

Heaven & Earth

In the Cape South Coast region of South Africa's Western Cape lies an area so breathtakingly idyllic, its name is the stuff of poetry: Hemel-en-Aarde, or "heaven and earth" in Afrikaans.

Incredibly fitting, the name paints a perfect picture. Near endless expanses of sky are met with lush undulating peaks and valleys in complete panoramic perfection, with reflections from bodies of water glimmering in view.

About 50 miles southeast from Cape Town, Hemel-en-Aarde is located within the Walker Bay district and overlooks the seaside resort town of Hermanus and the South Atlantic Ocean. It is one of the coolest and most southerly winegrowing parts of South Africa, with a distinct maritime influence to its Mediterranean climate. The conditions are ideal for the production of fresh and well-balanced wines of high quality and finesse.

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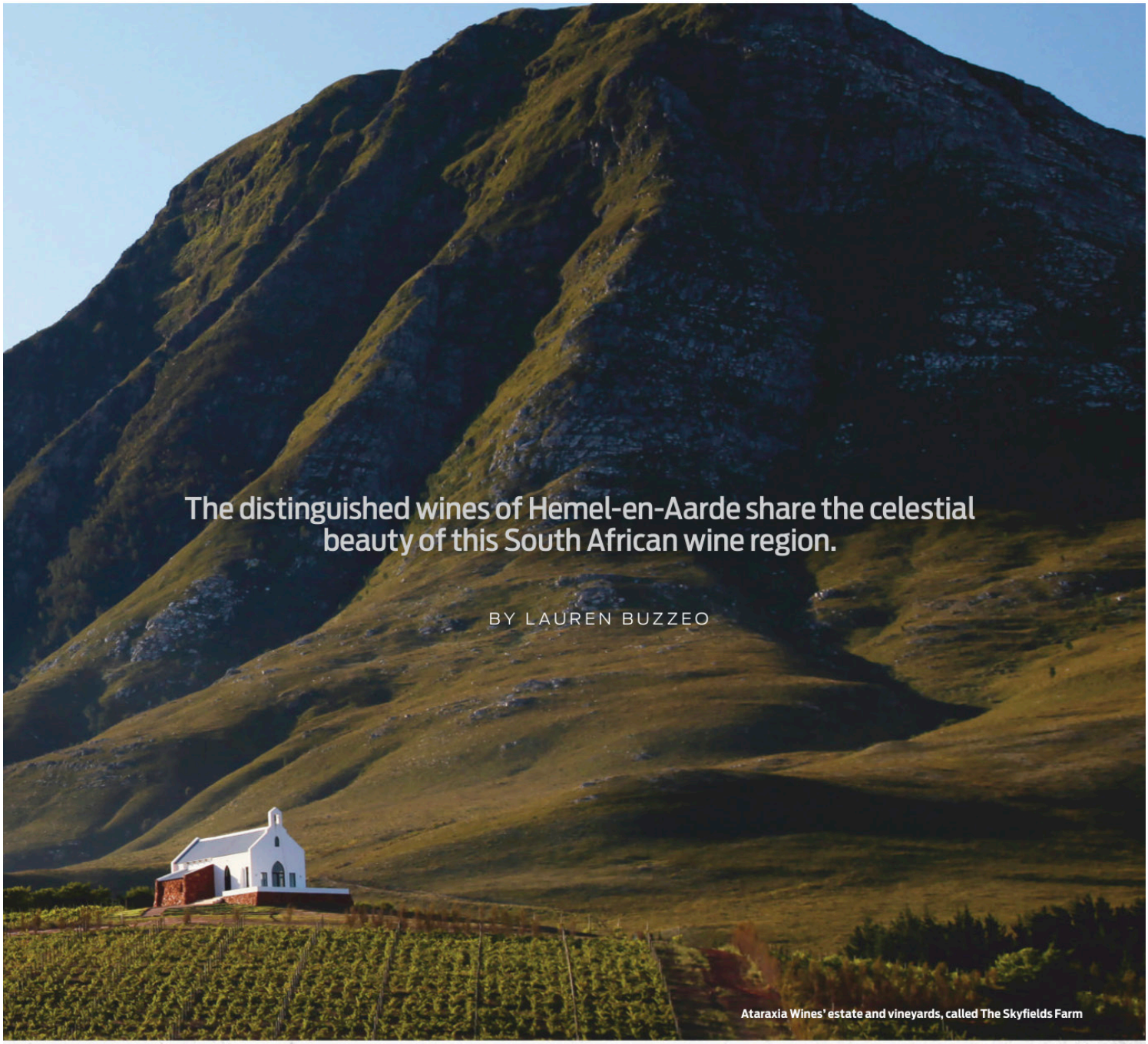

The distinguished wines of Hemel-en-Aarde share the celestial beauty of this South African wine region.

BY LAUREN BUZZEO

Ataraxia Wines' estate and vineyards, called The Skyfields Farm

"The advantages of a cool-climate region like the Hemel-en-Aarde are natural acidity together with physiological ripening," says Jean-Claude Martin, co-owner/viticulturist and cellar master at Creation Wines. "Benefits include freshness, ageability and excellent food pairing potential."

Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, two cool-climate varieties that benefit from such climatic conditions, thrive here. Thanks to the ocean proximity and cooling breezes, with some vineyard sites as close as a mile to Walker Bay, vines are able to retain vibrant natural acidity throughout ripening to offer both freshness and flavor in the wines they ultimately yield.

With three distinct wards, or subregions, and the majority of vineyards planted anywhere from 650 to 1,300 feet above sea level, Hemel-en-Aarde is a haven for fans of refined, terroir-driven fine wine.

ATARAXIA WINES

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An aerial image of Hamilton Russell, Ashbourne and Southern Right vineyards in Hemel-en-Aarde

A Brief History

Officially, Hemel-en-Aarde's wine history is relatively short. While there have been findings that date wine production here to the early 1900s and likely even earlier, many cite 1975 as the key year in the establishment of the quality-driven wine region as it stands today.

That year, Johannesberg advertising executive and longtime Hermanus visitor Tim Hamilton Russell purchased a roughly two-and-a-half acre property in the Hemel-en-Aarde area with the intent to develop a wine estate. He planted a range of varieties and hired a winemaker from Franschhoek, Peter Finlayson, to make the first wines from the 1981 vintage.

"Several varieties were planted along with Pinot Noir: Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Gewürztraminer and Sauvignon Blanc, among a few others," says Anthony Hamilton Russell, Tim Hamilton Russell's son and the current owner of Hamilton Russell Vineyards. "Chardonnay wasn't available in South Africa at the time the first Pinot Noir was planted in 1976. My father creatively sourced material—a Swiss 'Champagne' clone—and propagated it in our farm nursery. I think it was 1979 that the first Chardonnay vines went in on Hamilton Russell Vineyards. The first Chardonnay made was the 1982 vintage—one of the very first in SA—and the first commercial release was the 1983 vintage."

Before long, it was clear that Chardonnay and Pinot Noir showed the greatest promise for quality wine and optimal site expression from Hemel-en-Aarde vineyards. When Anthony took over the estate in 1991, it was easy for him to decide the winery would focus exclusively on those two varieties.

As the unique characteristics of this special terroir came to light, earning accolades and appreciation at home and abroad, winemaking talent increasingly came to the appellation to develop properties of their own.

"Both white and red wines in the greater Hemel-en-Aarde have a defining texture to them with subtle underlying structure—a function of the low-yielding soils," says Hannes Storm, owner/winemaker of Storm Wines, who launched his Hemel-en-Aarde winery in 2012. "Furthermore, most of the wines have good length and acidities due to the low-yielding soils and maritime influence from the cool Atlantic Ocean and prevailing wind direction."

Today, there are more than 20 wine producers based in Hemel-en-Aarde, with more on the way. Staying true to the region's roots, many remain small, limited-production, family-owned operations of first or second generation.

"The standout feature [of the region] has been the growth in the number of producers—two more about to join the ranks—and a surprising level of varietal focus on Pinot Noir and Chardonnay as the leading quality varieties for the area," says Russell. "Overall standards of quality have without doubt improved significantly over the last decade as people get to know their properties and the stylistic constraints of their terroirs better."

LEFT: HAMILTON RUSSELL VINEYARDS; RIGHT: CREATION WINES

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Creation Wines

Defining the Divine

Hemel-en-Aarde initially came onto the scene as a part of the Walker Bay appellation. Officially designated in 1981, Walker Bay was first defined as a ward, or the smallest, most specific and specialized appellation of a demarcated viticultural area. However, as more producers populated the Walker Bay winegrowing area, and varying microclimates, soil compositions, stylistic tendencies and techniques asserted themselves, it became increasingly clear that the Hemel-en-Aarde area was distinct from the region at large.

In May 2004, Walker Bay was reclassified from a ward to a district, or a designated viticultural area that's larger and less homogenous than a ward but still with distinct climatic conditions.

Following that, the producers of Hemel-en-Aarde were presented with the opportunity to better define their own unique terroir.

More specialized wards were demarcated with the help of viticulturists, soil specialists and consultants.

"The development of the three appellations has contextualized the differences and commonalities of these wards, allowing an accumulation of knowledge and understanding within each ward that has already seen a crystalizing of stylistic differences within each—some subtle, some marked—however all still with a discernable thread of overarching filialness which sets these wines collectively apart from those produced in other areas of the Cape Winelands," says Kevin Grant, co-owner/winemaker of Ataraxia Wines.

The first two wards were approved in August 2006: Hemel-en-Aarde Valley and Upper Hemel-en-Aarde Valley.

The former is the first appellation you encounter when you depart Hermanus to the northeast, which makes it the closest to Walker Bay and climatic influence from the Atlantic Ocean. It's home to the first vineyards planted in the area, mostly north facing, with soil largely composed of Bokkeveld Shale and clay. For the most part, these conditions result in wines with great tannic structure, with deep fruit and floral tones.

The high clay content here can be considered comparable to that in the soil of Burgundy's Côte d'Or, though the soils are shallower, stonier and absent of the limestone bedrock iconic to that region.

