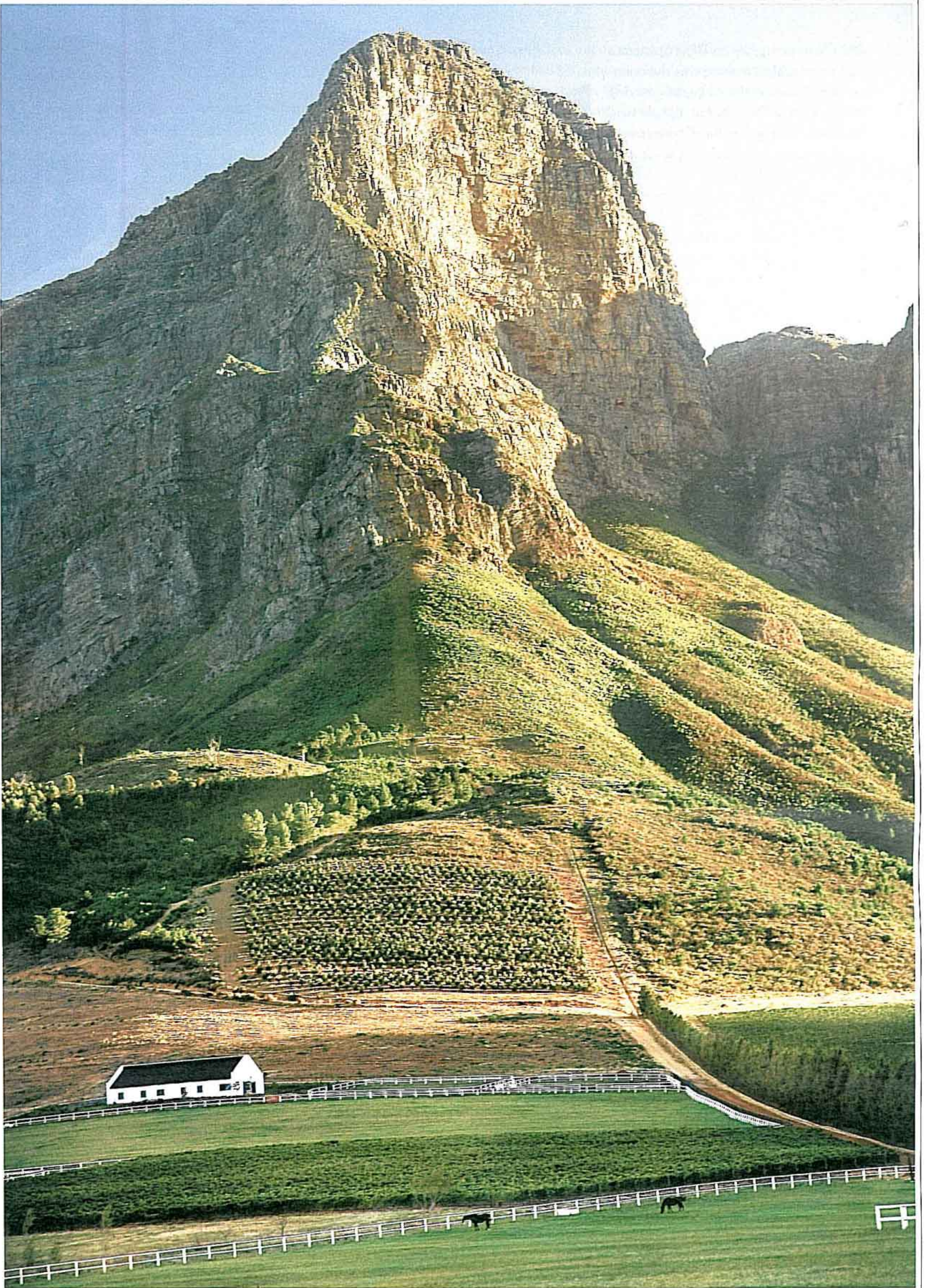
Adi Badenhorst's new Voor-Paardeberg winery (above) and the remade Franschoek estate of L'Ormarins (opposite) showcase the Cape's commitment to making outstanding wine.

Every year, South Africa takes another step toward proving itself as a world-class wine producer. But progress is more a whisper than a shout.

By any measure, quality is better than ever, with a growing number of highly rated wines in this year's annual report, including a classic-scoring bottling. Diversity is on full display too: South Africa does well with

a range of varieties, both on their own and in unique blends, and the country's winemakers continue to explore new vineyard areas. Not least, value abounds, with many bottles costing just \$20 or less.

