

South Africa Wine and Stellenbosch University launch innovative Chenin Blanc project

South Africa Wine, the South African Grape and Wine Research Institute (SAGWRI), Stellenbosch University, and the Chenin Blanc Association of South Africa (CBA), have launched an initiative titled "Premiumisation and Value Growth of South African Chenin Blanc Wine." Spearheaded by Prof Melané Vivier and a team of academics, this initiative aims to increase the recognition and economic feasibility of South African Chenin Blanc. With an investment of over R4m over three years from South Africa Wine and co-funding from the National Research Foundation (NRF), the project represents a significant stride towards sustainability and innovation within the South African wine sector.



Source: Matthieu Joannon via [Unsplash](#)

The relationship between Stellenbosch University and the South African wine industry has a rich history, dating back more than 100 years. In 1925, Professor Abraham Izak Perold, the first professor in viticulture at Stellenbosch University, created the grape variety Pinotage for the industry by crossing Pinot Noir and Cinsaut.

"South Africa Wine remains dedicated to driving progress and excellence within the South African wine landscape through proactive research and innovation," says Gerard Martin, research, development and innovation executive at South Africa Wine. "That is why we partnered with various stakeholders in this project to grow the value of Chenin Blanc."

"Chenin Blanc was chosen as the project's focal point due to its widespread cultivation and growing reputation. Additionally, substantial industry expertise in crafting high-quality wines from Chenin Blanc grapes makes it an ideal candidate for exploration.

"The economic sustainability of wine producers in South Africa faces significant challenges, necessitating value growth in bulk and packaged wines. This initiative is designed to tackle these obstacles head-on through multidisciplinary methodologies. With a key emphasis on striking a delicate balance between grape yield and wine quality, the project aims to ensure the profitability of South African Chenin Blanc wines."

The value of this project lies in its holistic approach to examining the sustainability of the whole Chenin Blanc value chain.

Comprising five synergistic work streams, including:

- Market and Product Intelligence,
- Distinctive SA Chenin Blancs,
- Production for Profit,
- Juice to Wine, and
- Support Systems.

The project hopes to yield comprehensive insights into various aspects of viticulture and winemaking.

"This project underscores our longstanding belief in Chenin's adaptability, excellence, and potential to compete internationally," says Chenin Blanc Association (CBA) Chairman and co-founder Ken Forrester. "We are delighted to be a partner in advancing the research of South African Chenin Blanc and emphasise its significance in our industry."

A pivotal aspect of the project involves a model Chenin Blanc vineyard planted with 19 different trellising systems, generating scenarios ranging from very high to very low yields. This vineyard was a collaboration between Stellenbosch University and Vinpro to establish the Welgevallen vineyards with a generous financial investment from Vinpro. The Chenin Blanc vineyard represents all the trellising systems used across all the wine regions in South Africa, including irrigated and dryland systems.

Through rigorous experimentation and analysis, optimal microbial consortia, winemaking techniques, and production strategies will be identified to enhance the premiumisation of South African Chenin Blanc wines across all price categories.

The project builds on previous Chenin Blanc research, and funding will include student bursaries. The industry will receive the project's results through various knowledge transfer channels.

"Adopting a market-centric approach, the project endeavours to tailor grape production and winemaking processes to align with consumer preferences and market demands. Integrated data analyses, economic evaluations, and demonstrated results will drive data-driven decision-making and foster industry-wide innovation," says Prof Vivier.

"We are thrilled to embark on this collaborative journey to unlock the full potential of South African Chenin Blanc wines. By partnering with various industry stakeholders, we aim to drive sustainable growth and differentiation within the industry," she concludes.