

STANDARD BANK CHENIN BLANC TOP 10 CHALLENGE – 2025 REPORT

The Standard Bank Chenin Blanc Top 10 Challenge 2025 judging and procedures

The judging at the Standard Bank Chenin Blanc Top 10 Challenge 2025 was conducted according to strict, audited tasting protocols detailing both the logistics and tasting procedures as in the past. Auditors were LDP from Stellenbosch. This is not only for good governance but ensures consistency and is a guarantee that the same procedures are followed each year, even though the panel of judges is rotated on a regular basis.

Two significant changes were introduced this year to the judging process. Wines were scored out of a possible 100 points. This was both to align more with international standards but also to allow for a wider scoring range and therefore more nuance to the panel averages. We also identified a Top 20 shortlist this year, acknowledging the high standard of entries in recognising more wines and building the anticipation for the winners right up to the announcement at the rewards lunch.

This year's judging panel comprised five judges and one associate. The associate's scores were not considered in the results, but they did contribute to the discussion in a learning capacity while also often adding valuable inputs. The associate judging position is crucial in the guidance and mentorship of up-and-coming young judges to give them the opportunities to gain experience.

Panel members were:

Higgo Jacobs (Chair – Sommelier and industry expert)
Ginette de Fleuriot CWM (Judge – Wine Training Manager, Vinimark)
Rob Gower (Judge – Wine Category Manager, Spar South Africa)
Noncgebo Langa (Judge – Winemaker, Delheim Estate)
Shawn Mathyse (Judge - Winemaker, Ken Forrester Wines)
Shane Mumba (Associate – Sommelier Nocturne Bar & Restaurant)

The wines were tasted blind and randomly with no indication of vintage, cellar treatment or technical analysis by the six-person panel. When relevant, vintage and analysis (mostly RS or ABV) details were requested during panel discussions. Panellists judged wines in different sequence, to give the entries as fair as possible a chance in the line up (flights).

Healthy discussions were allowed around wines with notable score discrepancies among panellists. Judges were encouraged to seriously consider contrasting points of view but were not pressured to move on scores.

Where bottle faults were suspected by any member of the panel, another bottle was called for. Faults (especially TCA) were once again relatively uncommon, which is positive. This is indicative of the increase in use of closures under screwcap, composite and of course improvement in cork closure technology.

A strong and competitive 133 (up from 127) entries from 79 producers across 28 different WO's were considered for the first round of judging. This number was narrowed down, over two days of diligent tasting, to 29 potential wines tasted for a second time (from fresh bottles) on the final (3rd) day. This year's Top 20 and Top 10 were selected from this final flight of

29. The Top 20 wines scored above 89.8/100 average; and this year's Top 10 winners all scored above 91.4.

New scores were assigned to wines in the final round of judging, and the Top 20 and Top 10 wines were clearly distinguished from panel averages, showing the benefit of the 100-point system.

Key findings and commentary

With a high number of old vines in plantings across a diverse range of sites all over the Cape, Chenin remains SA's calling card for unique, authentic, world class white wines. A cross-section of quality in this challenge shows remarkable diversity in a category ever-growing in confidence. Entries from 28 (up from 22 last year) different Wine of Origin classifications indicate that not only is the variety planted across most of the Cape, but it also produces quality in various terroirs. Our winning 10 wines represent no fewer than seven WO's, with a further four featured in the top 20.

It is this diversity in expression that is at once an exciting prospect for the exploring consumer, while also a challenge when defining the parameters of quality for an awards challenge. Due to the smorgasbord of tools and techniques available to winemakers, there is incredible variety that shows in the canvas of flavours on offer.

We received 96 wooded and 37 unwooded entries this year (the latter up from 26 last year). Among the 10 winners are two unwooded expressions and two wines listed with combined élevage in amphora, cement, ceramic, old oak etc.

Panelist Rob Gower commented that there might be an opportunity to open up to other categories in their own challenges / top 10's. Sparkling, Value, Off-dry etc are all commercially viable considerations.

Even though the diversity of styles was identified and celebrated by the different palates on the panel, universal quality markers like purity, varietal definition, intensity and balance were rewarded.

The category is as strong as ever, with most entries warranting a second look, as they brought something additional to simple commercial appeal. However, we believe that we should not rest on our laurels. This year saw quite a few pedestrian entries that were very commercial in nature. Of course, price point is a factor here, but neutral, one-dimensional wines should not be accepted, even at a low price point.