Since my last report ("Smaller But Better," April 30, 2010), I have reviewed more than 375 South African wines. Of these, 83, or nearly one-quarter, earned outstanding ratings



(90 points or higher on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale), making this the country's best showing since I began covering its wines in 2000. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted for this report is available at www.winespectator.com/053111.)

Overall for South Africa, red wines set the pace. Leading the pack is the Sadie Family Columella Swartland 2008 (95 points, \$NA), whose rating equals the performance of the winery's '07 and '05 bottlings of the wine. To date, the Columella and the de Trafford Shiraz Stellenbosch 2007, reviewed in last year's report, share the distinction of being the only South African wines to earn classic ratings from *Wine Spectator*.

The Columella, a blend of Syrah and Mourvèdre, illustrates one good rule of thumb when you're shopping for the best South Africa has to offer: Look for Syrah and Rhône-style blends from Paarl and the emerging Swartland district.

Of the 66 Syrahs and Syrah-based reds in this report, more than one-third of them earned outstanding ratings. Other top bottlings include the Boekenhoutskloof Syrah Coastal Region 2007 (93, \$47), delivering Rhône-like mesquite, plum sauce and olive notes, and the Stark-Condé Syrah Jonkershoek Valley Three Pines 2007 (93, \$35), which provides a different profile, featuring graphite, loam and apple wood notes, with a very structured finish. Hartenberg, L'Ormarins, Rust en Vrede, Rudi Schultz, Thelema and Vins d'Orrance also produced outstanding Syrahs.

Cabernet Sauvignons and blends—many of them from the established Stellenbosch district—are the other red highlight. The MR Mvemve Raats De Compostella Stellenbosch (2007: 93, \$60),



Since the first vintage of their Mvemve Raats label in 2004, partners Mzokhona Mvemve (left) and Bruwer Raats, two of South Africa's leading winemakers, have maintained the high quality of this Cabernet Franc-based blend.

which combines Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec, Petit Verdot and Merlot, has become one of the country's most consistent high-end bottlings since debuting in 2004. Vilafonté, a joint venture among South Africa's Warwick Estate, American winemaker Zelma Long and viticulturist Phil Freese, turned in its best performance since its own debut in the '03 vintage. The estate's pair of outstanding wines are the Series C Paarl 2007 (93, \$40), a structured blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc, and the polished, more immediately accessible Series M Paarl 2007 (92, \$25), made from Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Malbec and Cabernet Franc.

The Rust en Vrede Stellenbosch 2007 (92, \$40), a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz and Merlot, continues that bottling's consistently outstanding track record. Other high quality Cabernet-based blends were made by De Toren, Glenelly, Kanonkop and L'Ormarins. Many of the best reds in this report come from 2007, a growing season that had some ups and downs, but that wound up favoring late-ripening varieties such as Cabernet.

Chenin Blanc is South Africa's leading white varietal, accompanied by lots of bracing, cool-climate Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay bottlings. There are a handful of sweet wines that are also worth tracking down.

For the country's premier white grape, the De Morgenzen Chenin Blanc Stellenbosch 2008 (91, \$30) is this report's best bottling, delivering juicy flavors of persimmon, mango and ginger that are



textbook for the variety. Chenin Blanc also does well in blends; the Mullineux Swartland White 2009 (92, \$32) weaves Chenin, Clairette, Roussanne, Viognier and Grenache Blanc into a well-defined wine, with riveting acidity driving flavors of melon, creamed peach and Jonagold apple. Ken Forrester, Miles Mossop, Mulderbosch, Raats Family and Reyneke, among others, are excellent sources for Chenin Blanc and its associated blends.

Those looking for other blue-chip white varieties can feel confident with the country's Chardonnays and Sauvignon Blancs. The Hamilton Russell Chardonnay Hemelen-Aarde Valley 2009 (92, \$32), delivering both quality and value, is at the forefront this year, with appealing versions also on offer from Bouchard Finlayson, De Wetshof, Glen Carlou and Uva Mira.

The barrel-fermented Reyneke Reserve White Stellenbosch 2009 (91, \$50) is a very stylish Sauvignon Blanc that features alluring notes of verbena, honeysuckle, straw, blanched almond and melon rind. Johan Reyneke is one of the more recent South African producers to enter the U.S. market. (To read about other newcomers worth discovering, see "Wineries to Watch," beginning on page 90.)

Other outstanding versions include the Buitenverwachting Sauvignon Blanc Constantia Husseys Vlei 2010 (90, \$20), the Neil Ellis Sauvignon Blanc Groenekloof 2009 (90, \$18) and the Southern Right Sauvignon Blanc Walker Bay 2009 (90, \$19). All three deliver crackling citrus and sea salt notes while checking in at modest prices.