On south-facing and higher northern slopes, the soils are more Table Mountain Sandstone-derived. With very low to no clay content, they are lighter in structure, generally deeper and have the potential to encourage greater vine vigor.

Upper Hemel-en-Aarde is the second appellation as you proceed northeast from Hermanus. The largest of the three Hemel-en-Aarde wards, it tends to see ripening later than the Hemel-en-Aarde Valley appellations, and it boasts more of the lighter structured Table Mountain Sandstone-derived soils, although some sites also exhibit a clay-rich subsoil.

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Harvest at Storm Wines

This ward often yields expressions with more pronounced opulence and concentration on the nose, but a softer, more linear impression on the palate, and often with noticeable tones of herbs and fynbos.

In June 2009, the third ward, Hemel-en-Aarde Ridge, was introduced. The smallest of the area's appellations, the soils here return to Bokkeveld Shale-derived dominance, with many vineyards planted on stony, clay-rich soil.

The appellation has an amphitheater-like landscape, so vineyards are planted on many different aspects, with site altitudes that are generally higher than those in the other two wards. Ripening generally occurs later as well, which lends a structured concentration to the fruit sourced here, but in partnership with pronounced natural acidity.

"I am comfortable with the Hemel-en-Aarde Ridge," says Martin. "The most significant advantage is our virus-free vineyards, which will soon be the oldest in the Hemel-en-Aarde. Quality of vines and age have an impact on the complexity of the wines. We have winter frost due to our elevation, which creates a complete dormancy period; therefore, even budding of Chardonnay in spring creates crop stability. The cool night index is a significant contributor to the depth of color, aromatics and flavor purity of red wines."

"Each of the three terroirs that we work with give us the opportunity to steer the grapes to the bottle in the same manner with contrasting characteristics," says Storm. "This makes it exciting and there is always a wine for a different occasion. Being the only producer to work in all three wards, steering the three different terroirs to bottle in the same manner is always exciting."

8 Heavenly Wines to Try

94 **Alheit 2017 Hemelrand Vine Garden (Hemel-en-Aarde Ridge); $40.** Broadbent Selections Inc.

94 **Storm 2018 Ridge Pinot Noir (Hemel-en-Aarde Ridge); $46.** Broadbent Selections Inc.

93 **Creation 2019 The Art of Chardonnay (Walker Bay); $65.** Cape Ardor LLC.

93 **Hamilton Russell 2019 Chardonnay (Hemel-en-Aarde Valley); $43.** Vineyard Brands.

92 **Ashbourne 2017 Pinotage (Hemel-en-Aarde Valley); $58.** Vineyard Brands.

92 **Ataraxia 2016 Pinot Noir (Hemel-en-Aarde Ridge); $48.** Red Wolf Imports.

92 **Cap Maritime 2018 Pinot Noir (Upper Hemel-en-Aarde Valley); $54.** Vineyard Brands.

92 **Tesselaarsdal 2019 Chardonnay (Hemel-en-Aarde Ridge); $40.** Vineyard Brands.

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Bouchard Finlayson Winery

A Bright Future

The amount of international interest in and accolades for this small region and its wines in such a relatively short period of time is nothing short of impressive, as well as absolutely warranted.

"Huge progress has been made in the past decade, in the sense that wines have more character, soul and longevity," says Storm. "Focus has largely shifted to viticulture and soil management/preservation while winemaking/cellar actions are mainly seen as secondary to cultivating balanced and healthy fruit in the vineyard."

"High-quality grapes, innovation in winemaking skills, experimenting with amphorae terracota pots and whole-bunch fermentation have all added to this internationally well-known wine region and award-winning wines," says Berene Sauls, owner of Tesselaarsdal.

After years of working in the region, Sauls launched her brand in 2015. She currently buys fruit from a vineyard in the Hemel-en-Aarde Ridge while she waits for her own vineyards to be planted and ready for production on her property in the village of Tesselaarsdal, in the Overberg district.

In examining what has driven success and worked best viticulturally for Hemel-en-Aarde thus far, some producers also consider the possible effects of climate change in future.

"At present, we are remarkably focused varietally for a South African wine area—73% of plantings are made up of only three grape varieties: Pinot Noir 28%, Chardonnay 23%, Sauvignon Blanc 22%, all early-ripening grapes," says Russell.

"One of the attractions of the Hemel-en-Aarde is that various producers have a specialty aside from Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. This adds a little depth and has not really detracted from our area's primary focus. Highly successful examples would be Restless River's Cabernet Sauvignon, Ashbourne's Pinotage, Southern Right's Sauvignon Blanc, Newton Johnson's Albariño, Bouchard Finlayson's Hannibal and Creation's Viognier."

"Climate change is a fact that we have to acknowledge and contend with," says Grant. "We must factor this into our future farming and business plans… Above all, we need to experiment with candidate grape cultivars that could potentially thrive and be happy here. If we are not experimenting, we are not going to be in a position to change and adapt when the time for it comes."

LEFT: STORM WINES; RIGHT: BOUCHARD FINLAYSON WINERY

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