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South Africa’s wine researchers deliver strong results on lean budgets.

Industry leaders said tighter margins, climate pressure and water constraints now threaten that edge.

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South Africa’s wine researchers are producing strong results despite working with less money and fewer people than many of their peers abroad, according to scientists and industry figures who met at a recent South Africa Wine research event near Paarl in the Western Cape.

At the Research, Development and Innovation Celebration and Awards hosted by South Africa Wine, speakers said the industry now faces a practical question: how to protect and expand that research base at a time when wine producers are dealing with tighter margins, climate pressure, water constraints, and changing consumer demand.

Dr. Albert Strever, a lecturer in Stellenbosch University’s Department of Viticulture and Oenology, said local researchers continue to generate important research, innovation, and postgraduate training even though institutions in Australia, California, and France have much larger resources. He said South Africa continues to produce high-quality students and scientific output each year despite limited funding and capacity.

That strength has also made South African researchers attractive abroad. Erhard Wolf, a retired industry leader who chaired the panel discussion, said local specialists are being recruited internationally, a sign of the expertise built inside the country’s wine sector. He said retaining that talent matters, even if overseas demand also reflects well on the quality of South African research.

Several participants said the next step is not only to preserve academic output, but to improve the way research is financed, organized, and applied in vineyards and wineries. The issue carries wider importance for the beverage business because research in wine can shape practical responses to water use, climate risk, and product development, including lower-alcohol and no-alcohol wines that are drawing more attention in global drinks markets.

Dr. Pierre van Rensburg, global wine technology lead at AB Mauri, used Australia as an example of how a better-funded system can support research with direct commercial use. He pointed to a three-year Australian project focused on improving the quality of low- and no-alcohol wines that received A$6 million, which he said is about R66 million. He said Australian wine research benefits from several channels, including industry levies, a dedicated wine research fund, and government research programs. That mix, he said, gives the sector more room to back projects that could be difficult to fund through levies alone.

Van Rensburg drew a distinction between scientific productivity and practical return. He said Europe performs strongly in scientific publications and postgraduate training, but argued that Australia has been particularly effective at turning research spending into outcomes that the wine industry can use. At the same time, he cautioned that Australia's own research model is under pressure. Changes in Wine Australia's funding priorities have already contributed to staff cuts at the Australian Wine Research Institute, raising concern about whether that country can maintain the same level of impact.

For South Africa, panelists said one lesson is the need to broaden the sources of money that support research and innovation. Strever said the sector needs more backing not only for academic work, but also for the step that comes after a promising idea emerges: turning it into a viable business or usable tool. Venture capital could help in some cases, he said, but access to that type of funding remains difficult locally. Helping young businesses grow around wine innovation, he suggested, should form part of the wider support system.

Speakers also said the industry needs to focus more carefully on which problems it wants researchers to solve. Dr. Etienne Terblanche, consultation service manager at Vinpro, said South Africa Wine's research calls are shaped by input from industry participants and committee structures. Researchers are first asked to submit short concept proposals, and only selected ideas move on to full applications. He said that approach creates space for fresh ideas while still allowing committees to test whether a proposal matches industry needs.

Dr. Eduard Hoffman, a retired researcher and lecturer, said the system has changed over time. In earlier years, he said, research priorities were heavily influenced by feedback from producers at information days and by advice from industry consultants, while the Agricultural Research Council carried out much of the work. As the council's capacity weakened, more of that work moved to universities, and researchers themselves became more active in introducing project ideas.

Hoffman said the introduction of flagship projects, built around strategic planning and industry input, helped bring together researchers from different disciplines. He said those projects produced useful results, including new methods for water management. Panelists said that model could be pushed further by concentrating limited expertise into two or three large programs focused on shared problems. Under that structure, researchers could work on different parts of the same challenge instead of spreading effort too thinly across many small projects. Van Rensburg said he supported a stronger emphasis on coordinated flagship programs.

The case for that kind of focus has grown as conditions in vineyards become more complex. Strever said current research programs have been responsive to issues such as water availability and resilience to climate change. Sandra Lamprecht said soilborne diseases deserve more attention within the broader push toward soil health. She also pointed to the effect of climate change on plant disease patterns, saying the industry needs a better understanding of how those risks are shifting.

Participants said scientific progress alone will not help the industry unless producers trust it and use it. Marko Roux, a private vineyard consultant, argued that growers should be involved throughout the research process, from shaping a concept and testing it to putting results into practice. He said that kind of participation can improve the chance that producers will adopt new methods in a meaningful way.

Roux also said communication matters. Information, he said, has to be presented in forms that fit the audience, noting that a 25-year-old producer and a 66-year-old producer may absorb information in very different ways. That issue is likely to become more important as the industry tries to spread technical findings more widely across farms with different ownership structures, experience levels, and management styles.

Hoffman said water management remains one of the clearest examples of the gap between research and everyday practice. He said studies have shown that producers can often use less water, yet some still follow long-established irrigation habits. When researchers asked why, he said, growers often referred to their consultants’ recommendations. Hoffman criticized what he described as a tendency to hand responsibility for problems to consultants and then switch advisers when the suggested

approach does not produce the desired result.

He said farmers need to make fuller use of sensors, data, and other available tools to understand conditions on their own farms and to stay directly involved in diagnosing problems, weighing advice, and choosing solutions. In his view, stronger producer engagement is essential if research is to deliver gains in efficiency and resilience.

The debate comes at a time when many wine-producing regions are trying to balance research ambitions with tighter budgets and market uncertainty. In South Africa’s case, the speakers suggested that the sector has already shown it can deliver strong work with limited means. The question now is whether it can build a more stable system around that capability, one that links funding, scientific priorities, and on-farm adoption more closely and gives emerging researchers room to stay and work in the industry.

Wolf closed the discussion by urging the sector to support younger researchers and remain open to their ideas while also drawing on the experience of established specialists.