

Marketing Pinotage to the Swiss

16 June 2004 by Kim Maxwell

Don't bother with unwooded versions in this market.

Cape Town-based Andy Zimmerman sells South African wine labels in Switzerland, trading as Kapweine. With a logo, 'Premium wines from the Cape', it's clear where his focus lies.

Zimmerman's honest realism delivered to winemaker members of the Pinotage Association may have burst the idealistic bubble for some though, especially those with unwooded examples in the regional line-up of young 2004 Pinotage. His message to South Africans was: offer your best shot in quality terms, and don't bother with unwooded Pinotage in Switzerland.

The agent said he made the mistake of pushing Pinotage when he entered the Swiss market eight years ago, but consumer ignorance about South Africa - and Pinotage - convinced him that good South African wine needs to be promoted as a category first. Swiss consumers have long-term associations with SA wine competitors Italy, France, Spain and Portugal, as these countries generally have a longer track record and promotion history. A delivery of wines from Italy to Switzerland also takes around three days, whereas the average South African consignment takes six weeks.

He advises using classic South African Bordeaux blends with elegance and finesse, top-end Shiraz and more recently, Sauvignon Blanc, to open doors. After that, quality Pinotage can slip inside. 'If you look at the local market, top-end Shiraz or Bordeaux blends are more expensive than top-end Pinotage, and the international market is also like that. We need Bordeaux blends to introduce a quality South African wine image. Maybe a Pinotage Cape Blend will even work,' he says.

Despite this synergistic approach to wine marketing, Zimmerman has specific ideas on Pinotage styles that sell. Noting that Zurich is the major wine-buying market with a strong restaurant clientele, he criticises the fully ripe, over-extracted style that's been 'overdone' in the past. This applies to Pinotage, as well as Aussie or South African Shiraz. Zimmerman advocates wines with elegance and finesse over extraction. 'With Shiraz, South Africans had to say, do we do Old World or New World, or find our own style? With Pinotage, let the terroir and vintage speak. Lean towards weather patterns. If it's a dry, hot vintage, go New World. If there is more Bordeaux-like weather, head for an Old World style.'

Zimmerman favours a lighter, fruitier style at Swiss commercial level. Fruity doesn't mean jammy though. This is more agreeable, readily consumable but definitely oaked style.' Look to the success of French-stave-fermented Beyerskloof by way of example, producing 60,000 - 80,000 cases of Bottelary fruit, and selling at R30/?3.

Lastly, Zimmerman reminds of the interconnected relationship between Pinotage and food, providing an excellent promotional opportunity for South African wine in Swiss restaurants. 'Game dishes really work with Pinotage.'

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