

# Dismissing the elephant in the room

## The 'Kumala effect' may have caused a South African slump in Britain, but everywhere else wines from the Cape are on the rise

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LONDON — With apartheid sanctions a fading memory and investments pouring in, South Africa's 350-year-old wine industry is enjoying an impressive renaissance. That much was palpable - and palatable - at a sprawling Cape wines expo held here this month.

The most conspicuous trend that emerged at the aptly named Mega Tasting was the progress of South Africa's red wines, historically not the country's strong suit. I tasted dozens of impressively balanced cabernet sauvignons and shirazes in particular that tended to combine the crowd-pleasing fruitiness of New World reds with the prized earthiness of their European counterparts - all without the overly smoky quality that has historically marred many South African reds.

But the mood wasn't entirely upbeat at the tasting, held every two years for the benefit of the Cape wine region's biggest export market. That's because along with a display of 2,000 wines from 250 producers, there was an elephant in the room, figuratively speaking. Everywhere one turned at the Earls Court convention centre, it seemed people were wondering whether South Africa could recover from the dreaded "Kumala effect."

If you know your bargain wine brands, you know Kumala. Created 12 years ago by British distributor Western Wines, it tapped the Australian critter-label trend with a logo featuring a gecko (many Britons still believe Kumala is Australian, apparently) and became a runaway success, shooting to No. 1 on South Africa's export charts. At its height two years ago, it accounted for almost 30 per cent of South Africa's wine volume shipments to Britain.

Then the gecko lost its footing. Bought in 2004 by Mississauga-based Vincor, which expanded the brand across Canada and elsewhere, Kumala's prices started to rise just as quality appeared to many consumers to be heading south. Along came U.S. giant Constellation in 2006, which gobbled up Vincor in an unsolicited takeover, further eroding confidence in the brand among British retailers. It didn't help that the strong South African rand kept putting pressure on the bean counters to raise prices.

The result had few parallels in the modern wine industry. A single brand in a single export market quickly unsettled an entire region's wine industry. Over the past two years, sales of Kumala in Britain plunged by about 850,000 cases. They now account for closer

to 20 per cent of the South African category. Because of the Kumala effect, other brands suffered collateral damage, with the whole South African category last year dropping about 11 per cent in dollar terms compared with 2005. As Ben Grant, a writer for London-based Drinks Business magazine, put it in a recent article, "When Kumala sneezes, the entire Cape catches a cold."

Adding insult, that other southern hemisphere bargain upstart, Chile, has been competing aggressively for space on the discount shelves of Britain's huge supermarket chains and is poised this year to take over from South Africa as the region's fifth-biggest wine supplier.

So much for the bad news. Despite the British slump, Cape wines have in fact been on a tear in much of continental Europe, the Far East, the United States and, not least, Canada. In the 12-month period ending June 30, South African wine sales by volume were up 23 per cent across the country from the year-earlier period. By far the strongest gains were among red wines. And in Quebec, where South Africa is on fire, sales were up 75 per cent in the same period.

The reasons: perceived value and crowd-pleasing wine styles that have benefited from new technology and better vineyard care.

Before apartheid, South Africa was perhaps best known in this country for brandy. As it emerged from that dark past, it shot out of the gate mainly with cheap white wines, notably a whole lot of thin, tart chenin blancs produced in bulk by large co-operatives. The big red wine at the time was pinotage, a South African cross between pinot noir and cinsault, which occasionally rose to satisfying heights but in most cases delivered an overly smoky, rubbery note and gritty texture best described as an acquired taste.

Today, a host of new boutique, quality-oriented producers are crafting wines from new vineyards planted with globally popular varieties, such as chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, cabernet sauvignon and shiraz.

Some of the standout producers of cabernet sauvignon at the Mega Tasting included Hartenberg Estate, Iona, Meerlust, Mont Destin, Neil Ellis, Spice Route, Kloovenburg and the mellifluously named Boekenhoutskloof. They're hard to find in most provinces most of the time because production quantities are small, but they are names to keep in mind.

