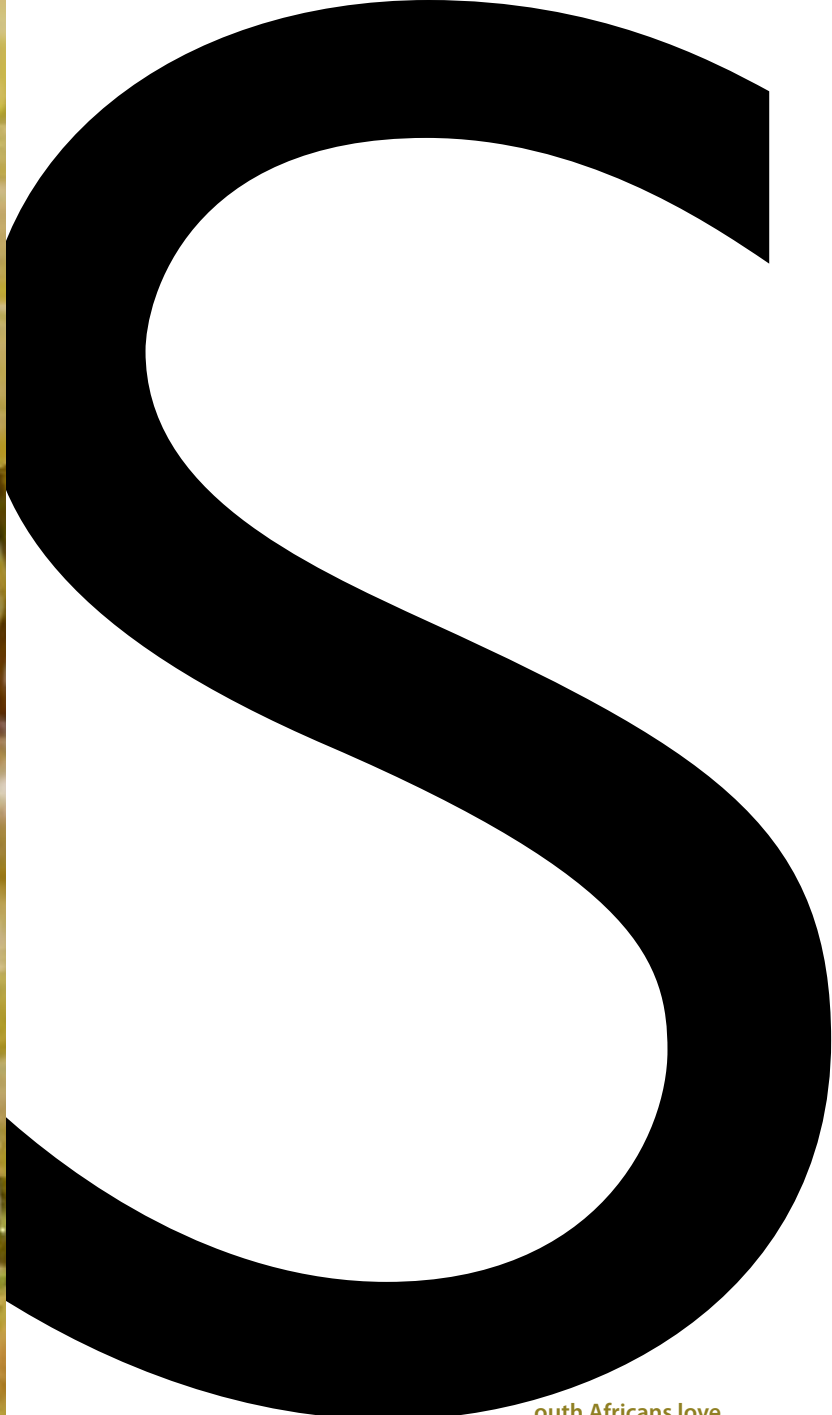


## REDISCOVERING CHARDONNAY

THE WELL-ENDOWED  
FEMME FATALE OF  
SOPHISTICATED WHITES,  
CHARDONNAY IS A WINE  
THAT ROLLS OFF THE  
TONGUE AS EASILY AS  
ITS NAME DOES

