

Pushing Pinotage

Producers should take a more positive approach, suggests Angela Lloyd 1 November 2004

There's so much hot air and emotion circulating around pinotage at present, I think we've lost sight of what we're actually dealing with.

First and foremost, pinotage is a grape variety; it thus responds to a greater or lesser degree, depending on where and how it is grown and how it is treated in the cellar. In these respects it is no different from cabernet, shiraz, chardonnay or any other variety, producing poor examples as well as wines of outstanding quality. If pinotage does have one shortcoming, it would seem that it follows its parent, pinot noir, allowing no room for mediocre wines. Whereas a cabernet that isn't top-draw can still make agreeable drinking, this isn't the case with either pinot noir or pinotage; top quality, in whatever style, is a must.

Turning from the factual to the emotional, what sets pinotage apart from other varieties grown in South Africa lies in its origin. Probably more than the unpleasant nature of some of the lesser wines, it is pinotage's South African roots that cause feelings to run strongly, usually with little objectivity.

The constant very public pulling in two directions creates a confused perception in the market place. One only has to look at surveys of top wineries to understand the huge importance of image, an aspect sometimes transcending quality, though all top-rated wineries also produce top quality. Image applies as much to grape varieties as it does to producers. It's not enough to have quality wines without the all-important sexy appeal, which will leave the winery or variety's currency that much lower down the popularity scale.

The Pinotage Producers Association has done much good in many respects, but it is in marketing the wine that it falls short. But then its members are almost all winemakers, not marketing people and too close to their favoured grape to see the bigger picture. Just having Beyers Truter or Francois Naudé tell us that it makes great wine won't convince winelovers at large of its desirability. Indeed, they often come across more defensive than positive.

That this rather dictatorial approach has also been adopted with the Cape blend only aggravates the situation. From Kim Maxwell's article in September Wineland, it appears there's a lack of will (as well as communication) to resolve the various issues. As much as the enthusiasm to create something uniquely Cape is understandable, it has led to a case of more haste, less speed. Blends are not made on paper but in the bottle; the mix that works in one area or on one property doesn't in the next. I believe a far more successful approach would have been to work from the ground (literally) up, rather than trying to first set and force through rules. One gets much further by wanting people to follow ideas than forcing them to do so.

Perhaps a good, hard look at California's zinfandel producers' approach would pay dividends as that grape's potential and niche in the market place are, I would suggest, similar to those of pinotage.

What pinotage needs now is a strong marketing/PR campaign run by outside professionals. What better opportunity to initiate this than when ABSA has generously doubled their sponsorship. There are some terrific pinotages out there; to convince winelovers of their worth, producers have first to get us to look beyond the name on the label and appreciate, objectively, the wine in the bottle; creating an active demand for pinotage could then well be a less difficult, second goal.