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# From inspiration to innovation

By Wanda Augustyn

*Peter Andrews,  
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Culture Wine Co.*

Inspired by his travels to South Africa, Peter Andrews was so impressed by the country's culture, sense of community, and world-class wines that he simply had to share his newfound insights with American wine lovers.

While studying wine, Peter remembers seeing photos depicting the sheer beauty of South Africa and vowing to visit the country one day. It took many years to fulfil that promise, but he eventually visited South Africa after leaving an executive role at a fine wine merchant based in Napa Valley. The experience surpassed his expectations and left him doubtless about the South African industry's potential for global recognition.

"While in South Africa, I was invited to the Good Juice Wine Fair," Peter says. "It opened my eyes to an energetic, vibrant and deeply supportive wine scene. The organisers fostered an environment of kindness, openness and authenticity, bringing together like-minded winemakers to create something special. I seized the opportunity to taste every wine and connect with each producer. It was refreshing to encounter a room filled with young, talented winemakers without any barriers to entry. What sets the South African wine scene apart





is its innovative spirit and collective commitment to cultivating an open, inclusive wine culture. Witnessing this community's camaraderie, knowledge sharing, and support is truly inspiring."

He delved deeper into South African wines, connected with more producers and explored every wine region in the country. "My goal was to share these newfound insights with the wine community in America."

Back home, he drafted a business plan and launched Culture Wine Co., the sole importer, wholesaler and e-commerce retailer in America exclusively dedicated to South African wine. A few months later, he returned to South Africa to pitch his business to producers and kickstart his venture. "Remarkably, only nine months had elapsed from attending the wine fair to receiving our first wines in America," he says. "It's incredible what can be achieved when inspiration strikes."

#### **How do you select South African wines for your business?**

When I officially decided to launch Culture Wine Co. I returned to South Africa, met with over 50 producers, tasted well over 500 wines, and traversed nearly 1 500 km. I aimed to create a portfolio with breadth and depth of price points, styles and producers.

Promoting diversity and inclusion in the wine industry is a core value of mine. It's crucial to see more representation of women and people of colour. There's a lack of diversity in the wine industry globally, so I'm proud to provide a platform for diverse voices to be heard through my work with Culture Wine Co. This commitment to diversity will always be a fundamental aspect of our partnership criteria.

My approach to selecting new producer-partners begins with prioritising high-quality, low-intervention wines that are consistent and free of flaws. This forms the foundation of my portfolio. Effective communication and strong collaboration with producers are also essential to our partnership. Building and nurturing relationships is critical to achieving success in the wine business. Regular check-ins ensure that both sides are aligned regarding sales, marketing and brand development.

#### **What characteristics or qualities do you look for in South African wines that distinguish them from wines of other regions?**

The strides South Africa has made in sustainable and regenerative farming, the emphasis on old bush vines and the incredible industry growth over the past 30 years post-apartheid make it a fascinating time to drink the wines. I particularly love the fresher, leaner, crunchier wine styles many of the younger producers

are making. Pinotage is a beautiful example of growth and change. While not all producers have embraced this shift, some have developed a style of Pinotage that beautifully showcases the best characteristics of both varieties in this Pinot Noir and Cinsault cross. With delicate tannins, lively acidity, lower alcohol, a focus on red fruits and flowers, and minimal to no use of neutral oak, the future looks bright for Pinotage. It's a revolutionary approach to reshaping perceptions among sommeliers and buyers in the American market.

#### **How do you navigate challenges associated with importing South African wines into California, such as regulations and logistics?**

Licensing in America is time-consuming and costly. But once you're up and running, label approvals are pretty straightforward. Advocating for more significant government support for the wine industry could lead to substantial growth and more reliable exports and benefit countless people nationwide. From discussions with producers, grape growers and officials, it's evident that increased financial and regulatory support can significantly enhance the industry's prospects. Comparisons with the EU's agricultural subsidies and their impact on export growth and market share in America underscore the potential benefits of similar measures for South Africa's wine sector.

#### **Are there specific regions or vineyards in South Africa that you find particularly intriguing or promising for wine production?**

There are so many intriguing regions throughout South Africa. The Swartland's intensity captivates me. It feels like a world away from home in the best possible way. The awe-inspiring beauty of Franschoek and Stellenbosch fills me with gratitude for the opportunity to represent South African wine. The coastal influence of Walker Bay reminds me so much of home in northern California. Among the many regions currently exciting me, Piekenierskloof stands out. The old vine Grenache and Cinsault from this area are phenomenal. I've long believed Grenache and Cinsault are best when sourced from mature vines, and what I'm witnessing in this region is truly remarkable. I've just dipped my toes into this region, but I can see its massive potential.