On a more positive note, and very significant, there is a decrease in obviously faulty wines every year. This includes both winemaking and bottle faults. We were sitting at around 3% of bottles questioned, which is very low for a technical tasting. Entries now comprise a majority in screwcap (54), followed by technical corks (46) and then natural corks (33).

Once again winning wines' concentration and intensity don't resonate in oak and sweetness but rather fruit intensity and length. There are fewer high RS, overtly toasty or leesy, or botrytis character influenced wines going around than when this challenge started. This shape shift may be well documented, but it remains an impactful change.

‘Rich & ripe’ wooded expressions showed good integration of oak and fine lees work, with very few over-oaked wines. This style was welcomed by the panel as a legitimate expression of Chenin and judged on merit. There still are plenty of consumers who prefer this style of Chenin, and this was fully acknowledged and awarded by the panel.

However, the world’s best wines are those that express their terroirs best with purity and drive.

To quote co-panellist Ginette de Fleuriet: “Once again I was completely taken by the exceptional quality and stylistic range of the wines entered. Wines with purity of fruit, freshness and elegance and space to showcase minerality. Then the more textured, oak-matured expressions showed more finesse than in years gone by - allowing better integration and support of fuller flavours. Collectively, they reaffirm South Africa’s reputation as a world leader in Chenin Blanc.”

And Rob Gower: “I saw a fantastic use of older oak supporting the wines in structure more than flavour. Very few wines were tasting bombs and I would comfortably drink more than one glass of all the winners. As a country we can be extremely proud of Chenin Blanc, we have announced ourselves on the world stage with a unique style of wine that is imminently marketable.”

Reduction remains an interesting tool, and a recurring topic of panel discussion in judging Chenin. With an increase in more natural farming and fermentation methods, this topic is more pertinent than ever before. Tight, nervy, savoury wines that take time to unfold from the glass are no longer a rarity.

Reduction can be intriguing and quite frankly fashionable, but careful consideration is required, and producers should be wary of unattractive mercaptans and bruised fruit characters that don’t blow off. Obvious stylistic (winemaking) impression with not enough fruit character to back it up can be monotonous and has become a little easier to spot. This year’s Top 10 winners have six under screwcap closure, two natural cork and two composite corks.

A few wines were identified with exotic floral, perfumed characters. This can be best allocated to varieties like Muscat or Viognier used in small blending components. Understandably this may charm some consumers, but when obvious it is a detracting characteristic. The Top 20 wines are all 100% Chenin Blanc. This is significant.

Looking at the **results**, we received entries spread across the vintages of 2022, 2023, 2024 and 2025, with all 10 of the winning wines from the 2024 vintage, and just one wine of the top 20 from the 2023 vintage.

Retail price points of the Top 10 range between R100-R925, once again highlighting the incredible value that is on offer from SA Chenin as well as the ability for more simply produced, pure styles to compete with more ambitious, complex styles, most often as a result of old vines.

Seven of the Top 10 wines are from old vines, once again reinforcing the contribution to quality from older vineyards in Chenin Blanc.

The Standard Bank Chenin Blanc Top 10 Challenge 2025 winners are (in alphabetical order):

- Alvi's Drift 221 Chenin Blanc 2024
- Chamonix Old Vine Steen 2024
- Du Toitskloof Pierre Du Mont Chenin Blanc 2024
- Joostenberg Estate Die Agteros Chenin Blanc 2024
- Ken Forrester Wines The FMC 2024
- Roodekrantz Die Kliphuis 2024
- Stellenrust Stellenbosch Manor Barrel Fermented Chenin Blanc 2024
- Stellenrust Stellenbosch Manor Chenin Blanc 2024
- Stellenrust B28 Chenin Blanc 2024
- Stettyn Family Vineyards Shackleton Old Vines Chenin Blanc 2024

A tip of the hat to the incredible consistency in the top performers and return winners every year, especially considering the strict protocol and regular rotation of the panel. This year sees a healthy influx of many all-new winners, along with some return winners from previous challenges and one return (multiple) winner from last year. Once again, special mention befits Stellenrust, with another remarkable year of results, achieving six listings in the Top 20 from 10 entries, a very impressive strike rate indeed!

A heart-felt thank you to Standard Bank for promoting healthy competition and excellence in South Africa's champion category – Chenin Blanc.