



## Alternative wine flight: Building diversity in the vineyard

Graham Howe

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*Graham Howe tastes some of the warm climate varieties which are building diversity in the South African vineyard - and coming to fruition in big new red blends perfect for winter.*

I enjoyed Adegas Eidos Albarino, billed as the new star of Spanish and Portuguese white varieties (where it is known as Alvarinho in Vinho Verde country), high over the Atlantic on a British Airways flight en route to Florida. The signature floral aromas, tangy citrus and peach flavours, and crisp, dry finish took me travelling to its source far below, a family winery in Rias Baixas on the coast of Galicia - proximity to the sea seems to impart a salty nuance to the wine. Albarino is now planted at **Newton Johnson** Vineyards in the Hemel-en-Aarde Valley - described as "a textbook example showing its huge potential in the Cape's moderate climate vineyards" according to renowned sommelier Miguel Chan - as well as Malvasia at Ayama.

I moved onto a superb glass of Montecillo Gran Reserva 2008, sourced from old vineyards in the Rioja Alta region, a winery which has been making superb Rioja since 1874. I was delighted to spot the Albarino and Rioja sharing equal billing on the British Airways wine-list with Alexanderfontein's "Chip off the Old Block" Sauvignon Blanc 2014 from Theo Basson at Ormonde Cellar - as well as **Zonnebloem** Laureat 2012. The roasted black fruit flavours of this full-flavoured, full-bodied Rioja reminded me of recent tastings I attended of alternative varieties in the Cape with key producers of Tempranillo (aka as Tinta Roriz in Portugal) - the signature grape blended into Rioja with Grenache - as well as Touriga Nacional and Tinta Francesca.

Talk about a wine flight. Travel expands the mind as well as the waist. Whiling away the trans-Atlantic flight on these Iberian varieties took me from Rioja to Darling to Calitzdorp. "Tinta Roriz is an amazing variety with good colour, perfume, fruit, flavour and acidity declared winemaker Louis van der Riet at the annual release of new vintages by **De Krans**. We moved onto his Touriga Nacional 2013, the most planted Portuguese variety at De Krans - a wine that creates the tannic backbone and dusty, herbal signature of their award-winning ports and Portuguese-varietal wines.

De Krans has pioneered many alternative varieties in South Africa - releasing the first single varietal Tinta Barocca in 1979, the first local Touriga Nacional in 2000, the first Tempranillo (now labelled Tinta Roriz) in 2002, and lately, Tritonia, a three-way Calitzdorp blend made from Portuguese varieties named one of the top 100 wines made in South Africa.

Winery owner Boets Nel says, “This blend does justice to Touriga Nacional. The trick is not to use new oak on these varieties - It takes away their character. The challenge is to get consumers to buy these wines. We export 80% to Scandinavia - and the rest goes to local restaurants. No-one buys it off the shelf. The face of De Krans is port”. The tasting at Planet at The Mount Nelson ended with a vertical flight of De Krans vintage ports since 1999 paired to chef Rudi Liebenberg’s sublime winter menu.

De Krans also unveiled their new vintage MCC 2013 blended from Chardonnay, Chenin Blanc and Tinta Barocca - one of few examples of bottle-fermented sparkling wine made using this Portuguese variety. After eighteen months on its lees, Louis says the MCC retains the fruit and secondary flavours of all three varieties, combining the candyfloss and sherbert flavours of Tinta Barocca, the green apple and minerality of Chardonnay with the fullness and texture of Chenin Blanc. Unveiling the new elegant, classic look of their port bottles, Boets advises sommeliers and restaurateurs, “We’re serious about port. Our Premium Cape Ruby is a new brand in a new bottle - not just another ruby port. You should drink port within two weeks of opening. People will never drink port again if it’s left opened on the shelf for months.”

When Calitzdorp comes to town, it does so in style. A month later, **Boplaas** held a tasting of their annual new releases at Dear Me, a rising star of the Cape culinary scene. It was a delightful family affair hosted by Carel Nel and his wife with daughters Margaux (winemaker) and Rozanne (marketing and sales). Over 70% of the this specialist port and Portuguese wine producer is devoted to plantings of six Portuguese grape varieties - with more Tinta Barocca, Francesca and Touriga Nacional sourced from vineyards from Wellington to the Swartland for best-selling blends like Woolworths The Portuguese Connection - and for their own Portuguese Collection (white and red blends as well as Touriga Nacional and Tinta Barocca).

Selling alternative varieties starts at home for Boplaas. Carel Nel explains, “Demand for niche varieties is growing all over the world. Portuguese table wines make lovely food wines. The trick is not to over-oak these varieties. Woolworths is listing our Tinta Barocca, and Checkers is opening up markets in Angola and Mozambique. The best place to sell wine is from the farm. We sell 75% of our wines at our two tasting rooms in Calitzdorp and Mossel Bay - and will shortly open in Dullstroom, Gauteng.”

Over a fascinating tasting of Boplaas ports and Portuguese varietal wines, Rozanne Nel takes up the story: “Wines like Ring of Rocks (a blend of Tinta Barocca and Touriga Francesca) and The Gamka (their flagship blend of Touriga Nacional and Shiraz) are hand-sells. You need to tell the story behind the wines at the cellar. If you add a French variety to a blend like Gamka it makes it more accessible to consumers”.

She also explains why several of their wines are multi-regional blends. “We have a next generation strategy. We want to work with Stellenbosch, Wellington and Swartland growers of Portuguese varieties - and not just make a Calitzdorp blend.” As for the award-winning fortified ports, Rozanne adds, “We are taking market share from the same size port pie - 35% of our production are fortified, including ports and muscadels. No-one has noticed we dropped the name port from our label since 2012 (to comply with EU trademarks)”. So where is the missing EU Euro 54m reward?

The matching menu prepared by new chef Christina Senczyszyn who took over from Vanessa Marx at Dear Me earlier this year proved as creative as the blends of Boplaas. The exotic tropical flavours (pineapple, lemon zest and prickly pear) of the Cape Portuguese White Blend 2014 (Verdelho, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc) crowed as loudly as the cockerel on the label with piquant pickled hake and curried pineapple. And a tasting platter of sticky soy pork belly, lamb and buchu stew,

tartare and fynbos-smoked quail matched the dusty, herbal, spicy and tarry Karoo signature of Boplaas Tinta Barocca 2013, Touriga Francesca 2012 and Boplaas Gamka 2013.

At least, the Nel family didn't have to make the long trek home to Calitzdorp by ox-wagon afterward, the way Carel's great, great grandfather did when he was exporting brandy to England. We ended with a glass of Boplaas CWG Auction Reserve Ox Wagon 1880 Brandy - distilled on the potstill which makes spirit to fortify ports like Cape Tawny Vintners Reserve which won five Platter stars and Veritas double gold.

I'm toasting this column with a flute and fruit of another alternative variety - billed as "Africa's first bottle-fermented Zinfandel". Winemaker Rolf Zeitvogel describes **Blaauwklippen** Diva 2013 as a Blanc de Noir style sparkling wine which spent eight months on the lees and thirteen months in the bottle before disgorgement. The newcomer is the sixth in the Zinfandel range, the signature grape of this cellar - joining a single vineyard Zin, vineyard selection, rosé, noble late harvest and grappa. There's always something new out of Africa, as Pliny once said.