PHOTOGRAPHS **GREG COX**  
PRODUCTION **CORNELIA BADENHORST**  
TEXT **ALLAN MULLINS**



**South Africans love Sauvignon Blanc, pulling off its corks and twisting its screw caps with almost indecent haste. After all, what's not to love?** Crisp

and fresh with tangy, zesty flavours, it's the perfect thirst quencher. But increasingly, local wine drinkers are rediscovering the wine that most of the world has long considered to be the noblest of whites, Chardonnay.

If one were to compare these two great wines to women (and why not?), Sauvignon Blanc would be the young supermodel – striking, easy to admire yet lacking complexity. Chardonnay, on the other hand, would be the gracious, full-bodied, sophisticated woman, perhaps not as obviously eye-catching at first, but far more interesting and rewarding in the long run.

Chardonnay has the ability to caress the palate with her unforgettable finesse and charm. She's also the perfect companion to a surprisingly wide variety of dishes. Although most commonly paired with roast chicken and other white meats, unoaked Chardonnays pair well with more delicate fish and seafood dishes, and oaked wines perfectly complement smoked fish, rich sauces and spicy Southeast-Asian cuisine.

Surprisingly, despite the wine's wide range of styles, the Chardonnay grape itself has very little flavour, yet it knows how to capture the flavours, fragrances and nuances of its surroundings and bottle its *terroir* like no other wine. As Chardonnay devotee Johan

**“THERE'S SOMETHING WITHIN THE CHARDONNAY RANGE FOR ALMOST ANYONE WITH A LOVE OF WINE AND AN OPEN PALATE”**



Allan Mullins is one of South Africa's few Cape Wine Masters and has been Woolworths' wine selector for more than 16 years.

Kruger of Sterhuis puts it: "Chardonnay is the perfect translator of *terroir*". In other words, the subtle brush strokes of wind, earth and aspect are beautifully conveyed over the clean canvas of Chardonnay.

True to its roots in more ways than one, Chardonnay's birthplace is one of true wine nobility – the legendary Burgundy area of France. Nurtured among the rolling hills of central France and watered by the Saône and Rhône rivers, Chardonnay lived a relatively secluded existence until the early 1980s.

Venturing outside the borders of Europe, however, would catapult this unassuming grape into a dizzying new realm of fame. Chardonnay literally exploded onto the wine scene. In the United States, new Chardonnay vineyards spread from California to Connecticut and, by 1988, the number of vines planted in California alone eclipsed those of France. Other new-world wine countries were equally taken with Chardonnay's smooth finesse. From Australia to Argentina, the making of Chardonnay became a rite of passage for new and developing wine regions.

By the 1990s, Chardonnay had become the fashionable drink of choice for young urban women of the Bridget Jones ilk. Testament to this generation's love of the grape, in 2003 alone 91 British babies were named Chardonnay. Today, Chardonnay is the

## WINE

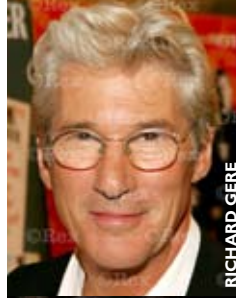
most widely planted noble white grape, with vineyards across the globe extending to more than a staggering 175 000 hectares – that's roughly the size of Mauritius.

Notwithstanding the rest of the world's infatuation with the grape, South Africa and Chardonnay have endured a somewhat rocky relationship. To begin with, its entry into South Africa's wine farms was superseded by an impostor.

