

Crucial Timing and Human Courage the Features of Memorable Kleine Zalze Harvest 2023

Erratic weather conditions and unseasonable summer downpours in the Cape winelands have already ensured the region's 2023 wine grape harvest being termed as one of the most memorable in recent memory. But for Kleine Zalze Estate in Stellenbosch this year will be remembered as a vintage in which human foresight and the Kleine Zalze team's experience in and understanding of their vineyards played a crucial role in avoiding damage to harvest-ready grapes or the dilution of crushed juice.

"This year truly was a viticulturist's vintage," says RJ Botha, Kleine Zalze's cellarmaster. "With two heavy spells of rain in March two weeks apart and with the heavy bunches of Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon nearing their picking dates, the winemaking and viticulture teams had to make decisive calls to ensure blocks were harvested without being affected by the rain, but at levels of adequate ripeness. Fortunately, we got it right, getting the red grapes in before the deluges that came down in the week of 20 March and with desired sugar-levels."

With 100mm of rain experienced in December 2022, this year's Klein Zalze vintage commenced in middle January under mild weather conditions.

"The white grapes were on average two week earlier than last year, and as we got going mention was being made of a fantastic harvest all round," says Botha. "Chenin Blanc from our vineyards in Stellenbosch's Firgrove region was of fantastic quality as a result of these dryland bush-vines having received a welcoming splash of water with those December rains – especially as the preceding winter was warm and dry, and the vines really needed a top-up. These young 2023 Chenin Blanc wines now lying in the cellar are of incredible quality."

Kleine Zalze's Sauvignon Blanc grapes from vineyards in Stellenbosch, Darling and Durbanville were harvested three weeks earlier than average. "The Darling crop was smaller due to some hail damage in December, but yields, as well as fruit quality, were generally healthy and coupled to extraordinary flavour profiles and aromas," says Botha. "The mild vineyard conditions ensured firm, riveting acids, and another very good Sauvignon Blanc year can be expected."



The warm winter of 2022, however, hurt the Chardonnay harvest. “There simply were not enough cold units to allow the vines to undergo a suitable state of dormancy during last year’s winter,” he says, “thus, Chardonnay volumes are down 30% to 40%, which appears to be the case over most of Stellenbosch this year.”

With rain forecast in March and the later-ripening red varieties still hanging in the vineyards, Botha and his teams had to make those important calls of harvesting to avoid the rain, but get the ripeness needed for varietal expression.

“This wet year showed the benefits of having young virus-free Cabernet Sauvignon vineyards,” says Botha. “Virus-free means there is no slouching in the vines as they struggle to ripen the fruit. Therefore, we managed to get half our Cabernet Sauvignon fruit into the cellar before the first big rainfalls beginning the weekend of 4 March. The rest of the grapes were picked before the following set of showers which followed two weeks later. Cabernet Sauvignon came in at ideal ripeness levels of 24°B and – importantly – without showing any sign of water uptake. And to boot, Cabernet Sauvignon quality is incredible with deep, vivid colours and brilliant complexity in the young wines.”

Concerning Shiraz, another stalwart of Kleine Zalze’s wine offering, Botha says Shiraz is very forgiving in vintages like this, and one will probably see more delectable spice and pepper notes on the Shiraz due to the earlier ripening and picking that was demanded by the inclement weather.

“This harvest really kept us on our toes, not only with the usual manual labour involved during this time of year but with the mind-games the weather was playing,” says Botha. “But our relationship with and understanding of the vines allowed us to make the right calls during a challenging wine grape harvest where the human hand played almost as big a role as nature’s commanding presence.

“All this makes the quality of the young new wine we are seeing in the cellar doubly rewarding.”

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Hatch Mansfield Agencies Limited | New Bank House | 1 Brockenhurst Road | Ascot | Berkshire SL5 9DJ

Telephone 01344 871800 | E-mail info@hatch.co.uk | www.hatchmansfield.com

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