Sweet wines should not be overlooked. The Klein Constantia Vin de Constance Constantia 2005 (94, \$50) is a beautiful wine made from shriveled Muscat de Frontignan grapes. The wine has improved in recent vintages since winemaker Adam Mason took charge of production in 2004. The Mullineux Straw Wine Swartland 2009 (93, \$27/375ml), made from air-dried Chenin Blanc grapes, offers lush tropical flavors.

But while South Africa's best wines are world-class and a new generation of winemakers such as Reyneke continues to swell the ranks of outstanding producers, the country still struggles for wider acceptance in the marketplace.

Despite the lofty reviews he has earned, Eben Sadie has stopped exporting his wines to the United States after struggling to gain a foothold. Other top producers, such as Kevin Grant's Ataraxia Mountain and Kevin Arnold's Waterford Estate, are also inexplicably

on the outside looking in, trying to find distribution in the States.

"We were lucky in that we were able to connect with an importer almost from the start in '08," says Adi Badenhorst, of A. A. Badenhorst Family, a new boutique winery in Voor-Paardeberg that was

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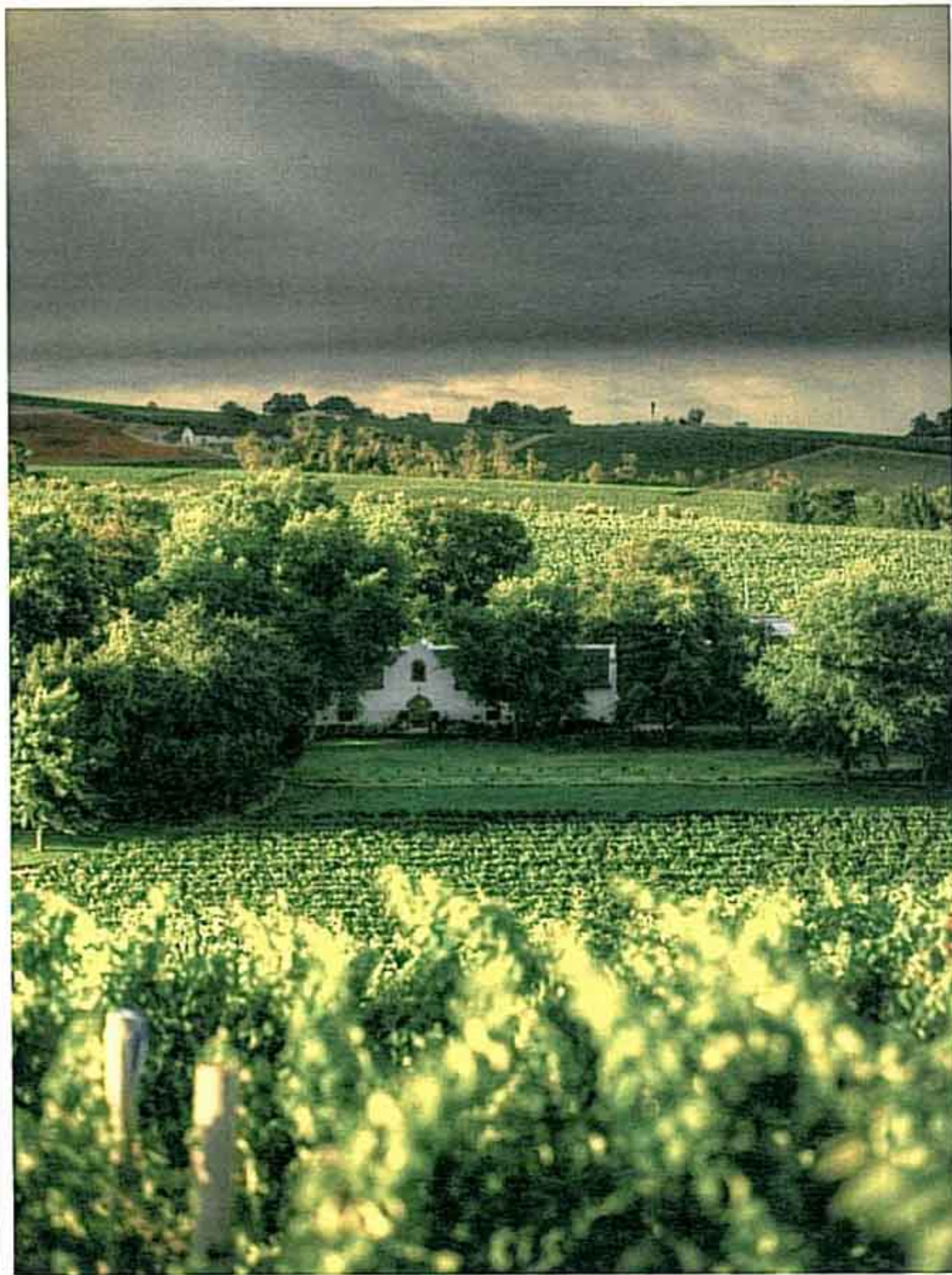
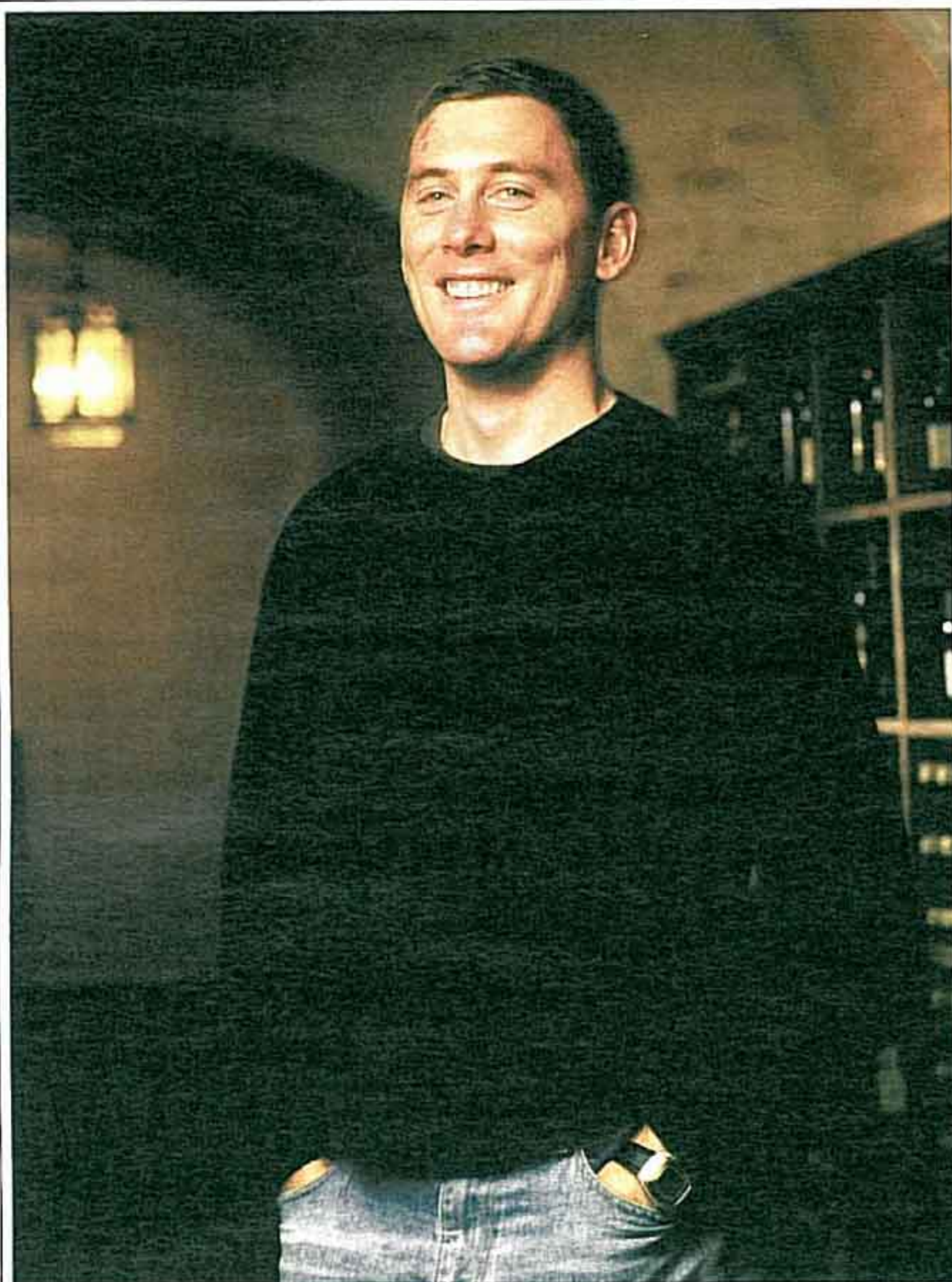
José Condé of Stark-Condé punches down the cap in vats of harvested grapes at his Jonkershoek Valley winery. Condé produced a group of outstanding Syrahs and Cabernet Sauvignons in the tricky 2007 vintage.

