

WINE INFLUENCER

# Happy soil, happy Chenin

As South Africa continues to shape its identity as a global leader in Chenin Blanc, Spier cellar master Johan Jordaan's love for this humble grape serves as a guiding force.

By Wanda Augustyn

A man with short brown hair and a slight smile, wearing a dark olive-green button-down shirt, stands in a vineyard. He is holding a large, smooth, light-brown rock in his hands. The background is a soft-focus view of a vineyard with rows of grapevines under a warm, golden light, suggesting late afternoon or early morning.

South African winemaking has long been defined by its resilience, innovation, and respect for the soil. Among our country's many varietals, Chenin Blanc stands out as the flagship. At the helm of its evolution is Johan Jordaan, who was recently named a Chenin Blanc Master Winemaker at the prestigious Master Winemaker 100 awards in Paris. The award recognizes his expertise, dedication, and commitment to excellence.

For Johan, this accolade is more than a personal milestone. It celebrates teamwork, terroir and tradition. Over the years, Spier has become synonymous with quality Chenin Blanc, and Johan's vision has played a crucial role in shaping its identity. His love for the grape and keen understanding of sustainability and regenerative farming ensure that every bottle tells a story of South Africa's heritage and innovation.

In this candid conversation, he shares his insights into what makes South African Chenin Blanc a global sensation and the future of this versatile varietal.



**What does this recognition mean to you personally and for Spier as a brand?**

Thank you! An amazing team effort over many years culminated in

this result. It shows that when the marriage of terroir and grape with the vision of a wine farm such as Spier starts to resonate in harmony, success emanates from it. The reward isn't just a personal milestone; it celebrates our efforts in Chenin Blanc. It's a true cornerstone of our portfolio. Often called a workhorse, we see it as a thoroughbred – versatile, expressive and a star of South Africa's wine heritage.

**Chenin Blanc has become one of South Africa's flagship varieties. In your opinion, what makes South African Chenin Blanc stand out on the global stage?**

A renewed focus on the grape has allowed its elegance and versatility to shine. From making fruity, easy-drinking wines to well-rounded, elegant, poised and refined wines, this cultivar has it all. Our winemakers' interest helps the variety blossom and evolve, attracting much interest from former Pinot Grigio and Chardonnay drinkers.

**Spier has long been committed to regenerative farming and sustainability. How do these practices influence the quality and character of your Chenin Blancs?**

I always say tongue-in-cheek, happy soil, happy wine. We've seen first-hand how regenerative practices breathe life into depleted soils – from shale to weathered granite – bringing energy back to the vines and vibrancy into the wines. When we nurture the soil's microbiome, the vines are better able to unlock flavours that might otherwise remain suppressed.

**Your Chenin Blancs have consistently performed well in global competitions. What's your approach to crafting award-winning wines year after year?**

To be insatiably curious, with a desire to improve from what was to what can be. Use the vineyard to inspire the viticulturist and winemaker to grow and make something exceptional. Bring all this together in a shared vision, and teamwork takes care of the rest.

**You're one of only three South African winemakers to have received this honour. What do you think this says about the evolution of South African winemaking?**

Sometimes, we're at the right place at the right time, but consistently doing this is no fluke. South African winemakers tend to have this never-say-die attitude. We persist, endure, and travel to learn. It's a great privilege to learn from others worldwide and fine-tune the lessons to apply them in our local context.

**What trends or innovations in Chenin Blanc production excite you the most right now?**

Chenin Blanc holds a special place in our hearts for two key reasons: its rich heritage and remarkable versatility. It's been cultivated in South Africa for over 300 years, so

this varietal is rooted in our winemaking tradition. More recently, it's gained recognition beyond its traditional strongholds, finding a foothold in new wine regions such as California, Australia and New Zealand. Some producers are even experimenting with making Cap Classique and natural sparkling pét-nats from Chenin Blanc grapes, which is exciting.

**For wine lovers looking to explore Spier's Chenin Blancs, which wines would you recommend, and what should they look for in terms of taste and style?**

We love fresh, fruity wine in South Africa, making our Signature Collection just the thing. But don't put too much ice in it – it wants to whisper to you, so chill it down, but let the ambient temperature slowly reveal its vibrant fruity flavours.

For something more complex, consider our Good Natured and Field & Flutter ranges. They feature stone fruit and mineral elegance, all wrapped in organic goodness.

Then, of course, we have two delectable, more serious styles of Chenin Blanc that demand attention. Farmer Angus is a naturally fermented Stellenbosch gem from old vines with a touch of oak. This wine is wonderfully complex and sincere. 21 Gables is a treasure from Durbanville's resurrected vineyards and is aged slowly to reveal its rich, complex soul.

From easy-drinking charm to profound depth, there's a Chenin Blanc for every moment, ready to unfold, sip by sip.

**South African Chenin Blanc has gained significant recognition internationally. What has driven this global success, and how does South Africa compare with other Chenin-producing regions such as the Loire Valley?**

The variety is resilient and can make an average to above-average wine with little attention. That sums up what many people think of it. However, we can see the results worldwide by looking at local winemakers' focus on it. South Africa hosted the Chenin Blanc Congress last year, showing that our wine world peers appreciate our efforts and are curious about what we're doing here. The Loire region has noted that when you meet their winemakers, they're always keen to understand how we've evolved the grape to what we see today. So, I think it's game on with our French colleagues!

**With South Africa increasingly seen as a leader in Chenin Blanc production, what steps should the industry take to cement its reputation on the world stage?**

If we're serious about our grapes and the styles we can produce, we should manage and own the category. We should back ourselves up and be proud of our achievements while emphasising the highest possible quality. Make wine with intent, not by accident. We can't forfeit the significant gains of the past few years. Invest in new plantings, experiment with various rootstocks and styles, and be brave in the market. It's not easy, but a collective message helps. ■