

CLASSIC WINES: ROSÉ



THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

Within these top three 4-Star Rosé wines, it is clear that what counts is the intention and focus from the very outset. As winemakers take the category more seriously, **Cathryn Henderson** considers the knock-on effect this may have on wine-lovers.



ABOVE: The iconic cellar design of Dornier – with no boundaries between the vineyard and the winery, the same people get involved on both sides of the winemaking process.

BELOW: Vondeling Wines, with a three-centuries-old winemaking tradition dating back to the early 1700s, and a modern focus on sustainable cultivation and protection of fynbos with BWI.



LEFT: Vondeling has a strong focus on conservation and protection of its fynbos. RIGHT: The patio at Vondeling – the tasting room was also recently renovated.



A good Rosé has always tickled me pink, but generally seems to leave local wine-drinkers with a fairly lacklustre impression. From the stellar examples in the Top Six, a clear theme was quick to emerge from the winemakers who described what they felt was the success factor behind their approach. It's simply that this type of wine ought to be treated as a separate category with its own style and structure from the very beginning of the process, and not the result of rejigging surplus juice, for example. A lack of interest in Rosé or the view that it's 'just not a serious wine' is the hangover as a result of those days of sweet pinks. As the focus is now on a dry style – similar to that of Provence – a resulting shift in attention and appreciation from wine-lovers is hopefully sure to follow.

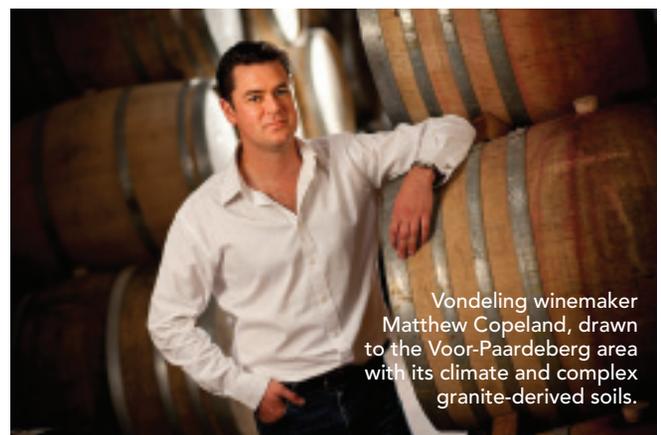
MADE WITH MERLOT Vondeling's victory with Rosé

Allured by what he saw as the many opportunities to be found in South Africa, proprietor Julian Johnsen moved here from England in 1990. Initially, he bought a small farm in the Bovlei 'on a wing and a prayer', later sold it, and then came upon the Paardeberg in about 2000. Julian was completely taken with the Vondeling farm, and after driving his wife to the top of a hill with views of the surrounds and sea, she simply said, 'We've got to buy this!' They put in what he says was a 'ridiculous' offer to buy the land, which was, in fact, accepted. His idea was to try to get investors involved – so with a similar strategy, in 2001 he drove English friends Anthony Ward and Richard Gower to the same viewpoint he had shared with his wife, and by the time they got to the top of the hill (some déjà vu), they simply said, 'We're in!'

After Mandela's release, South Africa held a further attraction, despite the remaining risks involved. 'But with risk, there was good value, and this really gave us a chance to get such a venture off the ground.'

Julian had spent some time in Provence and grew up around good-quality Rosé. He says, 'We've done well with the climate here and our winemaker Matthew Copeland has proved really adept at making our Rosé, so we've seen tremendous success... it is in fact our top seller in the UK.'

Matthew goes on to explain that Vondeling has something of a different approach to Rosé. It was made in response to a rather large demand in the UK market where sales for this wine are on the rise. 'Rosé doesn't have the bad rap there that it seems to have in SA. The areas in the south of France have traditionally made Rosé that is dry and spicy, and that's a long legacy that the UK has tapped into and enjoyed. The dry style is preferred, so we've met this for a few years. Once we felt we had the technique, flavour and aroma profile in the right balance, we decided to release some into South Africa. The reason why we think it is doing well is the fact that ours is a dry wine, made from red grapes with a red fruit profile and some spice, rather than taking white wine and adding a little bit of colour.'



Vondeling winemaker Matthew Copeland, drawn to the Voor-Paardeberg area with its climate and complex granite-derived soils.



In the past, some local Rosés were “dumbed down” and quite sweet in the sense of being very fruity but lacking in complexity – not really refreshing.’

Matthew is so confident that perceptions will change locally that next year they are going to produce a second Rosé at a higher price point on par with that of quality Sauvignons and Chardonnays. ‘I am going to make it with the classic five Bordeaux varieties grown on the farm and it will have spent some time in old barrels and will be a proper, serious wine,’ he says. ‘Rosé does have a hint of structure from the red grapes and a little tannin which helps to preserve it, and if you ferment in oak and leave it on the lees, it will have palate-weight and fullness and will keep like any good white wine that is treated in such a way. We’ll probably release this next summer.’

For the Rosé featured here, they tried using Shiraz for one year, but it was quite difficult to extract the right juice, and then experimented with Pinotage, hoping it would give something like a light Pinot Noir. ‘Pinotage gives its colour generously, which you have to be careful of, and we didn’t want too much “blue” fruit.

Above: Vondeling cellar.
Below: Winemaker
Jeanine Faure in
the Dornier vineyards.



Then we tried Merlot and that tended to give us the slight bit of spice that we were looking for. We wanted a hint of pepperiness with good red fruit.’

All the grapes come from the farm; Vondeling functions as an estate. Matthew has been there since 2007 coming from Welbedacht, and was attracted to the Paardeberg: ‘Our location here with its warm climate and lovely granite soils adds great vibrancy.’

Also quite the music fan, he says, ‘About this time of year, when we are constantly in the cellar, there is music playing the whole time. It starts off slowly, then when we run out of energy it gets more vibrant with hard rock and heavy metal, and over time moves into classical music when nerves become frayed!’

Vondeling’s flagship wines, Babiana and Erica, are named in honour of two fynbos species, a nod to the focus on conservation. Vondeling has just been awarded Biodiversity and Wine Initiative (BWI) Championship status – with about 200ha of the 330ha farm allocated for conservation and the implementing of an ecological management plan.

Another reason for elation this year is the release of Methodé Ancestral, a Champagne-style wine but made in a single-ferment process – a technique used in the Languedoc. Set for degorging in late March, watch this space...

Dornier’s restaurant Rosé

With the conversion of former fruit and cattle farms from 1995 onwards, 180ha is now dedicated to the wine estate, also one of the first estates with international investors who saw the potential of South African wine production after the first free elections. Dornier has a rich history, including that of Keerweder, acquired by Jac van Dyk in 1694. Later, Christoph Dornier was often ahead of his time and worked for 14 years on a winemaking vision – the younger generation is now at the helm, with son Raphael. Today, like Vondeling, Dornier also happens to be a BWI member since 2006.

Visitors to the estate are not only drawn to the three ranges of wines, Donatus, Dornier Stellenbosch and Coco Hill, but also to its restaurant Bodega. In fact, the Coco Hill Rosé was made in response to the needs of a restaurant. Winemaker Jeanine Faure describes how this style of wine is such a fabulous summertime friend, and how versatile it can be when it comes to food pairing.