Rating South African Vintages

2010	84-87	Cold, wet winter resulted in late budbreak, with windy weather during flowering leading to reduced yields and a wet growing season causing some disease pressures. Late season dryness and warmth helped save vintage, but beware of inconsistencies	<i>NYR</i>
2009	91-94	Following the growing season's typical heat wave, moderate temperatures and well-timed rains extended the harvest into April and May. Very consistent for reds and whites in warm inland areas and cooler coastal spots	<i>NYR</i>
2008	87	A late flowering, wet spring and intermittent heat spikes during the growing season led to a challenging year. Vineyard management was critical for success; reds and whites have lower-than-usual alcohol levels and lighter-bodied textures	<i>Drink or hold</i>
2007	88	Up-and-down growing season marked by a heat wave in late January. Most whites and early-ripening reds (Pinot Noir, Merlot) harvested in sweltering conditions; later-ripening reds (Syrah, Cabernet) benefited from dry, moderate second half of season	<i>Drink or hold</i>
2006	90	Wet winter replenished the vines after three dry seasons. Warm, dry growing season with consistent temperatures in second half led to even ripening. All major varieties performed well	<i>Drink</i>
2005	93	Dry growing season with a hot finish. Early-ripening whites picked under cool conditions, with reduced yields; later-ripening reds are rich, tannic and muscular. Superb all-around vintage	<i>Drink or hold</i>

Note: Most South African white wines should be drunk on release, though top Chenin Blancs can develop in bottle. A score range indicates preliminary analysis based on barrel samples and/or a limited sampling; many wines of the vintage not yet reviewed.

Vintage ratings: 95-100, classic; 90-94, outstanding; 85-89, very good; 80-84, good; 75-79, mediocre; 50-74, not recommended. **Drinkability:** "NYR" means not yet released; "drink" means most of the wines of the vintage are ready to drink; "hold" means most of the ageworthy wines have yet to fully mature.



Left: Since taking the helm as Klein Constantia winemaker in 2004, Adam Mason has crafted top-rated versions of the winery's famed Vin de Constance bottling, while also instituting a program of green winemaking. Right: Rust en Vrede makes outstanding red wines at its historic Stellenbosch estate from Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz and Merlot.

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able to enter the U.S. market more easily than some of its peers.

Even successful brands have been challenged by current economic realities, including currency rates. As of press time, the South African rand stood at nearly seven rand to the dollar, one of its closest exchange rates in recent years.

"Sales are off to a good start, but the exchange rate makes things really tough," says Badenhorst. "You have to eat the margin to try and hold on to the market share that you have. It's a really tight business these days. You can't cut farming costs if you're trying to put good juice in the bottle."

But these circumstances have a silver lining for wine drinkers. As South African producers hold the line on pricing to retain customers, opportunity abounds for those looking for wines that overdeliver on quality at modest price points. All told, more than 125 wines in this report rate 85 points or better while costing only \$20 or less per bottle.

Badenhorst's Secateurs Coastal Region 2009 (89, \$15), a blend of Shiraz, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cinsault, Mourvèdre, Grenache and Carignan, and his Chenin Blanc Swartland Secateurs 2009 (88, \$15) are among the values that showcase the grapes South Africa does best. Other top values can be had from Boekenhoutskloof, De Morgenzon, De Wetshof, Neil Ellis, Finlayson Family and Simonsig.

South Africa's wine industry continues to expand—production for the 2010 harvest totaled 771.2 million liters, up from 540.2

million liters in 2000, and the country boasts more than 600 wineries, up from 355 in 2000. But despite these large increases, exports to the United States are still modest, topping just 1 million cases in 2010, according to South African Wine Industry Information & Systems, the industry-funded research organization. Ironically, much of the growth at home has been spurred by the small wineries, which have then struggled to elbow their way into the U.S. marketplace.

"The primary difficulty is the lack of a convincing presence for the category in general, with a major volume player to drive the category," says Ken Forrester. The top Chenin Blanc producer sends 30,000 cases annually to the United States, putting him in the upper echelon in terms of volume.

"For small wineries, if they send 50 cases to the U.S., that doesn't cover the cost of a plane ticket for the winemaker to come and work the market," Forrester adds. "We don't need a massive Yellow Tail type brand—look what Cloudy Bay did for New Zealand. But we do need critical mass on the volume side to help drive the category."

While South Africa's smaller wineries may be a little more difficult to track down, they offer quality and bring diversity to the country's offerings. "When we visit the U.S., we see how much great wine there is in that market that we have to compete with. It's daunting," says Badenhorst. "But I'm really positive about the future."

Senior editor James Molesworth is Wine Spectator's lead taster on South African wines.