

Wild Ferment - A new column by Bruce Jack

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Bruce Jack ranks among South Africa's top winemakers and his Flagstone wines are consistently celebrated by the world of wine's most revered opinion leaders. Bruce is a man of many talents and also holds a Master of Letters from St Andrews University, Scotland (among many other credentials). In **Wild Ferment** he intends to share his opinions and insights on WineNews. In this first contribution, Bruce enlightens us as to **Why Pinotage is a Cool Grape** in his books.

Recently one of Germany's top wine writers, Hamburg-based Gero von Randow, writing in a national wine magazine, told us to forget about Pinotage completely as he had never tasted a good one in his life.

When internationally recognised wine commentators tell us to stop making Pinotage, they mean it. They have been thrown out of the saddle by this capricious grape. Often they have been unnerved by a bad Pinotage experience; sometimes parading under some European-bottled, cheap, unheard-of brand.

We should all be grateful they even consider us worthy of their powerful opinions and expensive column inches. And criticism, especially if it is intended to be constructive, is always good, and always welcome. We should reflect on this criticism.

Pinotage is easy to knock, like the thin, small boy in the nursery playground whose mom makes him wear socks with his sandals, and fills his lunch box with sugar-free carrot cake. What untapped potential rumbles under that fragile exterior, I can't help but wonder? There's always the chance that one day he might just buy the company I slave for and fire my ass! So I am cautious about knocking new, stuttering varieties or wine styles.

It is true that many Pinotage wines are not very nice; a few on the market are horrible. This is true of Pinot Noir in Burgundy as well. There certainly isn't yet the consistency of style and quality you can get from Cab or Shiraz. When I came home from working in the Barossa, I couldn't wait to make Pinotage, for those very reasons.

The challenge of Pinotage tingles deep down in your gut. Our Pinotage in Tulbagh is the first red to start colouring up. Seeing those first signs of veraison fires up the adrenalin boiler-room for vintage.

Like a skittish, taut race horse Pinotage grows in fits and starts, nervously eyeing the weather. You ease it through the heat and eventually lead it down to the racetrack, whispering encouragement. In the winery it can bolt, throw you off and kick your head open. It is unruly, proud, irrepressible, jumpy, powerful and arrogant. You can understand why some people shoot race horses when they break a leg. Of what worth is a grape that will not be harnessed and run in the right direction?

What I've learnt is that Pinotage doesn't like the racetrack rules. Chemically, biologically and by nature it doesn't play by them. It falls into the non-conformist category. It really needs to be ridden in the veldt, over uneven ground, through thorny, dense trees and at breakneck speed.

Aren't we all in some way attracted to outsiders? Pinotage is an outsider grape, prone to temperamental fits of failure. Caution reminds us it's embarrassing being associated with failure, but that doesn't stop most of us celebrating the thrilling challenge Pinotage offers in abundance.

Pinotage is all about the risk and the capricious reward. Pinotage, again like its bloodline Pinot Noir, is

the unpredictable, dangerous ride of your life's work as a winemaker. It can smell fear on a winemaker at 20 paces. But if wine pushes your button, making a good wine from a difficult grape is like pushing ten. It's an awesome sense of achievement!

I am biased, however. I have tasted and drunk wonderful, emotionally rallying small-scale, hand-made Pinotage. For those moments of beauty, it's more than worth the wild ride.

*Bruce's column is called Wild Ferment for a reason. WineNews wants to elicit debate about the topics raised here and in our experience few topics get the industry talking like Pinotage does. Please give us your (constructive and courteous!) five cents' worth by using the **COMMENT** icon. Also see the following related articles:*

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