



# SPARKLING FOR HALF A CENTURY

THE FRENCH HAVE BEEN MAKING CHAMPAGNE SINCE THE 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY BUT THE PROCESS DIDN'T MAKE ITS WAY TO SOUTH AFRICA UNTIL THE 1970S. **LUCY CORNE** RAISES A GLASS TO CELEBRATE 50 YEARS OF LOCALLY PRODUCED BUBBLES AT THE WINERY THAT STARTED THE REVOLUTION.





From harvest to supermarket shelf, each vintage of Kaapse Vonkel is almost two years in the making

**M**aking champagne-style wine in South Africa 50 years ago has a surprising amount in common with being a craft brewer here in the early 2010s. Equipment was so tough to get hold of, it was easier to make your own, drinkers needed to be convinced to part with their extra rands for this unfamiliar beverage and every bottle sold needed to be explained to the customer. Of course, it was much more difficult for South Africa's first champagne-style winemaker than for our latter-day brewers. There was virtually nobody locally that could offer any practical advice and in a pre-Google world, library books and pricey international phone calls were the main source of information.

It was 1971 when Frans Malan first forayed into making sparkling wine in the champagne style and the winery where it all started, Simonsig, is still going strong today. "Back then the varieties being grown here in South Africa were very limited," says Johan Malan, Frans' son, who has been making wines on the northern Stellenbosch farm since the 1980s. "My father loved travelling, particularly to see what was happening in other wine producing areas of the world. He visited Champagne and came back thinking 'why not do that here?'"

The hurdles were sizable. At the time the grapes typically used in champagne-style wines – Pinot Noir and Chardonnay – were not grown in South Africa, so Malan senior experimented with what was available. "The very first Kaapse Vonkel was made with Chenin Blanc," says Johan, "but it was made in the *méthode champenoise*, meaning that it was bottle fermented. Sparkling wine had

been produced in South Africa for a long time then but in the "Sodastream" style. A lot of it was very sweet and nobody was making anything resembling champagne."

#### TIME-HONOURED TRADITION

Parts of the champagne-making process would not be unfamiliar to a homebrewer. One of the crucial components is the secondary fermentation in the bottle – better known in brewing as bottle conditioning. And just as with beer, the prospect of having too much sugar or yeast in the bottle could be disastrous. "There's a huge potential explosion in every bottle," says Johan, going

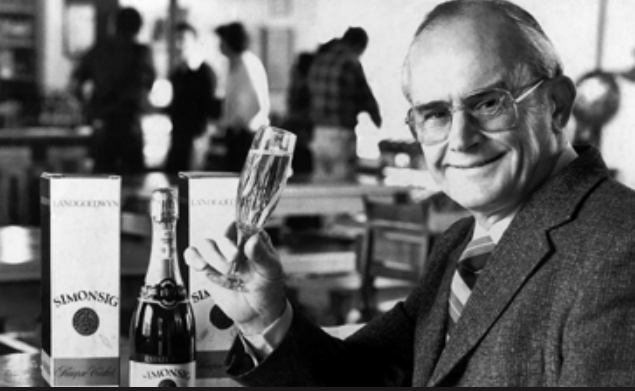
Each bottle came in a gift box with an insert explaining the process

on to express just how important it is for a winemaker to fully understand the process before they attempt champagne-style wines.

Champagne bottles are extremely strong to withstand the immense pressure within, but sourcing them was initially quite a challenge. "At first my father couldn't get the bottles with the lip, which is necessary for the crown cap which goes on during bottle fermentation," says Johan. "The only ones he could get were 800ml rather than 750ml



The striking new packaging for the Satin Nectar duo pays homage to the Cape floral kingdom



Frans Malan bottled his first wines under the Simonsig label in 1968; three years later Kaapse Vonkel was born



Johan Malan celebrates winning the 2020 Diners Club Winemaker of the Year Award



Simonsig is open to visitors for tours, tasting and lunch

and he was very concerned that he was giving away 50ml with every bottle sold!"

It takes six weeks for the secondary fermentation to finish its work, creating a fine bubble, known in the business as the mousse. But from vine to glass, the process is far, far longer. "Legally, in South Africa, the wine must be on the lees for a minimum of nine months in the primary fermentation, although this is going to change from this year's vintage to 12 months," says Johan.

There are a lot of legal stipulations with champagne-style wines in South Africa, beginning with the name itself. In the late 1980s, about 99% of South Africa's sparkling wine market was of the force-carbonated variety, according to Johan. Those that were closely following the champagne method wanted to formalise the sector and protect their product, but legally they couldn't use the term 'champagne'. "And so, after a lot of bottles of wine we came up with Méthode Cap Classique," Johan says.

In 1992 the Cap Classique Producers Association (CCPA) association was founded, with Johan Malan as chair, and it is this association that stipulates the processes necessary for a wine to be allowed to carry the Cap Classique moniker. It is now a term recognised around the world but it all began with that first vintage of Chenin given the

champagne treatment by Frans Malan half a century ago

### CAPE SPARKLE

Kaapse Vonkel – meaning 'Cape sparkle' – was South Africa's only champagne-style wine for 10 years, with Boschendaal releasing their version in 1981. The wine continued using Chenin for many years but by the late 80s Johan started to look at ways to evolve it. "We were the pioneers here but we needed to be closer to the traditional style, so in 1987 I started using Pinot Noir and Chardonnay," says Johan. "It actually made a big impact on the quality – and the popularity."

In the early days, convincing people to swap their familiar wines for something drier and more expensive was a slow process. "When Kaapse Vonkel was first released it was the most expensive white wine in the country at R3 per bottle versus R6 per case for most other wines," says Johan. "Each bottle came in a gift box with an insert explaining the process. My father always wanted it to be a luxury item like champagne itself."

Over the decades, the original Kaapse Vonkel has been joined by three more variants, all with the Cap Classique designation. The Satin Nectar duo arose as a response to a global trend towards *demi-sec* versions of French Champagne, but the rosé was born

of an experiment. "In 2003 there was a shortage of Pinot Noir so we tried a version using Pinotage," says Johan. "It didn't really work so we made a rosé and just wanted to get it out there. I didn't care for it but we did a tasting with Waitrose in the UK and they bought the entire vintage and that's how the Kaapse Vonkel Brut Rosé was born." Rosé was an emerging trend at the time and has continued to gain gradual popularity, with the UK market largely driving the trend.

The original Kaapse Vonkel is still by far the favourite though – a classic that celebrates its 50th birthday in 2021. The wine was inspired by French champagne, but it was never meant to mimic it. "This is South Africa," says Johan. "Champagne is the northernmost wine region in France and has less sunshine than other regions. Although we use all the same processes and techniques, we have a different climate here and our ingredients are different, making for a wine that is more fruity and with less of a mineral quality. I like to say that we're bottling a little bit of our sunshine."

Today there are around 200 wineries in South Africa producing what has colloquially become known as MCC. And you can bet that in 2021 they'll all be toasting to 50 years of locally produced bubbles with a glass of the wine that started it all. ☺



The Kaapse Vonkel range has had a wardrobe change for 2021, with each bottle celebrating the 50th anniversary

## CELEBRATE CAP CLASSIQUE DAY

In case you feel you need a reason to crack open a bottle of bubbly, 1 September is International Cap Classique Day. Founded by the Cap Classique Producers Association, the day hopefully brings with it the first of the spring weather, kicking off what Johan Malan likes to think of as "Cap Classique season". For more info check out [capclassique.co.za](http://capclassique.co.za).