

AN ODE TO PINOTAGE – Danielle le Roux CWM

Pinotage's history started in 1925 when Prof Abraham Perold planted the seeds of his experimental crossing of Pinot Noir and Hermitage in his garden in Welgevallen, Stellenbosch. From there, Pinotage has come a long way.

In 1991, Beyers Truter was named Winemaker of the Year at the International Wine and Spirit Competition for his 1989 Pinotage. The award led to significant international interest and also contributed to the idea of the birth of the Pinotage association in 1995. The goal of the organization was basically to uplift the standards of Pinotage and to share knowledge among its members. Pinotage has come a far way from those early days with the helpful activities of the Association.

Each year the best new vintage Pinotage is elected from the different wards and all the winning wines are then showed in a new-vintage tasting. Knowledge is exchanged regarding the viticulture and vinification methods and criticism is shared if needed.

The Absa Top 10 Competition was launched in 1997 and the winning wines establish the criteria for distinctive styled Pinotage wines, which would ensure their uniqueness in the international wine world. The winners also receive a lot of marketing privileges like exposure in Top Billing, Wine land and various other magazines, exposure during country-wide festival participation and Pinotage road-shows. The association also sponsors Pinotage-based research.

This year the Absa Perold Cape Blend Competition was also announced, aimed at creating a signature style for the composition of true Cape Blends. Wines should contain a minimum of 30% and a max of 70% Pinotage, as Pinotage is a uniquely South African cultivar and represents the African spirit. I think one of the key elements why the association is so successful is that it does not market individual labels, but the generic promotion of Pinotage wines.

Why Pinotage is so special: of course it's unique to SA but if you exclude the patriotic side, Pinotage is also so versatile: from the most elegant Cap Classique, to refreshing rosé, to a robust grand red wine that can mature for many years, Pinotage can hold its own.

There are also so many wines that wannabe something else - aspiring to be Bordeaux or Rhone - but Pinotage is just itself. It won't be boxed into one category and can rise above its' disadvantages with individual personality and flair.

In 2008 we presented a tasting on Pinotage and it was interesting to see that Pinotage is also grown in so many other parts of the world: from the Judean lowlands in Israel, Okanagan in British Columbia, Lodi California as well as New Zealand to name a few sites. During the tasting the different regional styles were discussed. Beaujolais - style from sandy red soils with clay and loam in the Judean Lowlands.

Spice-and-berry-style from deep sandy soils with limestone, gravel from Okanagan. And more full-bodied styles from the well drained fine sandy loam soils- rich in minerals from California.

You can never rest on you laurels with Pinotage, but getting it right is very rewarding!
Pinotage has become more than a novelty with an ever growing following.