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Unintelligent design: winemakers deliberately created an unsatisfying mixture of Cinsault and Pinot Noir

DRINK

Pinotage – a bad idea that became a national flag

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This is a despatch from the Pinotage wars, a conflict that is all the fiercer for being entirely pointless, though it has that in common with other wars and at least nobody has died in this one – so far. The weapons of choice are wine glasses but those who consider South Africa’s signature grape a perfect example of the futility of a nation trying to “own” a variety can fill those glasses with almost anything. The enemy, poor loves, is a little short of ammunition.

Not that decent Pinotage doesn’t exist. Man Family Wines makes one; *Decanter* magazine gave Bellingham’s Bush Vine Pinotage 2010 an award – although I’m not a fan

of wine gongs, I’m prepared to accept that it probably doesn’t taste, unlike many, of burned rubber or a tin of baked beans. I just feel that Pinotage suffers as much from a design error as the dodo did and should follow it into extinction.

Unlike the dodo, Pinotage was a deliberate creation. In 1925, Abraham Izak Perold, the first professor of viticulture at the University of Stellenbosch, crossed Pinot Noir with Cinsault (known in South Africa at the time as “Hermitage”), then forgot about the seedlings. They were rescued and have been thriving in a limited sort of way ever since. Your local off-licence will have a Pinotage. It will

be cheap. If you want a better adjective, you’ll have to breach the battle lines.

The thing is, crossing Cinsault and Pinot Noir doesn’t strike me as a very good idea in the first place. Both are lovely grapes and are versatile: red Burgundy, which is made from Pinot, is the wine I’d have with my last meal (depending on what that meal was); Cinsault is the party grape, its rose and cherry fruitiness and light, sociable style able to charm the austerity out of Carignan, or persuade a po-faced Grenache/Syrah/Mourvèdre blend to lighten up. Along with Cabernet Sauvignon and Carignan, it features in the spicy signature red of Lebanon’s Château Musar and in at least one of Domaine Stéphane Ogier’s Châteauneuf-du-Papes. It gives aroma and frivolity to the sumptuous Chocolate Block from Marc Kent at Boekenhoutskloof – a wine that proves what South African reds can do.

Cinsault can also be good, although probably never great, on its own. From the Rhône, there’s the lovely red-plum Estézargues les Grandes Vignes 2012; in Chile, De Martino makes a delightfully delicate Viejas Tinajas that has the signature Cinsault quality of wafting across tongue and consciousness without unduly disturbing either. I still fondly recall a brunch interlude in the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon with bread, cheese and tomatoes so fresh that you wanted to snip their umbilicals, with the fruity Cinsault falling down my throat as the owner of Heritage wines, who was also the town’s mayor, burbled in the sunshine. I took a bottle home and opened it with my sister, loudly singing its praises and . . . found it needed Lebanese weather, Lebanese food and possibly a loud-voiced Lebanese mayor. Some things don’t travel.

Some do. Cinsault grown in France’s North African colonies beefed up Burgundies that didn’t quite cut the mustard. Was this where Perold got his crazy idea of marrying Cinsault to Pinot Noir? If so, what made him think that a combination that was usually about hiding one flavour profile within another was a great notion for the alcoholic equivalent of a national flag?

The new multicultural South Africa should stop banging on about Pinotage and embrace Cinsault, a French grape so cosmopolitan that it’s even comfortable with curry. For the bold smokiness of Eben Sadie’s Pofadder Cinsault 2012 the pro-Pinotage faction downed arms long enough to make sautéed venison and mushrooms. It seems churlish to point out that no Pinot was harmed in the making of this meal; but then, all’s fair in war. ●
Next week: Felicity Cloake on food