



# THE SWARTLAND REVOLUTION

A TASTING WITH:

**CRAIG  
HAWKINS**

ROBERSON WINE

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In the bad old days of apartheid, South Africa's wine production scene was dominated by KWV, the enormous organisation that started out as a co-operative winery and developed into a government-led behemoth that controlled prices, production volumes and almost everything else that happened in the South African wine industry. At one point, the system was so mismanaged that only 30% of all the wine grapes harvested were being used to make table wine, with the rest of it being thrown away or used for distillation. Farming high quality fruit in this quantity focused environment didn't make financial sense, so it wasn't until after the end of apartheid that things began to change.

The rolling farmlands of Swartland was where much of the bulk fruit came from, but once the co-operative system was dismantled in the early 1990s, the growers began to emerge from KWV's shadow. Producers like Fairview and Boekenhoutskloof may not have been based in Swartland (they are in Paarl and Franschhoek respectively), but they saw the potential in its fruit and would source grapes from the region for some of their blended wines. Charles Back of Fairview was enthusiastic enough to invest in a winery in the area, founding Spice Route in time for the 1998 vintage and employing a young winemaker named Eben Sadie. This turned out to be an inspired decision, and Sadie was soon running the show at Spice Route as well as producing his own wines (Columella, Palladius and the Sequillo range) down the road at Sadie Family winery. The critical acclaim received for Eben's wines meant the wine world soon woke up to the potential of Swartland and before long there were a number of small independent wineries that were taking advantage of the region's unique terroir.

Many of them had been selling their fruit to the local co-operative for years, but in the noughties the Swartland revival really got going with the emergence of wineries like Lammershoek (2000), Badenhorst (2003), Mullineux (2007) and most of the other members (23 in total) of the 'Swartland Independent Producers'. The key to this group coming together was their belief that the region's distinctive soils give wines of remarkable definition when the grapes are farmed in a conscientious fashion and low intervention winemaking is practiced. The fact that Swartland is a long established wine region means that there are numerous old-vine vineyards populated by interesting grape varieties (Chenin Blanc and the Rhône varieties do particularly well). By fermenting their wines with native yeasts, repudiating additions of enzymes, acid, tannin or excessive SO<sub>2</sub> and staying away from new oak barrels, the SIP believe that they can communicate a sense of 'Swartlandness' - a direct riposte to the fashion-led identikit wines so commonly available elsewhere.

As Swartland continued to develop along the lines of organic farming and low-intervention wine making, more and more winemakers were attracted to the area. The number of dynamic young producers was swelled by the likes of Jurgen Gouws (Intellego), Donovan Rall, David Sadie (no relation to Eben) and Callie Louw, the winemaker at Porseleinberg (which Boekenhoutskloof's Marc Kent bought in 2010 after buying fruit from there for 3 years). The camaraderie between this generation of winemakers has allowed them to forge a genuine collective identity for the region, with distinctive wines made at each estate but a common thread holding them all together. Beginning in 2010, they decided to establish an annual event called 'The Swartland Revolution', which features a programme of seminars that are intended to develop the press and trade's understanding of the unique characteristics of the region. Once the learning is done, the street party starts and each of the growers pours their wines to crowds of thirsty and enthusiastic drinkers. The event reflects the people involved - serious about the incredible terroir that they work with, but relaxed enough to know that throwing a party is the best way to enthuse people about their wines.

About an hour's drive to the north-east of Cape Town is the town of Malmesbury, in the heart of the Swartland. Lammershoek estate is about 10 miles from there, occupying 96 hectares of incredibly beautiful land that has been farmed since 1718 and planted to the vine since 1750 - so it doesn't exactly put the *new* in New World. The name is Afrikaans for 'lamb's corner', as legend has it that the ewes would bring their offspring to shelter in the farm's forest when threatened by Black Eagles. Many years later, a chap called Desiderius Pongrácz visited the farm during the 1970s and advised the owners to plant a number of lesser known varieties, including Tinta Barocca, Carignan and the Harslévelu that Craig now uses for one of his most interesting wines. Pongrácz was very well known in the South African wine community and is credited with introducing some of the country's most successful grape varieties and helping to improve the standards of viticulture and vinification - the plantings that he inspired when visiting Lammershoek represent some of the best plots of vines at the estate today. Paul and Anna Kretzel purchased Lammershoek in 1995 and by the year 2000 they had pulled their fruit out of the Paardeberg co-operative and renovated the winemaking facilities on the property. By 2010, the estate had been officially converted to organic viticulture and, as well as producing a comprehensive range of their own wines, they supply fruit to other high quality, independent growers in the region.

The vineyards are planted to a wide range of different grape varieties. The classic stalwarts of Chenin Blanc, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Pinotage, Grenache, Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot are joined by the rarer sights of Viognier, Harslévelu, Mourvedre, Carignan, Zinfandel and Tinta Barocca. Nowadays the focus is really on old vine Chenin Blanc and the Rhône varieties, as they are well suited to the Swartland soils that are rich in minerals and decomposed granite. The climate is very warm and dry, so the varieties that perform best in a dry-farmed environment are those that are well adapted to heat.

