

TRAVEL

WINE FLIGHT

The Swartland Secret Innovative wines and a stunning landscape are two reasons to visit one of South Africa's most exciting wine regions.

By Mary Holland

Paardeberg mountain overlooks the Swartland, where, despite a harsh, dry climate, hardy grapes are able to thrive to create powerful, unique wines.

PHOTOGRAPHY: OBIE OBERHOLZER/LAIF/REDUX

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65



IT'S A SCORCHING DAY in the Swartland in early January—104°F, one of the hottest of the year—but winemaker Adi Badenhorst isn't troubled by the heat. "I love this weather," he roars over the blues music pounding through the cellar at his winery. A few minutes later, sipping an espresso as we both seek refuge in the barrel room, sweat dripping from our brows, he adds: "It's challenging to farm here. It's dry, hot; the yields are low, but you can make wine with immense character."

The Swartland (from the Afrikaans for "black land," due to the native rhinoceros bush that covers the landscape and turns black after rain) is located about an hour north of Cape Town. It's more low-key than the Cape's better-known wine regions, like Stellenbosch, but has gained recognition in recent times not only for its concentrated old-vine Chenin Blanc but also for a growing contingent of charismatic, independent winemakers producing innovative natural wines (mostly textured Chenins and Rhône varietals). One of the advantages of the brutally hot conditions is an absence of pests, minimizing the need for chemicals and pesticides—ideal for natural winemaking. "The terrific climate means there's very little disease pressure," says Andrea Mullineux, winemaker at Mullineux & Leeu, whose expressive wines are a part of this new scene.

The area—a dramatic landscape of undulating flaxen hills lined with wheat fields and tangled vineyards punctuated by the jagged Paardeberg mountain—has also gained popularity as a weekend destination for Capetonians. The region's anchor town of Riebeek Kasteel in the Riebeek Valley dates back to the early 1900s. Its quiet streets are flanked with beautifully restored cream-toned Victorian buildings that house art galleries and antique shops, and visitors come to taste wine and olive oil at specialty stores like The Wine Kollektive and Olive Boutique. (The Swartland is one of the top olive-producing regions in South Africa.) In the evenings, when it's often cool enough for a light, long-sleeved shirt, diners crowd the broad veranda at The Royal Hotel for icy gin and tonics in oversized glasses.

It's in the past 15 years that the region and its wines have really garnered acclaim, as much for perfecting old-vine Chenin Blanc as for the willingness of the region's mavericks to experiment with lesser-known varietals like Cinsaut and Pinot Gris. "A lot of the individuals here are characters—self-made with self-made wines—who you wouldn't find anywhere else in the world," says founder of The Sadie Family Wines Eben Sadie, one of the first independent winemakers to move here in 1997.



Swartland winemakers like Adi Badenhorst, Andrea and Chris Mullineux from Mullineux & Leeu, and Callie Louw of Porseleinberg follow a core set of values—wine is made with minimal manipulation and is vinified, bottled, and aged within the region—and they are largely responsible for revolutionizing wine in the Swartland. Badenhorst notes that the winemakers, who are all friends, foster a good community. "What's important is the diversity and individuality of producers. [These days] there's no barrier to entry. You can get a barrel from a friend and make wine."

It's this convivial environment that makes the Swartland an ideal place for young winemakers to get a foothold in the industry—even if they can't afford to buy land, they can still set up a winery and purchase grapes from nearby farms. Plus, the established winemakers are quick to promote the next



generation, like Jurgen Gouws of Intellego, Lucinda Heyns of Illimis, Jolandie Fouché of Wolf & Woman, and Jasper Wickens, who has been producing his label Swerwer since 2012. Wickens was the assistant winemaker at A.A. Badenhorst and recently moved his brand to a small cellar on his father-in-law's grape farm, along with some barrels on loan from Badenhorst.

I find him one sweltering afternoon at the winery, which borders a scrubby nature reserve. He springs up from cleaning a tank, dusts his hands off, and leads me into his cellar to cool off and try his Chenin Blanc. Over sips of wine that are heavy with notes of peach and dried grass, he tells me that he was drawn here because of the unpretentious vibe and experimental wines. "The Swartland was one of the first places to push boundaries," he says. "And the folks here also happen to be making the best wine in the country."

OPPOSITE: The Wine Collective in Riebeek Kasteel is a great place to taste and buy local wines.

ABOVE: You can stay adjacent to the private Elandsberg Nature Reserve.

WHERE TO TASTE

Most of the wineries are located along dirt roads, so it's advisable to rent a 4x4 in order to get around easily. Tastings are available by appointment only, but if you call ahead, they'll gladly welcome you.

