

HRV embraces Pinotage but knocks old-style branding

10 December 2004 by Kim Maxwell

close

Hamilton Russell Vineyards has released South Africa's most expensive Pinotage, claiming a later vintage will be the country's most acclaimed red. But to succeed, Pinotage branding first needs a concerted overhaul.

Anthony Hamilton Russell's desert island wine may be a great Pinot Noir, but the proprietor of Hamilton Russell Vineyards (HRV) has realised that as a South African international wine player, Pinot isn't going to cut it.

'Watch this space with Pinotage. It can do great things. Give me 10 years and I'll make South Africa's most famous red,' he challenges instead. He's deadly serious about basing this wine predominantly on Pinotage ('I adore the variety but don't always like what's been done with it'), and is backing the grape precisely because it doesn't mimic existing international varieties.

'Doing the Rhône ranger thing is, surprisingly, considered innovative in South Africa. But it's been done in California, Australia and the Rhône. These guys are essentially trading on brand value someone else has built. If you think we're going to out-Rhône the Rhône or out-Shiraz Australia, there could be disappointment in store,' he says.

Hamilton Russell is 'hugely disappointed' that many of South Africa's elite winemakers have been put off by the intrinsics of Pinotage. 'We're either a nation of followers or a nation of innovators. I'd like to see what top winemakers could do with Pinotage.'

Local WINE magazine takes flack for dropping the annual Pinotage Challenge in favour of fashionable Shiraz this year. Hamilton Russell says the previous competition encouraged winemakers to push the envelope and helped create a market for top-end Pinotage - the only style of Pinotage he rates. 'The incentive was that it encouraged an upgrade in a sector that needed it. To elevate those big, rich, fruity examples to classically styled, age-worthy wines with refinement and site expression. Most of us only encounter middle to lower-end Pinotage. This is not where the variety's strengths lie.'

Misdirected marketing and consumer ignorance are usually blamed for Pinotage's poor image. Hamilton Russell says its un-sexiness is linked to its perceived association with 'the old South Africa - defensive, prescriptive and inward looking'. Calling sexy Shiraz 'a bit of a site slut' for its ability to 'perform pretty much anywhere' in a showy way, he sees opportunities in the current Shiraz obsession - it gives Pinotage producers time to get their acts together.

The SA wine industry has moved back into the international arena, yet Pinotagers are sometimes so stuck on prescriptive styles and percentages in wines and Cape Blends, that branding hasn't budged much. To become viable internationally, it must. 'Apartheid was unequivocally old South African, but our brand positioners know it's not a particularly sellable concept around the world,' Hamilton Russell quips dryly.

Perhaps it's worth remembering how quickly Apartheid-era winemakers dispensed of their international reputation for seeming thick-skinned and argumentative when criticised. Ironically, the characteristics of Pinotage seem ideally suited to South Africans - thick skins, lots of tannin (if not careful, bitterness) and plenty of colour. I'm convinced a bit of a millennial marketing shove could work wonders.

Hamilton Russell wants the Pinotage brand to be associated with vigorous innovation, boutique

wineries and styles that are in persistent pursuit of local, site-driven alternatives to international benchmarks.

He reckons the grape's early-ripening ability is best suited to cooler areas. So 30 ha of clay-rich shale-derived soils on a 113-ha strip have been tweaked for growing premium Pinotage and possible red blending partners, since the farm's purchase for Southern Right wines in 1998. An impressive flagship Ashbourne 2001 (the original Bastenburg name had to be changed) is made from 100% Pinotage from HRV's Bastenburg vineyard. But grapes will be sourced from Southern Right's site from the 2004 vintage.

There is no indication of cultivar on Ashbourne's classy label and imported bottle. Hamilton Russell says this is intentional, and isn't a copout. When you're selling your maiden Ashbourne bottling at R225 - priced on a par with the Pinot Noir - people should buy it because it's a really good wine first; after which they can unravel the variety. 'We were unsure about whether we had what it takes, so we had this wine tasted blind by around 200 people, including top international buyers and journalists,' he says. 'People liked it, and only three English consumers picked the variety as Pinotage.'

It just shows what wine lovers who've been misled frequently, are only too aware. The 'aha' moment when the identity of the glass is revealed, can sometimes be more persuasive than a 100 marketing campaigns.

close

The article above is distributed royalty-free.

You may copy, re-use or re-print any of this information as long as wine.co.za is quoted as source.

Any statements made or opinions expressed are the legal responsibility of the AUTHOR,

and do not necessarily reflect the views of WineNet (PTY) Ltd. or it's sponsors.

WineNet (PTY) Ltd P.O. Box 5280, Heldervue, Somerset West, 7135, South Africa
Tel +27 21 855-0509 • Fax +27 21 855-0519 • info@wine.co.za

