

Celebrating PINOTAGE

Have a glass of Pinotage and toast 100 years of a South African champion. Cheers!

by **LORRAINE KEARNEY**

It's 1925, and a South African hero is born, although it will take another 34 years for South Africans to notice, and another 66 for the world to notice.

We're talking Pinotage, the truly South African grape varietal. Siobhan Thompson, CEO of Wines of South Africa (WoSA) tells it like it is: 'Pinotage is woven into our history and has contributed to South Africa's global reputation, so it's essential that we safeguard it.'

This all means we're celebrating 100 Years of Pinotage this year. Of course, this also means you need to dive into Pinotage, too.

A QUICK HISTORY OF GREATNESS

Abraham Izak Perold, at the time the professor of viticulture at Stellenbosch University, crossed Pinot Noir and Cinsault (known as Hermitage in South Africa back then) in 1925. It's thought he was trying to make a local varietal that would reflect the Pinot taste and quality of Burgundy and the disease-resistant qualities of Cinsault.

Pinotage was first bottled in 1959 and named the Cape's Champion Young Wine. It hit the shop shelves in 1961 under the Lanzerac label by Stellenbosch Farmers Winery.

PINOTAGE BY NUMBERS

- ❖ 6 585 ha total area under Pinotage vines
- ❖ 7.21% percentage of total area under Pinotage vines
- ❖ 5 368 737 litres total domestic Pinotage consumption
- ❖ 13 222 578 litres total Pinotage exports

'It's the only truly South African varietal, and we need to celebrate it'

But in 1976, a group of (shortsighted) visiting British Wine Masters said it had no future. They said the nose (what you smell when you sniff the wine in the glass) was 'hot and horrible' and compared the taste to 'rusty nails'.

They had to drink their words in 1987, when Diners Club Winemaker of the Year was devoted to Pinotage; it was won by Beyers Truter, of Kanonkop at the time.

Beyers was named International Winemaker of the Year at the 1991 International Wine and Spirit Competition.

By the late '70s, Pinotage vines were being planted in California. Today, there are Pinotage vines in Brazil, Canada, Germany, Israel, New Zealand, Switzerland, the US and Zimbabwe. In the US, there are plantings in Arizona, California, Michigan, Oregon and Virginia.

WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

The varietal is loved by winemakers. 'Pinotage is a great varietal to work with – our passion for it really brings out the best, and like a diamond, it emerges polished and refined,' says Johan Jordaan, the Spier cellar master.

Izele van Blerk, the renowned KVV Mentors winemaker, has a deep love for the grape.

'For me, Pinotage is a very exciting varietal. It's the only truly South African varietal, and we must celebrate it. We need to be proud. I always say we can celebrate our sports teams and celebrities, and Pinotage is our wine celebrity,' she says.

Izele is the winemaker behind the gorgeous The Mentors Perold 2020, named for Prof Perold, and The Mentors Pinotage.

'It's a privilege to work with Pinotage, to work with a varietal that's so young, compared to Cabernet, for example.'

And that means there is so much to learn about it, she says.

'The wines can compete with the best in the world. But for me, the passion of Pinotage lies in the blending component that it presents.'

KVV The Mentors is KVV's internationally renowned flagship range.

'I'm very honoured, as a winemaker, to make that wine. It's the pinnacle of what KVV can produce, and it showcases the best of the best of Pinotages.'

It's a Cape blend, which is an unofficial but widely recognised South African red wine style that must include Pinotage, usually blended with Bordeaux or Rhône varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Shiraz. There's no legal definition, but stylistically, it reflects a uniquely South African identity.

KVV The Mentors Perold 2020, for example, is 40% Pinotage, 30% Shiraz, 10% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Petit Sirah and 10% Malbec. It won the Duimpie Bayly Veritas Vertex Trophy at the 2024 Veritas Awards, and got a Grand Gold Award at Mundus Vini 2024, the 35th Grand International Mundus Vini Awards.



Pinotage tastes best when made in a medium- or full-bodied style



Izele concludes: 'For me, Pinotage is a passion. It's an interesting varietal to work with, and I think there's no better varietal to work with when you want to drive innovation and experimentation because we've got so much more to learn about it. I don't think we've hit the sweet spot yet.'

'I think it's going to be one of the best varietals in the future, but we as winemakers still have a lot to do to get the quality up there, and I'm very excited about that.'

THE TASTE

The Pinotage Association of South Africa tells us Pinotage tastes best when made in a medium- or full-bodied style.

Young Pinotage has flavours associated with plum, banana, cherry, cassis and red and black berries. Older Pinotage presents more complex layers and sometimes an opulent creaminess.

Maturing the wine in new, small oak barrels adds cedar, chocolate and coffee flavours.

Medium-bodied Pinotage goes well with venison, fish or a hearty winter soup.

The fuller-bodied version is good with venison, spare ribs with a rich barbecue sauce, oxtail or osso bucco.

But don't be limited by convention, says the Pinotage Association. The wine has an infinite variety of shades and moods.

And then there is Pinotage Rosé and White Pinotage – both light and perfect for summer lunches and winter evening cocktail hour.

Try These

❖ **Beyerskloof Pinotage Classic Range 2023** primary fruit aromas lead to an abundance of red berries and plums. R120

❖ **La Cave Pinotage 2020** aromas of cinnamon, cherries, wild strawberry, raspberry and cedar wood, and ripe plums, black cherries, nutmeg and cloves on the palate. R130

❖ **KWV The Mentors Pinotage** an abundance of blackcurrants and plums, and hints of fruitcake and cloves on the nose. R349

❖ **Spier 21 Gables Pinotage 2019** The nose exudes violet aromas of sweet blackberries with a palate of Black Forest cake-like flavours. R400

❖ **KWV The Mentors Perold 2020** fruitcake, anise and cranberry with floral and marzipan aromas, and a touch of cigar box and pencil shavings. R799

WHITE

❖ **Duke White Pinotage 2025** aromas of peaches and cream, raspberries, strawberries, ripe pears and red cherries. Red apples, watermelon and white peaches on the palate. R70

❖ **Swanepoel White Pinotage** aromas of white pear and peaches. R325

ROSÉ

❖ **Lanzerac Pinotage Rosé 2024** gentle aromatic notes of perfume and rose petals, redcurrants and crushed strawberries. R119

❖ **Kaapzicht The Family Range Pinotage Rosé 2023** buckets of strawberries and candyfloss bursting forth on the nose, accompanied by subtle herbaceous and rose petal undertones. R120

❖ **Delheim Pinotage Rosé** fresh strawberries and orchard flowers, and pink grapefruit, berries and sweet cherries on the palate. R125