

In praise of Pinotage

In 1925 Abram Perrold, of Stellenbosch University, first successfully crossed Pinot Noir and Cinsaut (known in South Africa as Hermitage) to create Pinotage - South Africa's very own red wine. However it was not until 1959, some fifty years ago, that the first wine was bottled by Stellenbosch Farmers' Winery from the harvest at Bellvue under the name of Lanzerac Pinotage.

As a result this year's Top Ten Pinotage awards, sponsored for the past twelve out of 15 years by bankers ABSA, took on a special significance. They were held at the palatial pavilion of the new Val de Vie polo club outside Paarl. Beyers Truter, the man who almost single-handedly saved the wine from such bad practices as over cropping, gave the keynote speech. For 23 years he was the winemaker at Kanonkop and now runs his own very successful vineyard and winery at Beyerskloof. Typical of the man he looked forward to the next 50 years with Pinotage playing an increasingly important part in the Cape's panoply of fine wines.

It was indeed fortunate his own 2007 Beyerskloof Diesel was one of the Top Ten selected by the four judges. This big block-buster of a wine is a homage to his late dog Diesel, a massive lion shaped animal that let petrol powered vehicles pass unhindered, but barked his heart out as soon as a diesel one came his way! The wine, packed in a heavy Burgundy style bottle with a label bearing the hound's likeness, is the sort of wine that demands to be served accompanying a blood rare three or four bone wing ribs of beef. The wine has already been awarded the maximum five stars by the influential Platter Guide, South Africa's wine bible.

Tasting the 20 wines from which the top ten were selected it was possible to experience the wide range of styles in which the wine is now made. These run from lean – but never mean – through all expressions of red and black fruits to some quite weighty wines.

Later that evening I was delighted to be the guest of the Beyerskloof winery at the very grand Cape Colony restaurant of Cape Town's exclusive Mount Nelson hotel. Beyers had to be in Johannesburg that evening so our hosts to a packed restaurant were his son Anri and his fellow wine maker Travis Langley and their marketing executive Francois Naudé. With one notable exception all the five, out of six, wines served that evening contained Pinotage.

The reception wine was a complete surprise – a 2008 blend of around 75% Chenin Blanc with some 25% *blanc de noirs* Pinotage. The nose was almost all Chenin, but the mouth feel and weight conveyed the impression of another presence, which developed adding its own significant character and length on a well-balanced and sustained finish. I understand that Raisin Social who not only distribute the wine in Europe, but are also a major shareholder in the vineyard, have declined to include this quite

exceptional wine in their list because it has a miniscule suspicion of pink! And that is a shame because this wine, that sell in the UK for around £6 a bottle is an absolute joy.

The Mount Nelson's recently appointed executive chef, Rudi Liebenberg, created an outstanding menu that for most of the time did keep pace with the wines, and visa versa. A quite sensational Cevice with Salmon, Scallops, Crayfish and Linefish, was matched to a pink tank fermented 2008 sparkling Pinotage.

The Creamed Barley served with Asparagus and a poached egg was a triumph – getting some 160 poached eggs plated at around the same time must be a kitchen nightmare. This big flavoured dish was accompanied by an elegant 2009 Pinotage Rose that had excellent fruit and finesse, but strangely it was a far better match with the Hibiscus and Orange sorbet that followed.

The main dish of the evening was a quite magnificent Mushroom crusted Beef Fillet with an Oxtail Knodel. This was served with a Beyerskloof 2004 Field Blend that combined 80% Cabernet Sauvignon with 20% Merlot that had spent two years maturing in new oak and a further two years ageing in bottles before being released, What is unusual about this most remarkable wine is that the grapes are harvested and fermented together,, the result is a wine that exhales cigar box cedar wood, wild herbs all underscored by blackcurrants.

The attractive cheese course took the form of Gruyere and Ermental canapés with which a 2007 Pinotage Reserve was served. There was a risk that this superb wine would be something of an anti-climax after the majestic Field Blend, but it had the legs to stand up and be counted.

A dessert of scintillating coffee confections showed off the exceptional skills of the hotel's pastry brigade. The 2008 Beyerskloof Lagare, a fortified blend of Touriga Nazionale, one of Portugal's leading Port grapes and Pinotage, was perhaps a shade too young, but showed some excellent Port style potential.

Earlier in the day Beyers Truter had remarked that Perrold was still an unsung hero, hardly known outside South Africa, and even there seldom given the recognition that he deserves.

This is a pity because perhaps in 16 years time when, hopefully, the world celebrates the century of the first successful crossing of Pinot Noir and Cinsaut they will be toasting his memory with Blanc du Noir Cap Classique sparkling wine. There should certainly be a grand dinner at which the full top ten Pinotages of the day will be served, and finally closing the evening with some rich fortified Port-style wines that will show the full versatility of a vine that can be truly be classed the flag carrier of the Cape wine-lands.

2009 ABSA Top Ten Pinotage Winners

Altydgedacht 2008

Beyerskloof Diesel 2007

Cathedral Cellar 2006

Flagstone Writer's Block 2007

Kanonkop 2005

Longridge 2007

Lyngrove Platinum 2007

Onyk 2006

Viljoensdroft River Grandeur 2008

Windmeul Reserve 2008