

JUDGING PANEL'S FEEDBACK

DRY WHITE WINE – CHRISTO PIENAAR

This remains a great panel to taste on, thanks to the variety of the wines judged.

It was noticeable that Viognier, Nouvelle and Sémillon wines showed up much quieter on the nose this year. However, these wines had excellent full and complex palates on their own.

Given the vintage involved, it was also interesting to note how the pH and acid levels were well adjusted and managed. The wines were nice and healthy despite the vintage where the presence of rotten grapes was high during the harvest season.

The Muscat cultivars, excluding Irsai and Morio Muscat, were also much quieter on nose and palate, and showed limited Muscat character.

However, Morio Muscat and Irsai were very outspoken and showed very good, delicate Muscat characters. Even the Muscat blend classes showed very well.

A wide variety of "other cultivars" was judged, with Verdelho, Alvarinho and Grüner Veltliner, among others, leading to interesting conversations.

The Rosé class is starting to grow again, but there is a clear difference between those made from grapes pressed for their colour versus juice extracted from red grapes.

The standard of wines judged by the panel was generally good.

DRY WHITE – JOHAN DIPPENAAR

Thanks to my fellow tasters, we can honestly say that each wine was judged with merit and it remains a privilege to taste on this panel.

The unwooded white blended wines were again the largest class tasted, from the first 'flight,' it was clear that the wines would not deliver the same fruit and structure as last year. The different wines were well used in the blends; the Chardonnay blends stood out again, but other blends did not back down. A few faulty wines occurred in this class.

The wooded blends did not disappoint, and the use of wood and staves was good, but the wines did not show up as strongly as last year.

Cultivars that stood out were Colombar and Weisser Riesling.

CHARDONNAY – SJAAK NELSON

We had a very good line-up of judges for the 2026 Chardonnay panel. Everyone on the panel makes great Chardonnay themselves from all the styles we tasted. The panel was also made up of all the different regions, so it helps us to identify and understand all the areas.

The wines entered for 2026 were excellent. Overall, we experienced that the unwooded flight showed very well and the use of different yeast and fermentation styles from the producers delivered very good results.

Tasting young wine in the wooded flight is always a challenge but this year we were pleasantly surprised with the clever use of oak to produce well integrated wines this early in the year. Using oak on a young wine is the most difficult part of winemaking and when you get this part right and get a bronze, silver, or gold then you are on the right track.

CHENIN BLANC – ALBERTUS LOUW

The overall quality of the Chenin Blanc entries for the 2026 vintage was good with a large percentage of the wines receiving silver and gold medals. The larger harvest did have an impact on the concentration and palate weight of many wines, although there were good aromas on the nose.

The unwooded class delivered a variety of wines from elegant light styles, fruity tropical styles, as well as some more complex, fuller or richer wines. The majority of the wines were in the lighter elegant style and in many cases lacked palate weight and concentration.

There were limited faulty wines, which was positive compared to previous years, indicating that 'sample' preparation received more attention.

The unwooded wines that received gold awards were of high quality and represented a variety of styles. These wines stood out way above the rest in terms of fruit complexity, palate weight and balance.

The wooded class also produced a variety of styles and was superior to the unwooded class. The impression was that there were indeed wines that could not handle the wood and showed too little concentration. The excessive use of new wood is improving each year, and it is a positive trend to see wines with better integration and balance overall.

The wooded wines that received gold awards are generally strongly tropical, with full flavour on the palate as well as some elegance and good wood integration. The wines also showed good fruit intensity and balance.

SAUVIGNON BLANC – PIETER-NIEL ROSSOUW

The 2026 Sauvignon Blanc tasting highlighted the significant impact of climate and harvest timing on wine quality. Some extreme heat conditions, followed by substantial rainfall, created challenging growing and ripening conditions for the 2026 vintage. As a result, overall wine quality ranged from average to good, with a number of truly outstanding examples.

The unwooded Sauvignon Blancs generally performed well, displaying attractive fruit expression, freshness, and elegance. By contrast, many wooded Sauvignon Blancs showed less fruit character, with some wines lacking the concentration required to support effective oak integration. Overall, concentration was a common challenge across the category.

The tasting was also affected by an unusually high number of faulty samples. In some cases, perhaps linked to sampling and handling practice rather than winemaking intent.

Encouragingly, the wines that achieved gold medal status were truly exceptional, demonstrating outstanding quality, balance, concentration, and varietal expression, despite the challenging season.

Overall, the results reinforced the importance of favourable vineyard conditions, optimal harvest timing and healthy fermentation supported by appropriate nutrient management and careful sample handling in preserving Sauvignon Blanc quality.

RED BLENDS – KLAAS STOFFBERG

The year was challenging with all the rain at harvest time, which showed up in the dry red blends.

Many wines were unbalanced, with the tannins standing loose or green, because winemakers were trying to pick grapes before the rains without physiological ripeness reached yet. Colour in some blends was also significantly lighter than in previous years due to less extraction.