#### **What trends have you observed among your customers in California regarding demand for South African wines?**

I'm observing a significant need for education and a foundational understanding of South African wines. There's a prevailing misconception that South African wines are characterised by high alcohol content and

heavy use of new oak. However, when I introduce these fresh, mineral-driven wines that authentically express their terroir, sommeliers and buyers are pleasantly surprised. Many appointments with buyers end with gratitude for expanding their horizons and excitement for what's to come. Few wines achieve this as effectively as Bernhard Bredell's Scions of Sinai. His wines are reshaping the narrative around Pinotage and fostering confidence in investing in South African wines.

**How do you go about introducing South African wines to customers who may not be familiar with them?**

Fostering awareness of South African wine and growing Culture Wine Co. depends entirely on trust. If I can establish trust with buyers and sommeliers, they'll develop wine programmes centred around these wines. It's a lifelong endeavour, but I believe it's the right path forward. The same principle applies to consumers.

I consciously avoid using "value" on my website, marketing materials, or sales presentations. Elevating the image of the South African brand is essential to me, so I avoid selling solely based on value. While it's true that South Africa offers an incredible quality-to-price ratio, wine producers' dedication, the challenges they've overcome, and centuries of experience make South Africa worthy of more.

**Can you share any memorable experiences or success stories featuring South African wines?**

There's a renowned vegetarian restaurant in San Francisco called Greens. It was established in 1979, making it one of the oldest vegetarian restaurants in America. It's also known for its focus on top-quality produce. Thanks to the fantastic produce available in California, there's a lot of competition in this space, so to stand out as a leader takes incredible talent and determination. At my initial meeting with Greens' beverage director, I had the opportunity to introduce my version of new-wave benchmark South African wines and share my passion for them. He enthusiastically selected several wines for his award-winning programme and expressed his belief that Culture Wine Co. would become his go-to source for South African wine. It's seldom that someone's passion matches yours, as with this beverage director.

**What sets South African wines apart in the global wine market, and how does this influence your business strategy?**

The South African wine industry is characterised by a strong sense of community among winemakers, producers and

enthusiasts. This collaborative spirit fosters innovation, knowledge sharing and mutual support.

South Africa's wine industry has also demonstrated remarkable resilience, including facing political challenges, load shedding, and sharp economic fluctuations head-on. The industry's positivity in responding to these significant challenges inspires me. Then there's the country's diverse terroir and microclimates, which contribute to producing a wide range of wine styles.

South Africa is home to many old vines, some over a century old. Despite their lower yield and revenue potential, these old vines produce grapes of exceptional quality, contributing to the unique character of South African wines. I aim to support wines made from these old vines and the Old Vine Project as much as possible.

South Africa offers a diverse range of outstanding wines across numerous varieties. Consumers have many choices, from dry to sweet and still to Cap Classique. I believe Cap Classique has a significant runway in the American market. As for still wines, the Rhône reds, Pinotage, Cinsault and Chenin Blanc, particularly from older vines, provide compelling reasons for consumers and the trade to explore South Africa's wine offerings further.

**Looking to the future, do you see any evolving opportunities or challenges for sourcing South African wines for Culture Wine Co.?**

South Africa is packed with opportunity! It starts with open-minded and talented people, which South Africa has plenty of. With thousands of acres of old bush vines, two world-class winemaking schools training talented young producers, a vibrant food and wine scene, and breathtaking natural beauty, the potential is endless. I firmly believe I need to encourage more Americans to visit South Africa. One visit – and tourists will become ambassadors for and seek out South African wines stateside for life.

I admire the impactful work that the South Africa Wine Transformation and Development Department has done. I'm eager to engage with them as I continue to grow actively. It's essential to prioritise diversity and amplify various voices and perspectives in the wine industry.

The Cape Winemakers Guild Protégé programme holds a special significance for me. I'd like to bring a similar programme to America, possibly partnering with the CWG. Similar initiatives should exist in every winemaking region. Kudos to the CWG for spearheading this exceptional programme. ■