Chardonnay first made its way to our shores and wine makers in the early 1980s – or so we thought. In fact, the grapes that were sent to South Africa proved to be the very mediocre Auxerrois variety, but it would take a few years before anyone uncovered the truth. These inferior grapes were planted and harvested, and their wine sold as Chardonnay. Despite the flood of average wines that was produced as a result, there were some startling exceptions – unbelievably, De Wet's "impostor" Chardonnay, for instance, won the prize for best Chardonnay at the international WinExpo in 1987.

Even after the charlatan was exposed and the real Chardonnay took its place in our vineyards, most Chardonnays made in South Africa accrued more bad press for being overwooded. Twenty years on, however, as vineyards have matured and their oak barrels mellowed, overoaked wines have become rare. In their place, you'll find wines with balance, elegance and intrigue.

In Robertson, Stellenbosch, Paarl, Walker Bay and, most excitingly, in pristine new areas, Chardonnay seems to be finding a home away from home, a second Burgundy. And we're producing some exceptional wines as a result. From unwooded, younger wines to oaked vintages with great ageing potential, there's something within the Chardonnay range for almost anyone with a love of wine and an open palate. **W**



RICHARD GERE



JOHNNY DEPP



KATHERINE HEIGL



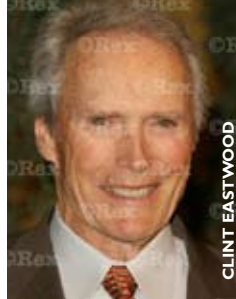
CHARLIZE THERON



SEAN CONNERY



MERYL STREEP



CLINT EASTWOOD

**WITH THE RECENT OSCARS IN MIND, ALLAN PRESENTS HIS GOLDEN GOBLET AWARDS:**

### BEST ROMANTIC ROLE

**1.** Waterford Estate Chardonnay

Star match: Richard Gere

Lithe and fresh, yet not lacking panache, this Chardonnay sells out almost on release. It will enhance any romantic tête-à-tête and, like any good relationship, gets better with age.

### BEST DRAMATIC PERFORMANCE

**2.** Sterhuis Barrel Selection Chardonnay

Star match: Johnny Depp

Rich and textured with layers of fruit and French oak, the Barrel Selection Chardonnay really is in a league of its own.

### MOST PROMISING NEWCOMER

**3.** Ataraxia Mountain Vineyards Chardonnay

Star match: Katherine Heigl

When it was released, this Chardonnay created waves both locally and internationally, and, almost overnight, became a collector's item.

### BEST SUPPORTING ROLE

**4.** Bouchard Finlayson Missionvale Chardonnay

Star match: Charlize Theron

Walker Bay wine maker Peter Finlayson caresses his Chardonnays to a peak that rivals his spectacular Pinot Noirs. Each has individual appeal, but the Missionvale 2006 has a particular affinity for food, playing to perfection the supporting role to fresh seafood.

### LIFETIME-ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS

**5.** Rustenberg Winery (Simon Barlow)

Star match: Sean Connery

If any South African producer could claim royalty status, it would surely be Stellenbosch's Rustenberg. The Brampton Unoaked Chardonnay, Stellenbosch Regional Chardonnay and top-of-range Five Soldiers are all examples of Cape Chardonnay at its best.

**6.** Hamilton Russell Vineyards (Anthony Hamilton Russell)

Star match: Meryl Streep

Hamilton Russell Vineyards can rightly lay claim to having been the benchmark for South African Chardonnay and Pinot Noir for more than 20 years. Constantly focused on ongoing improvement, their wines have gained international acclaim, with the Chardonnay often being likened to Burgundy's best.

**7.** De Wetshof Estate (Danie de Wet)

Star match: Clint Eastwood

Few would argue that Danie De Wet has fully utilised his limestone-rich Robertson soils to lead the development of Chardonnay in South Africa. Both his wooded and unwooded Chardonnays have set standards locally, as well as being the standard bearers for South African Chardonnay internationally. His flagship Chardonnay is the majestic Bateleur.