SWERWER

Winemaker Jasper Wickens has been touted as one of the area's best emerging winemakers. He produces a textured Chenin Blanc in granite soil and a red blend of Cinsaut, Grenache, and Tinta Barocca. facebook.com/swerwerwine

A.A. BADENHORST FAMILY WINES

Adi Badenhorst has three ranges of wines: a white blend and red blend under the basic A.A. Badenhorst label, Secateurs (Chenin Blanc, Rosé, and a red blend), and his premium single-vineyard wines. The farm also doubles as a venue and guest house with accommodation in a winemaker's cottage, silo, and stables with private pools. aabadenhorst.com

MULLINEUX & LEEU

Winemakers Andrea and Chris Mullineux have racked up a number of accolades for their range of wines from granite- and shale-based soils. Roundstone Farm is their base, where they grow Syrah, Grenache Blanc, and Viognier, as well as old-vine Clairette Blanche, Chenin Blanc, and Cinsaut. mlfwines.com

PORSELEINBERG

There is only one style of wine under the Porseleinberg label, a silky Syrah with a cult following. Winemaker Callie Louw produces a mere 24,000 bottles a year, independent from the fruit he farms here for the Boekenhoutsbloof winery. porseleinberg.com

THE SADIE FAMILY WINES

Considered one of the most visionary winemakers in the country, Eben Sadie produces globally award-winning wines. Sadie's flagship Columella, a complex red blend with spicy and earthy undertones, and Palladius, a fresh and herbaceous white blend, are two of his most desired. thesadiefamily.com

EAT, DRINK, AND EXPLORE

THE ROYAL HOTEL

Diners sit sipping G&Ts on the wide veranda of this grand hotel while gazing through high arches onto the street. One of South Africa's oldest hotels includes luxury accommodation. royalinriebeek.com

BILL&CO.

Owned by David and Johann Sadie in the neighboring town of Malmesbury, this wine shop, wine bar, kitchen, and bakery springs to life every second Saturday with a local farmers market. billandco.org.za

THE WINE KOLLECTIVE

This eclectic little wine store in a colorful cottage opposite The Royal Hotel sells wines at cellar door prices. It's a great spot to taste if you didn't get an appointment at one of the wineries. thewinekollektive.co.za

OLIVE BOUTIQUE

The boutique sources olives from small, local growers and presses them to make oils, as well as tapenade, mustard, and a range of natural beauty products. olive-boutique.co.za

RIEBEEK VALLEY TOURS

Specializing in tours of nearby wineries, restaurants, and landmarks like Kasteelberg mountain, RVT also delves into the troubled history of the region, which did not escape the effects of apartheid. goodintentconnections.co.za

RIEBEEK VALLEY MUSEUM

While Riebeek Kasteel was established in the early 1900s, the area has a deeper history. Tools and rock art have been uncovered from the Stone Age, and the Dutch colonized the area in the 1600s. riebeek-valley.com/riebeekvalley-museum

WHERE TO STAY

BARTHOLOMEUS KLIP

On the outskirts of Riebeek Kasteel, this splendid farmhouse-turned-guesthouse is located on a private nature reserve where zebra and eland roam. Guests can book one of the four rooms in the charming main house, the outdoor suite, or one of two gorgeously appointed self-catered farm-stay cottages. Dinner is served in the conservatory. (Rooms from \$290, bartholomeusklip.com)

THREE BOTTLES TO TRY NOW

Even if you can't travel to the Swartland, many of the wines can be found in wine shops here in the States and are worth tracking down.

—RAY ISLE

2018 BADENHORST FAMILY WINES SECATEURS RED (\$18)

Adi Badenhorst, one of the initial wave of Swartland winemakers, makes affordable wines—like this peppery, Cinsaut-based red—under the Secateurs label.

2019 MULLINEAUX OLD VINES WHITE (\$34)

Chris and Andrea Mullineaux blend old-vine Chenin Blanc with Grenache Blanc, Viognier, Clairette Blanche, Sémillon Gris, and others for this pear- and honeysuckle-scented white.

2018 THE SADIE FAMILY WINES TREINSPoor (\$88)

Eben Sadie's wines have become some of South Africa's most sought-after wines. He makes this intense, brooding red from the unusual Portuguese variety Tinta Barroca.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Adi Badenhorst tends to his vines; stay at one of the stunning cottages at Bartholomeus Klip; the Swartland is known for its olive production.



PHOTOGRAPHY (CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT): MAREE LOUW (2), DANA ALLEN COURTESY BARTHOLOMEUS KLIP