

Pinotage Club

AUTHOR

Peter May is secretary of [The Pinotage Club](#), a free and noncommercial organization whose aim is to promote, encourage, and publicize Pinotage. Their website aspires to list every Pinotage winery with tasting notes and label reproductions. A regular newsletter is free on request. In addition to his interest in Pinotage, Peter collects wine labels and publishes the [Unusual Wines](#) site to promote wine diversity, featuring labels, varieties and wines of unusual origin. He also contributed to PFW's [Understanding Wine Labels](#) article.

The result of a cross between the Pinot Noir and Cinsault varieties, ¹Pinotage was created in South Africa in 1925, by Stellenbosch University Professor A.I. Peroldt.

Pinot Noir makes the classic highly-prized wines of Burgundy, while Cinsault is a prolific cropper that makes relatively undistinguished wines in the south of France. Pinot Noir is very difficult to grow successfully, whereas Cinsault is sturdy and resistant to most vine ailments. It was hoped, by ²crossing these two, the new variety would gain the good points of both parents: classic Pinot Noir taste with a large crop from easy-growing vines.

However, as all parents know, offspring do not always turn out as expected. Initial tastings did not sufficiently impress, so Pinotage was largely ignored until 1961, when a 1959 vintage Pinotage won the Grand Championship at the [Cape Young Wine Show](#), South Africa's long-running and uniquely-themed wine competition.

There was a subsequent rush towards planting Pinotage vines. The vines proved easy to grow and high sugar levels were easily achieved, it is a good cropper and many farmers overproduced. The resulting wines didn't show the early potential and Pinotage tended to be used to bulk out popular-priced blends. There was also a tendency for the wine to show a sweet paint or nail-varnish like bitterness. And as such it suffered descriptions such as "rusty nails".

A few wineries began to specialize in pinotage and showed that a wine worthy of serious consideration could be made. But plantings declined year by year. Pinotage acreage sunk to around 2% of total area by 1993, with prices and demand for Pinotage grapes dropping, much was distilled for brandy.

Again, a wine competition proved savior. In 1991, Kanonkop's winemaker Beyers Truter entered his Pinotages at England's International Wine and Spirit Competition. These so impressed the judges that he was presented with the "Winemaker of the Year" award - becoming the first South African to win this honor.

Pinotage gained international attention, and wine drinkers keen to enjoy a new taste clamored for the unique wine, causing the price of Pinotage grapes to shoot up 500% by 1995. Again winemakers started taking the wine seriously and many even invested in French oak casks to age it. Wine Spectator Editor James Suckling was at a 1995 Cape of Good Hope tasting of old Kanonkop Pinotages when he declared, "What the hell's going on around here? These are spectacular SPECTACULAR! Why did you murder the grape?"

The Pinotage Producers Association was formed, research funded, and an annual Pinotage Top 10 competition begun. Research found that fermentation at too low a temperature was the cause of the nail-varnish problem.

The ending of apartheid not only removed trading sanctions, thus opening up new markets, but also created a great international interest in all things South African. And what was more South African than its own varietal? On the other hand, vineyards could finally import vine stocks and the

inclination was to plant more fashionable world varieties. At the start of the twenty first-century, demand for Pinotage is increasing and the acreage now forms almost 5% of the South African total for wine grapes.

Pinotage may be made in several different styles: young, light, and fruity, like Beaujolais, deep and rich like a Cotes du Rhone or Zinfandel, or elegant and restrained like Bordeaux are the most common styles. There are also a few rare 'blush' versions and several fortified into "Ports." At least one producer makes Methode Champenoise sparkling red Pinotage.

So what should you expect in a red Pinotage? Good depth of flavor, a unique individual fruity refreshing wine. Some tasters remark on a banana-like taste. I have noted bramble fruits and a velvet texture. It is a dinner wine, with good levels of alcohol giving depth and structure and keeping ability. But - like Zinfandel - there is no old-world style for winemakers to model on, so opening a bottle from a new winery is very much an adventure.

The list of top Pinotage growing estates includes Kanonkop, Simonsig, Warwick, Clos Malverne, Aventura, L'Avenir, Uiterwyk, and Middlevlei³. The words "bush-vine" on a South African label indicate that the vines are old, as it is only recently Pinotage was thought worth the expense of trellising.

Pinotage is not unique to South Africa. It is made in neighboring Zimbabwe and also widely planted in New Zealand, where the relatively thick, rot-resistant skin is an added benefit in this humid locale. Unfortunately many of the original New Zealand vines had a viral infection and acreage severely declined. New plantings of virus-free vines are improving the Pinotage reputation in New Zealand.

Pinotage has been planted in ⁴California, with just four wineries currently producing - [J Wines](#), [Phoenix](#), [Steltzner](#) and [Sutter Ridge](#). Lake Breeze Vineyards in British Columbia released Canada's first commercial Pinotage in 1999. There are also experimental plantings in New York and Australia.

by [Peter May](#)