Winemakers who showed patience and managed vineyards and picking time well, were rewarded with gold medals at the end of the day.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON – BERTHO VAN DER WESTHUIZEN

The 2026 young Cabernet Sauvignon wines showed very nicely. We were particularly impressed with the balance, depth and concentration. It was a warm vintage, but there were a few overripe characters. The wines showed good dark fruit and structure. Fewer wines were entered than in 2025, possibly due to the warm vintage.

The different 2026 styles stood out – all very good examples of Cabernet Sauvignon. We have certainly moved away from the big, rich and ripe styles, showing that the winemakers are adapting to seasonal variations.

On the negative side, there were a few wines with Brett character.

PINOTAGE – FRANCOIS VAN NIEKERK

The 2026 vintage produced numerous beautiful Pinotage wines.

The unwooded as well as the wooded wines generally had good colour, with pure fruit and nice complexity. The top four wines in the wooded class were of exceptional quality.

Good winemaking expertise ensured beautiful wood-fruit balance and wines with plenty of depth.

MERLOT – RENIER VAN DEVENTER

The Merlot was slightly more varied than last year, but the wines that stood out showed that the style of South African Merlot is really beginning to manifest an identity where balance, quality and depth are increasingly prominent.

Great colour extraction, with bright red and purple hues made the wines appear lively and bright. Fresh upfront red fruits and blueberry aromas made for super clean and aromatic wines in both the wooded and unwooded classes.

In both classes, the wines had good structure and length, with sweet juicy tannins. Clever use of oak in the wooded class gave the wines good complexity and depth without overpowering the fruit.

SHIRAZ – RIAAN MOLLER

The impression of this year's Shiraz panel was that the overall quality of the wines was high. Aromatically, the wines showed good integration with exceptional fruit and wood balance. It appears that the management of tannins in the 2026 red wines needed extra attention. The wines that stood out well showed exceptional cultivar character and drinkability.

OTHER RED CULTIVARS – ANTON SWARTS

The panel tasted over three days, with strong focus, enthusiasm and the necessary dose of humour.

Day one's focus was the unwooded and wooded Cinsault, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Franc, Mourvèdre and Malbec.

Overall, the wines showed up very nicely. However, the panel felt that some of the red wines may still be a little early in their development and did therefore not necessarily display their full splendour and glory. Most classes impressed the panel. Pinot Noir unfortunately did not quite reach the height the panel had hoped for when judging. Of course, this does not mean that the wines did not have good potential, but rather that they may need a little more time before fully revealing their true character.

An interesting observation was that some of the unwooded wines were more attractive than their wooded counterparts. This raised some eyebrows and elicited a few smiles, as the wood sometimes remained more modest in the background while the fruit stole the spotlight.

Day two was devoted to the unwooded 'other cultivars', including Tempranillo, Grenache Noir, while more Cinsault, Tinta Barocca, Touriga Nacional, Petit Verdot, Petit Syrah (Durif), Ruby Cabernet and Tannat were tasted.

Here, the wines showed deep colours, good fruit concentration and strong cultivar character. The panel took the due time to properly judge each wine. It was strongly believed that young wines deserve the opportunity to open in the glass and tell their story before the points are awarded.

By day three, the focus was on the wooded versions of several cultivars.

The quality of the wines was high and interesting cultivars such as Alicante Bouschet and Barbera made their appearance and added extra colour to the assessment. The quality of the young wines was impressive and showed that producers were becoming increasingly comfortable and proficient with these less common cultivars.

The panel is particularly pleased to see that this category is attracting more entries each year. This indicates not only growing interest but also increasing confidence in the potential of these cultivars. Especially the Petit Verdot, Petite Syrah and Tannat, which are often known for big, muscular and tannin rich wines, displayed a striking balance. These wines appeared softer, fruitier and more approachable, with nicely integrated tannins that the panel found very positive.

NATURAL SWEET, NOBLE LATE HARVEST (NLH) AND CAPE STYLE – FANIE GEYSER

The 2026 season has truly been very challenging. The dry summer that followed with some rain in harvest time had a major impact. The sugars were high, which spilled over into the NLH and Cape Style categories. In the NLH class, there were wines that showed a lack of noble rot character and not enough depth of flavour.

As always, the Tawny class was very strong, and all these wines will be seen in the Cape Vintage Reserve bottles in about two years – really top wines. In the Vintage class, there were some Cape Style wines made with grapes that might have ran away with their sugars. It has not been an exceptional Vintage Cape Style year. Ruby wines, however, were good.

DESSERT WINES – HERMIAS VOLLGRAAFF

The overall standard of this year's entries was high and the panel tasted several wines of exceptional quality. However, the early rainfall during February resulted in some grapes being harvested and pressed at lower sugar levels. Consequently, the wines generally displayed a more delicate style rather than the richer, fuller style often associated with dessert wines.

The Muscat varieties showed fresh, attractive aromatics with excellent fruit expression throughout. As in the previous year, the Red Muscadel generally performed better than the White Muscadel, showing greater concentration, complexity, and overall balance.

Congratulations to all the producers on the high quality of their entries and the dedication with which these distinctive wines are crafted.

ENDS