Since Craig took over wine making responsibilities at the estate, the range can be divided into four distinct sets of wines - three from the Lammershoek stable and one under Craig's own private label, Testalonga (started in 2008). The entry level range of wines goes under the LAM label and the wines are intended to be fun and easy to drink. The fruit used for these wines comes from some of the younger plots on the farm and there is very little use of oak - but the freshness, vitality and sheer drinkability of these wines is testament to the quality of fruit and gentle approach to vinification. There are five wines in the range, including a delicious Pinotage that proves how attractive the variety can be when treated sensitively.

The Lammershoek range of wines uses fruit from the oldest blocks on the property. There is a wonderfully savoury and fresh Syrah, a linear, focused and age-worthy Chenin Blanc and then a red blend and white blend. In some vintages Craig produces sweet wines under this label when the conditions allow. These are serious wines, but offer wonderful value for money considering their poise and complexity.

Before Craig took over at Lammershoek, he had spent years working with Swartland's trailblazer Eben Sadie, followed by a stint in Europe working at Sadie's Priorat estate 'Terroir Al Limit' and with Dirk Niepoort in Portugal and Austria. Close friends with Tom Lubbe at Matassa in the Roussillon, Craig's wine education involved working under maverick winemakers who all share an obsession with terroir and a desire to innovate and push boundaries. This spirit is very much alive in Craig and the third range of wines from Lammershoek - Cellar Foot - is his opportunity to experiment. There is no definitive range that gets repeated each vintage, but in addition to the spectacular Harslévelu and a Pinotage Nouveau (Sink the Pink) that is impossible to stop drinking, Craig has also been working on an 'Underwater Wine', a blend of 50% Pinotage, 25% Grenache, 12.5% Carignan and 12.5% Mourvedre, where the élevage takes place in submerged barrels.

Finally, there is Testalonga. At the moment Craig produces two wines under this label, both made from Chenin Blanc and both called El Banditio. The first wine, 'Cortez' is aged for two years on its lees and is made from fruit grown at Tom Lubbe's Swartland property 'The Observatory'. The second wine, 'Made From Grapes' spends two years on the skins and stems and evolves into an orange wine inspired by the wines of North-Eastern Italy. Both are incredibly complex, but most importantly they have a spirit and vibrancy inside them - a crackle of life that is bursting to get out. They are spectacular examples of what Swartland and its Chenin Blanc is capable of.

**Adi Badenhorst** is a larger than life character that has proven to be a wonderful ambassador for the Swartland Independent Producers and the region's wines. His 28 hectares of old vines are on the Paaderberg mountain, and since Adi and his cousin Hein took over the estate (Adi was previously head winemaker at Rustenberg in Stellenbosch), their red and white blends have become some of the most talked about wines in South Africa. Everything is grown organically and made in a very hands-off, natural way with old concrete tanks and open-top wooden fermenters. The white is a blend of Chenin Blanc, Roussanne, Grenache Blanc, Grenache Gris, Verdehlo, Colombard, Viognier, Chardonnay, Semillon, while the red is a blend of Syrah, Grenache, Mourvedre and Cinsault.

A close friend of Craig's and his assistant winemaker at Lammershoek is **Jurgen Gouws**. In addition to his day job, Jurgen has launched his own label - Intellego - made from grapes sourced primarily from the Lammershoek estate. Jurgen's focus is on Chenin Blanc and he makes two wines from the variety. In addition to his regular Chenin, there is also a cuvée called 'Elementis', which has three weeks skin contact. The fruit for these wines is grown on three different terroirs - chalk, granite and clay and it goes without saying that the wines are made in as natural a way as possible. The red wine is a blend of Syrah (80%), Mourvedre and Grenache Blanc. All three are complex and vivacious wines with tons of character.

Sporting a spectacular beard, **Callie Louw** is the head winemaker at Porseleinberg, the Swartland estate of Marc Kent (winemaker at Boekenhootskloof). He is a laid back guy that believes passionately in a focus on farming pristine, healthy fruit rather than interfering in the winery. "We work hard enough 11 months of the year growing grapes, then we kick back, have a beer and throw it in the cellar."

The vineyards are located on the schist infused slopes of Porcelain Mountain and the winery houses the foudres and Nomblot eggs used in the élevage of their eponymous Syrah. This is a wine of power and savoury depth, which already looks like becoming one of the country's finest.

Eben Sadie is the most famous of Swartland's winemakers and an inspiration for young, quality minded producers all over the world. Thanks to the wines he has made at Sadie Family vineyards, Eben has received widespread critical acclaim since his inaugural vintage in 2000 and his Columella and Palladius wines are among the best of the New World. Eben's philosophy is based on the notion of respecting and communicating the terroir of his (of any other) region. When he was younger, a visit to Europe's classic wine regions gave him a deep seated appreciation of matching varietal to place and eschewing too much intervention in the winery. This has led to him using Rhône varietals, as they are far better suited to Swartland's climate and terroir - Columella is a blend of Syrah (80%) and Mourvedre.