



Rick Staff
with a remit to sniff, taste,
and spit his way around Nanjing
and disseminate the drinkable.

POINT SYSTEM

0-10 A WARNING
11-14 A Feasible Party Prop
15-17 Heartily Recommended
17-19 Exceptionally Good
20 The Apogee Of
WINE EXPRESSION



Grape Expectations

If any grape should represent a country then South Africa's Pinotage is surely one. It was born in South Africa in 1925, when Abraham Izak Perold, the first professor of Viticulture at the University of Stellenbosch, crossed the noble aromas and flavours of the Pinot Noir grape with the more profligate, high yielding and disease-resistant Cinsault, which was then known as Hermitage (the name a portmanteau of its two parents), in the hope that they could teach each other a thing or two.

Yet Pinotage cannot be said to be truly an icon of the country. After the first commercial bottling in 1959 the grape has been very divisive, often described as the Marmite of the wine world; love it or loathe it. A lazy label to explain its controversial standing as, even within the very broad parameters of subjectivity, it is hard to see how a grape can run a gamut of descriptors ranging from "nail polish remover" and the similarly enticing "burned rubber with banana" but then deliver "juicy strawberry" right through to breathy references to "muscular aromas of tar, chocolate and tobacco". The fact is Pinotage varies, and as Mark Twain put it "The cat, having sat upon a hot stove lid, will not sit upon a hot stove lid again. But he won't sit upon a cold stove lid, either".

It is hard to grasp that one grape can throw out so many shapes and sizes such is its protean propensity. Though another big reason for such emphatic difference of opinion is that in the main it is now simply better made than it was twenty years ago. Alongside Mandela's long walk to freedom you can chart the its path from within the stifling grips of the KWV state cooperative to the glare of the international wine stage and an expectant world. And this is where the problems really started as, to put it simply, greedy winemakers took advantage of a high yielding grape whose inky dark characteristics could be stretched into many more bottles than it really should. Enter the rubber and nail polish. Those previously burned on Twain's stove should take note that the grape now collects serious prizes when put in serious hands if eyeing up the South Africa wine shelves. Kanonkop is just one of many notable premium Pinotage specialists to look out for now where strict low yields and old vines make for weighty dark-fruited age worthy masterpieces which are also beginning to command equally impressive prices.

Whether such a notoriously fickle grape should spearhead South Africa's charge into export markets is a moot point, possibly the crunchily fruity white grape Chenin Blanc is a more consistent and marketable style, but Pinotage is certainly South Africa's own and the stage looks well set for a kind of cultish cool the likes of which surround California's Petite Sirah et al.

Talking of cool, as you read this, most likely prising the damp pages of the mag apart next to an air con, a broodingly muscular red is possibly not what the doctor would order, but at a more seasonally approachable end of the Pinotage spectrum, and certainly pocket wise too, the grape can turn also turn a nice shade of pink. One such, residing in Metro, is the Saxenburg Guinea Fowl Pinotage Rosé 2014, for £108. Saxenburg's vineyards sit within Pinotage's most favoured region, being Stellenbosch, and overlook the Atlantic Ocean where cool, summer breezes play a crucial role in the ripening season preserving the natural acidities at full tilt and so the wine delivers crunchily fresh, light, strawberry flavours from nose to throat. A slightly shy shade of pink in the glass though there is enough weight on the palate for the wine to make a textbook shellfish partner (17 points). For a lightish style of red that could stand some fridge time and offering a good bang of oak and tobacco on the nose and black cherried fruit on the tongue is the Cape Heights Pinotage 2013, currently asking £115 from BHG. A fine choice for a late evening barbecue debauch, very gluggable and pairing well with rich meats, but is poised and balanced enough to go solo for a quieter evening in (15.5 points). 