

Tasting notes

We talk to our plants, so why not play them music? **Tim Atkin** hears why some vineyard owners are turning up the volume



Stroll through the vineyards of the De Morgenzon farm in Stellenbosch and the sound that surrounds you is literally music to your ears.

It may have to compete with the chatter of pruners or the mechanical chug of a tractor, but 24 hours a day, pieces by Bach, Corelli and Albinoni are piped through outdoor speakers into the South African air.

Music and wine have a well-established affinity. The wine merchant Berry Brothers & Rudd recently published its "perfect play lists" to accompany some of its selections, including a red Burgundy with, er, Neil Young's "Four Strong Winds", while Chilean winery Montes discovered a few years ago that consumers' perceptions of a wine were affected by different styles of music.

No large New World cellar is complete without a powerful stereo system. The biggest I've ever seen is at Cloudy Bay, where the noise levels wouldn't sound out of place at a heavy metal concert. The local rule is that anyone can put on a CD, but it has to be played in full. Its former winemaker, Kevin Judd, told me that he regularly put on the Andrews Sisters before he went out for an hour.

What's new about the music at De Morgenzon is that it's aimed at vines, not vineyard workers. I've heard of people hugging trees or talking to their plants, but not of anyone regaling their grapes with a play list



that is pure Classic FM. Talking of which, the owner, Hylton Appelbaum, was the man who created this very station in South Africa, so he's not short of inspiration or, one suspects, CDs.

According to Appelbaum, his vines respond to a very particular style of classical music. Rock, pop, rap, techno and jazz don't have the same effect. Nor, surprisingly, do choral works; maybe the vines don't like being serenaded in German. What they enjoy is something harmonious and melodious; in short, wordless baroque music.

How does he know the vines are responding to the music? Because they grow more vigorously and look more healthy, apparently. Moderate vigour is a good thing in a vineyard. Within reason, a vine with a bigger surface area of leaves increases

photosynthesis and, as a result, sugar and flavour accumulation in its grapes.

Appelbaum's claims have scientific backing. In 2007, researchers at South Korea's National Institute of Agricultural Biotechnology found classical music triggered a response in two specific genes (*rbcS* and *Ald*) in rice plants. In the same year, some pointy heads at Trakya University in Turkey found "relaxing, calming and mentally invigorating music" had a positive effect on root growth in onions during germination.

The De Morgenzon website (www.de-morgenzon.com) has lots of interesting snippets about wine and music. But these would be largely irrelevant if the Appelbaums' wine was mediocre or worse. I'm delighted to report it's one of the best examples of Chenin in the Cape, made with the help of consultant and Chenin Blanc guru, Teddy Hall. The **2006 De Morgenzon Chenin Blanc, Stellenbosch** (£18.50, 14.5%, Fortnum & Mason, www.fortnumandmason.com) is big, but not over-ripe, with perky acidity and balanced flavours of oak, apples, honey and tropical fruit.

How does it stack up against other top Cape Chenins? To find out, try the spicy, creamy, vanilla-perfumed **2008 Morgenhof Chenin Blanc, Stellenbosch** (£10.99, 13.5%, Waitrose); the bold, pineapple, turbo-charged **2008 Ken Forrester The FMC Chenin Blanc, Stellenbosch** (£17.99, 14%, www.waitrosewine.com), or the more focused, quince and mineral-like **2008 Raats Chenin Blanc** (£10.19, 13.5%, www.sawinesonline.co.uk). Make sure you're sitting near a stereo when you do. And no prizes for guessing what music I'd recommend. ★

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Last week, we said that the answer to question 1 of our Christmas quiz was A. It is in fact B - there are six litres of wine in an Impériale

Ask Tim

Q A few years ago we bought a bargain bin end bottle at Morrison's - an unusual spicy red like no other wine we had tasted before. Or since, because, like fools, we didn't make a note of what it was. We have "chased the dragon" ever since, but despite promises of a spicy flavour it is never really lived up to. Can you recommend a couple of truthfully spicy reds? We don't really drink much any more, so are willing to invest or pay that little bit more. **Sarah and Andy Page**

A The spiciest red grape by far is Syrah, especially if it's grown in a cooler climate. Try the 2006 Mayu Syrah Reserva, Elqui Valley (£8.32, 14%, Asda) or 2007 Qupé Bien Nacido Syrah, Santa Maria Valley (£19.99, or £15.99 each for two, 14%, Majestic)

Q Dear Tim, For a variety of reasons, I have decided to abstain during January. This is the first time I've actually tried to stay off alcohol for any extended period and so far, so good. On 1 February, I want to celebrate with a special bottle of red and am wondering whether you have any suggestions around the £40 mark? **Tom Ballantyne**

A Welcome back to the land of the living, Tom. Might I suggest the 2005 Roda Reserva Rioja (£29.99, 14%, Oddbins), which is a delicious, modern-style Rioja? It will age for a while, but it's also delicious now, so might I suggest you buy two bottles and keep one for another day?

If you have a wine question for Tim, email ask.tim@observer.co.uk

Buy of the week



2008 Sacred Hill Hawkes Bay Chardonnay

£8.99, 13.5%, Sainsbury's

Kiwi Chardonnay gets better by the vintage. This shows peach, melon and citrus fruit with fresh acidity and beautifully integrated oak