

Quali-Tea continued

bluish-white color,” and a “frost tea” that is “picked from bushes that have gotten slightly frosted right at the end of the picking season; they get a unique flavor.” It’s a scarce tea as only the leaves that have been just touched with frost are picked. Less esoteric finds are just as carefully scrutinized. Lipton takes pride in a long tradition of tasters who maintain the unique “Brisk” blend. Lipton teas must pass fourteen tastings before being chosen.

SOMMELIER TRAINING

It’s all just sour grapes until you develop your wine palate. Great tasters aren’t born, they’re made, from a studied interest and willingness to sample and learn. Tea is no different. The Take Me 2 Tea show is an excellent opportunity to jump right into the action (www.takeme2tea.com). President George Jage says “one of the biggest mistakes hotels make is serving loose tea and then just letting it sit there. After three to five minutes you’re extracting tannins and serving the customer a bitter tea they’re not going to enjoy.” Jage reports several food service solutions that are making it easier to serve high-quality teas. “Revolution Tea, Harney & Sons, and Mighty Leaf have all developed a silk tea bag that allows loose leaf quality without the traditional paper tea bag.” A lot of great tea companies work to educate chefs and hotel staff—Jage also recommends turning to vendors for education on how to maximize presentation.

There are as many philosophies and points of differentiation in tea as in wine. Some focus on specific regions or styles, like Indian teas or Chinese green teas. Davidson’s focuses on organics, with half its line already converted. Numi Tea eschews all oils and flavorings, using only the tea leaves and natural herbs. Te’ Teas is even more restrictive, focusing on estate quality tea alone, with no bags, flavors, or herbs. Others like Tazo take pride in their blends with whole flowers and fruit pieces perfuming their loose leaf tea. Simpson & Vail emphasizes its close relationships with estate growers and its long history (since 1929). But wherever your palate leads you, start the journey with a fresh brew right now. —John Paul Boukis

Why Whole Leaf?

“Full leaf tea has a more consistent quality flavor. The first infusion on a broken tea is exposed to the middle of the leaf immediately, giving it a slightly more pungent, bitter taste. A whole leaf tea releases flavor with a more subtle consistent taste, and you achieve a couple infusions.”

—Kevin Luu, Te’ Teas

Out of Africa

South Africa blossoms worldwide.

Ask the average American wine consumer how long South Africa has produced wine, and the typical response ranges from 25 to 75 years. Most are surprised to learn that the correct answer is more than 300 years.

Stellenbosch is the most renowned region for winemaking. There are, however, plenty of other appellations, including Robertson, Paarl, Wellington, Constantia, Walker Bay, and Franschoek.

HISTORY

The history of the South African wine industry is the story of many independent wineries that focused on quality rather than increased production. However, the largest wine entity, now known as KWV, was the cooperative of choice for the majority of grape growers. And, while many fine wines were produced over the years, the majority of production was typically “commercial grade” wine for the common man. It was cheap and guaranteed a buzz, but the taste was not a plus, explaining why it was normally swallowed without taking a breath.

Today the picture is different. Small growers continue to produce quality but with a better knowledge of farming and winery techniques. KWV has reversed its tradition of producing lackluster wine and has instituted conventional grape quality minimum standards—even for the product destined for the bottom of the domestic market. And it has instituted far higher standards to be competitive for export.

The variety of premium wine types from South Africa is splendid, such as traditional Chenin Blanc, Colombar, Pinotage, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc, and many more. South Africa is said to produce some of the world’s finest Sauvignon Blancs, and a review of international wine competitions bears forth this truth.

FLAVOR PROFILE

The flavor profile of most South African exports traditionally favored the “Old World” European style—earth and mineral toned with lower alcohol, higher acid, and lighter bodied. The largest export markets were the U.K. and European continent, and this style complements their cooking. But recently, after accepting that the American market requires the “New World” southern hemisphere style of fruit-forward, heavier bodied, and sometimes spicy (black pepper) style of wine that complements a culinary tradition including heavy seasoning and spices, a new generation of winemakers is responding with wines for the U.S. market. This, in great part, explains the double digit annual U.S. sales increases.

Examples of the best premium values from South Africa are Helderberg and Kumkani wines from Stellenbosch Vineyards and the complete works of Simonsig: Both are Stellenbosch appellations and produce wines with deep rich mid-palate fruit structure and soft ripe tannins. In the super-premium sector, great values exist, such as the creative works of Bilton Estate, whose Merlot, Shiraz, and Cabernet Sauvignon are astonishingly good. There is also Le Riche, heralded as South Africa’s Cabernet Sauvignon specialist and producer of fabulous reds.

VALUE

Some of the world’s best port wine values, made from Portuguese varietals and fortified with single vintage double pot-still brandy, emanate from Calitzdorp on the Eastern Cape. Average age of the NV Ruby and Tawny Ports is nearly double that of their European cousins, making them great values at a fraction of European prices. Kitchens love them because their residual sugars are slightly higher, producing better-quality reductions with increased flavor retention as well as increased yields.

With the wine-consuming public concerned more than ever with both quality and price, South Africa is a finalist on anyone’s shopping list for good value. The Rand, South Africa’s currency, is comparatively weak to the U.S. dollar, explaining to some degree the extra value. But the real story is a land of rich soils, favorable climates, 300 years of grape growing pride and tradition, and a people with the will to satisfy the palates of demanding consumers.

Fred Tibbitts, president Fred Tibbitts & Associates, is the foremost wine by the glass consultant for chain hotels and restaurants in the world.



The Globetrotting Wine Guy