For South African shiraz (also called syrah), be on the lookout for Fairview, The Foundry, Mont Destin, Neil Ellis, Newton Johnson, Sadie Family and Spice Route.

Impressive reds notwithstanding, I remain a slightly bigger fan of South African white wines. The best chardonnays, in particular, tend to offer excellent value, often showing opulent fruit and a pleasing roundness without the conspicuous oak character of many New World competitors from Australia or California. Good chardonnay producers to keep in mind, include Bouchard Finlayson, Glen Carlou, Hamilton Russell, Jordan, Rustenberg, Springfield Estate, Thelema and Vergelegen.

And arguably the grape that still best reflects South Africa's varied microclimates and soils is sauvignon blanc. Each region has its own nuances, but I'm a big fan of the basic South African profile, which often captures, in one glass, the tropical-fruit lushness of New Zealand with the classic, earthy-mineral character of France's Loire Valley.

Among the best at the show: Iona, Jordan, Spice Route, Springfield Estate and Waterford.

And if you're looking for value, Kumala happens to make a nice sauvignon blanc as well.

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### **The best buys from South Africa**

#### **TODAY'S BARGAINS**

Available in some provinces; all prices Ontario.

#### **Flat Roof Manor Cabernet Sauvignon/Sangiovese 2005**

Juicy blackberry, dark chocolate, fine tannins and slightly smoky. \$13.95

#### **Golden Kaan Merlot 2004**

Superb value. Medium-bodied, juicy and cherry-like. \$10.95

#### **Porcupine Ridge Syrah 2006**

Huge value. Blackberry, pepper and a tight finish. \$14.95

#### **Raka Spliced 2003**

Ripe and luscious, slightly smoky and spicy. \$17.95

#### **Robertson Winery Shiraz 2005**

Soft, round, cherry-like and silky. \$12.15

#### **TOMORROW'S CLASSICS**

Most not yet available in Canada; call the importers for information on availability.

#### **Boekenhoutskloof**

#### **Cabernet Sauvignon 2004**

Big and bracing, firm tannins. Seductive blackberry and cigar box. (RKW Wine Imports, 905-569-6115)

**Fairview The Beacon Shiraz 2004**

Huge and warm, concentrated. Plum, blackberry, cherry liqueur. (RKW Wine Imports, 905-569-6115)

**Glen Carlou Grand**

**Classique 2004**

Big, creamy, luscious, notes of cigar box and black pepper. (Lamprecht International, 416-421-3908)

**Hartenberg Estate The Mackenzie 2005**

Voluptuous and creamy. Plum, chocolate, vanilla and smoke. Fine tannins. (Hobbs & Co. Wine Merchants, 416-694-3689)

**Hidden Valley Shiraz 2005**

Rhône-like, firm. Notes of licorice and game. (Lifford Wine Agency, 416-440-4101)

**Iona Sauvignon Blanc 2007**

One of South Africa's best white wines. Light, clean and peachy. Long finish. (Wineworld Importers and Exporters, 416-487-7147)

**Kloovenburg Shiraz 2005**

Chunky and luscious. Big dark fruit and smooth vanilla. Double-gold-award winner in South Africa. (Excess Wines, 403-229-4160)

**Meerlust Rubicon 2003**

Bordeaux blend. Dark chocolate, great structure, herbal notes and fine, dry tannins. (Lifford Wine Agency, 416-440-4101)

**Nederburg Manor House Shiraz 2005**

Soft texture. Good concentration. (Mark Anthony Brands, 647-428-3123)

**Newton Johnson Syrah Mourvedre 2005**

Rich plum and cigar. Hint of herbs, licorice and smoke. (MCO, 905-562-1392)

**Springfield Estate Life From Stone Sauvignon Blanc 2007**

Superb. Concentrated, tropical gooseberry fruit. Hints of grass and gun smoke. Silky.  
(Lifford Wine Agency, 416-440-4101)

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