

## **Pinotage – Very Special South African Varietal**

by Andre Morgenthal

Pinotage Pioneer Beyers Truter (the man behind benchmark Kanonkop Pinotage, Beyerskloof and now also Bouwland) was once quoted as saying he could easily marry Pinotage. For those who have 25 years year-old bushvines on their farms, Pinotage is not just another variety in their repertoire. Pinotage has become an ambassador for our country – as Zinfandel is to the USA, Sauvignon Blanc to New Zealand and Shiraz to Australia. For groundbreaking vintners like Beyers, Jan Boland Coetzee (Vriesenhof), Jeremy Walker (Grangehurst and Hidden Valley) and Danie Steytler (Kaapzicht), Pinotage is a vinous religion.

It was Professor Abraham Perold, an academic at the University of Stellenbosch who, in 1924, cross-pollinated Pinot Noir with Hermitage (also known as Cinsaut). He was the first professor of viti- and viniculture at the University of Stellenbosch and later Dean of the faculty of Agriculture. It was in his garden at home, on the banks of the Eerste River on the Universitys experimental farm Welgevallen, that he crossed Hermitage (male) with pollen donor Pinot Fin (a very pure French Pinot variety). He physically brushed the flowers against each other and the result was only four seeds. By 1934 Welgevallen had almost 80 producing Pinotage vines, grafted on new, virus free Richter 57 and 99 rootstocks.

It is not known why Perold selected these two varieties - Pinot, the ‘prince of the red grapes’ and the very ordinary Hermitage. One theory is based on fact that Pinot Noir is not well suited to our climate and the results were often (and in many cases still are) disappointing, compared to Pinot from Burgundy. The vigorous growth and adaptability of Hermitage possibly appealed to the innovative Professor. His vision was of a cultivar with the healthy composure it proved to have in our terroir - as in Hermitage - but with the elegance and character of the Noble Pinot Noir.

Professor Perold left the university for KWV and it was only in 1935, while he was visiting his successor, Dr C J Theron, that they named the new variety ‘Pinotage’ - up to then known as ‘Perolds Hermitage x Pinot’. The first commercial planting of Pinotage was in 1943 on the Farm Myrtle Grove in Sir Lowrys Pass.

Stellenbosch Farmers Winery first used the Pinotage on a label in 1961, with a 1959 Lanzerac Pinotage made with grapes from the farm Bellevue. At the same time this Pinotage and one from Kanonkop came out tops in the Cape Wine Show, tasted against classic red varieties. The wines showed more intense colour than their parents, well balanced with good fruit expression and excellently balanced.

The story so far:

Professor Abraham Perold, an academic at the University of Stellenbosch cross-pollinated Pinot Noir with Hermitage in 1924. His vision was of a cultivar with the healthy composure it proved to have in our terroir - as in Hermitage - but with the elegance and character of the Noble Pinot Noir. Local success initially led to optimism however ...

The first international assessment of South African Pinotage was not favourable. 1976 saw a party of British Wine Masters comparing the Pinotage flavour spectrum with that of ‘rusty nails’, ‘nail varnish’, ‘acetone’ as well as ‘hot and horrible’.

In the light of this negative judgment, well-established Pinotage vines were pulled out and new plantings came to a standstill, although a few growers remained faithful to the variety. The first resurgence in its popularity was in 1987, when Diners Club dedicated their annual Winemaker of the Year Competition to Pinotage and the resulting publicity sparked new interest.

Consumers opened long-forgotten Pinotage from the 60s and 70s and were pleasantly surprised at the longevity of the wine in bottle - even outshining the favoured Cabernet Sauvignon. Local interest was spurred on by the variety's first international recognition in 1991 - when Beyers Truter won the Robert Mondavi Trophy for 'International Winemaker of the Year' at the International Wine and Spirit Competition (London) with a 1989 Kanonkop Pinotage. As a result, a separate class for Pinotage was established.

To top it all, the British MWs returned in the early 90s, this time with comments like 'excellent wine and grape variety with tremendous potential', 'the future of South Africa', 'diverse with flavours to make a spectrum of wines' and 'Pinotage should be taken seriously'. The scene was set for an entrance into the world market. Politically, the arrival of an oenological ambassador for South Africa was well timed with the arrival of President Nelson in the international arena.

Currently, the Pinotage Association of South Africa promotes the cultivar both locally and internationally, not only amongst consumers but, perhaps more importantly, involving producers with research into Pinotage, setting quality standards and establishing different styles relating to various target markets.

Judging by the comments raised from both local and overseas buyers and journalists at a Pinotage symposium hosted by the South African Wine and Spirits Export Association at Cape Wine 2000, Pinotage is making serious inroads in the world market. Pinotage is already a respected international cultivar with plantings in California, Canada, South of France and New Zealand.

The quality and world standard improves with every vintage and is confirmed at tastings like the one at Cape Wine 2000. The support of institutions like ABSA contributes to the cultivar's status and credibility, showing the South African business sectors involvement with and belief in the Pinotage success story. Producers are making history happen every day in their cellars and vineyards. The definitive serious Pinotage producer of the future in South Africa will proudly stand next to the Australian Shiraz, Californian Zinfandel and New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc producers internationally.