

# Neethlingshof Harvest Report 2018

## **Dry yet Mild Conditions Ensure Quality and Elegance for Neethlingshof Harvest 2018**

Soils with superb water-retention abilities and an even, mild growing season led to Neethlingshof Estate cellar master De Wet Viljoen welcoming his 15<sup>th</sup> harvest at this Stellenbosch estate in a buoyant mood. This amidst the ongoing drought in the Western Cape that has seen South Africa's average grape harvest plunge to the lowest level in years.

"After three exceptionally dry years in the Cape, we always knew the 2018 harvest was going to be a lighter yielding harvest than usual," says Viljoen. "Last year, for example, Neethlingshof only saw 380mm of rain instead of the recorded average of 750mm. The viticulture teams were prepared, however, and having soils with good water-retention capabilities due to the high clay component helped immensely in making the most of the conditions. Throughout the growing season irrigation was applied judiciously and canopy management directed to literally see each bunch of grapes ripen perfectly and in balance, from bud-break, right up until harvest time."

The potential negative impact of the drought on this year's harvest were, however, countered by mild and temperate weather conditions during the growing season of bud-break, flowering, berry-set and veraison.

"Besides a bit of wind damage during flowering, the growing season was ideal in terms of sun exposure and temperatures, leading to even ripening and balanced chemistries in the fruit arriving at the cellar," says Viljoen. "I think this once again emphasised the beauty of Neethlingshof terroir. Gently sloping from 80m to 380m and exposed to the Atlantic Ocean of False Bay the farm benefits from the open nature of its geography. Add the Oak-leaf and Tukululu soils and yes, it is a very special site for wine growing and making."

This cooler growing period led to the harvest on Neethlingshof commencing 12 day later than average, the first Sauvignon Blanc grapes arriving at the cellar in the first week of February. From the outset, the quality of white varieties showed, with Sauvignon blanc, Gewürztraminer and Riesling exuding stunning aromatic qualities, while Chenin blanc and Chardonnay portrayed ideal balance between sugar and acids.

"The weather played along finely during harvest season," says Viljoen. "There were no Boland heat-waves to speak of – only in late February did we see the mercury edging into the mid-30°C on one or two isolated days. Nights were cool, ensuring the cellar team had grapes of vital health to work with the next day."

The quality of the 2018 white wine harvest can already be seen in the Neethlingshof Sauvignon blanc 2018, which was bottled in March. “The delicate nature of the wine, with a fine tropical character and overall balance on the palate gives us a good idea of this year’s overall white wine quality, with which we are more than happy.”

On the red wine side, Viljoen admitted to things not being easy due to the smaller berries providing a larger skin-to-juice ratio.

“The smaller berries were one of the clearest indications of the impact the drier conditions had on the vines,” he says. “This meant the wine making had to be careful and attentive to ensure excessive tannin was not extracted during the ferments. We all like to say that wine is made in the vineyard. But any wine maker working red grapes in 2018 will tell you that this year the human factor was as important as the natural one.”

The result, says Viljoen, is a vintage showing lower alcohols yet brilliant structure in the red wines. “The mild weather continued through the harvest, causing the later-ripening red varieties to be timid in terms of sugar levels, and as a result shier alcohols. But what the red wines currently aging in barrel do show is fruit concentration, refinement and regal structures. At Neethlingshof, this is especially evident in Pinotage, Cabernet Sauvignon and Malbec, and once released I am sure the Stellenbosch red wines from 2018 are going to go down as one of excellent and unique quality.”

With early-winter rain having fallen in the week of 23 April, Viljoen says it could not have come at a better time.

“The vines really worked hard to give such quality fruit, and deserve a long winter’s rest in cool, damp soils,” he says. “We are all hoping that this season brings the cold, wet winter conditions that have made Stellenbosch such an ideal region for viticulture and wine making.”