

Working with Top Fruit

Morne Le Roux, Swartland Winery's general manager, believes the Swartland region makes South Africa's best Pinotage. He tells Lin Weiwen why.



While South Africa's Swartland wine region isn't as well-known as Constantia and Stellenbosch, it is a treasure trove for wineries in other regions, especially those looking out for excellent Pinotage. "Many South African vintners buy Pinotage grapes from growers in Swartland as the fruit is known for its intense concentration of flavours," explains Morne Le Roux, 37, general manager of Swartland Winery. "We also face the Atlantic Ocean, so it's a beautiful place to visit."

13 years ago, Le Roux visited Swartland and decided to stay: he left his business consulting job in Cape Town and moved to the town of Malmesbury in Swartland. Attracted by the wine industry, he landed a finance role in Swartland Winery (which is named after the region), and has since moved up the ranks to become its general manager, overseeing the company's production, logistics and the domestic and international markets. The winery sources grapes from more than 60 growers in the region.

PINOTAGE PRIDE

The South African wine history is something of a roller-coaster ride: in the 17th century, Dutch surgeon Jan van Riebeeck arrived in Cape Town and planted vines, setting the wheel in motion for the growth of the winemaking industry. By the early 20th century, many vineyards were replanted with fruit orchards, and a government-funded co-operative began to control prices and curb competition. Apartheid and political upheaval then shut the doors on the export market. It wasn't until the late Nelson Mandela's release from prison that the country's economy opened up and gave wineries the chance to showcase its wines beyond its borders.

But South African's vintners took the wrong path to the global market. "We tried to copy what other wine regions were making, and did the same," says Le Roux. "We missed out on the chance to focus on our uniqueness."

That uniqueness is the country's native grape, Pinotage. Over the past several years, South African wineries have been catching up with lost time. Two years ago, at the Decanter World Wine Awards competition, a Bush Vine Pinotage 2010 from Bellingham's 'The Bernard Series' snagged the trophy for a Red Single Varietal over £10, proving that the South African varietal can more than hold its own against other international grapes.

Pinotage in Swartland is particularly rich in flavour, and Le Roux believes the region makes the best style of the grapes in the country. Swartland's vineyards consist of bush vines, which are low to ground and produce small and concentrated berries: unlike trellised plants, bush vines sit lower to the ground, so their leaves and branches provide more shade for the grapes, giving them more protection from the harsh sunlight during summer. The night time breezes from the ocean help cool down the fruit. Rainfall is miserly: an average of 240ml per year. The absence of irrigation also means the vines receive less water and don't swell, resulting in smaller fruit, lower yields, and more intense flavours.

Swartland Winery's Pinotage 2010, which picked up the silver medal at the country's Veritas Awards, is an inky, full-bodied quaff with intense black fruit notes, an umami-like soya lift and a gentle floral fragrance. It also has that subtle smell of varnish or wet paint—a characteristic of Pinotage which new drinkers either love or hate.

Le Roux has tried to make Pinotage more appealing to new markets. Several years ago, the winery mixed equal amounts of Pinotage and Shiraz and sold it as a blend to the American market. "It was our way of introducing Pinotage to the U.S. Once they become familiar with its taste, we will do a straight version for them," says Le Roux. But the product failed to sell well, so they stopped producing it. "Unfortunately, [the Americans] don't seem to like trying new things. But Pinotage remains our flagship grape, and we always like entering our Pinotage wines in competitions to show the world that we can do them very well," he adds.

Swartland Winery wants to shift the focus from Europe to Asia for their international markets. Today, they export 55% of their production. Le Roux wants to bring that figure up to 75% in the next five years.

The Idelia, a red blend that is considered the best in their portfolio, may be the wine to showcase to initiates of South African wines and those who aren't fond of a straight Pinotage's gunky character. The individual components of the Idelia—Pinotage, Shiraz, Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec and Barbera—are aged for a year in new oak before they are blended and then left to slumber for another four months in wood. The ambrosia tastes like a dark and spicy fruit cake melted

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- 1 The rolling hills of Swartland
- 2 Swartland Winery
- 3 Morne Le Roux
- 4 The winery's stainless steel fermentation tanks



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- 5 Bush wines are a characteristic of the Swartland region
- 6 The winery's laboratory
- 7 Wines ageing in the cellar
- 8 The winery sources fruit from more than 3,200 hectares of vineyards in Swartland



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into a liquid form: plenty of rich berries, mint chocolate and gentle cinnamon accents.

"The biggest challenge for [South Africa] is there are many people who still don't recognise us as a wine-producing region," notes Le Roux. "Even in our own country, the younger locals are drinking less wine, which is why we have started making low alcohol quaffs and sweet whites that taste like a cider. We have to learn to be market-driven. If people clamour for a sweet Chenin Blanc one day, we will do it." **WD**

Tasting Notes

Bush Vine Chenin Blanc 2010

Notes of melon and pear, along with a faint aroma of honey. An easy-drinking wine to match with salads and molluscs. \$70

Bush Vine Pinotage 2010

Inky and intense. Flavours of dark berries and twigs give way to soya notes, a subtle floral fragrance, and a luscious, long finish. \$82

Bush Vine Shiraz 2012

A very young wine that can benefit from another few more years of ageing in the cellar. Tannins are still quite harsh, and the fruity notes remain closed. It has a medium-bodied texture that is reminiscent of a Rhône Syrah. \$82

Swartland Winery wines are available at Stellez Vine.



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