

ABRAHAM AND THE HERETICS

Once infamously described by one winemaker in the Cape as 'The bastard son of Pinot Noir', let's face it, Pinotage rarely gets a good press – even within a nation that somewhat naively considers it South Africa's 'signature' variety.

One can imagine the brief given to Abraham Izak Perold who perfected the crossing of Pinot Noir and Cinsault in 1924: 'Professor, we want you to create a uniquely South African grape variety that has all the nobility of Pinot Noir but the high-yielding potential of Cinsault'. Pinotage is what they got.

Abraham and the Heretics is something of a tongue-in-cheek challenge to those non-believers to accept the variety into their vinous lives.

Abraham Izak Perold was born in 1880 in Cape Town. Clearly a very bright boy, he studied Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry in Stellenbosch before going on to obtain a PhD in Germany in 1904. For the next two years, Abraham travelled widely, returning to the Cape with a knowledge of colloquial Spanish, Portuguese and Italian to add to his fluent French, German, English and Afrikaans.

Soon after accepting the post of professor of Chemistry at the University of Cape Town, Abraham left for Europe again, this time at the behest of the South African government with the objective of exploring international grape varieties. He returned with some 177 examples, the basis of which still exists at the Welgevallen, the experimental farm of Stellenbosch University today.

In 1917 Abraham became the first Professor of Viticulture and Oenology at Stellenbosch University, where he began his scientific examination of vines and researched into their origins and best growing conditions. From 1927 onwards, he served as chief wine advisor for the KWV.

It was before he left to take up this position that Abraham planted four seeds from a crossing of Pinot Noir and Cinsault in the garden of his official residence at Welgevallen. He then appears to have forgotten about them. With his departure, the garden became overgrown and a team of workers was sent in to tidy it up. Fortuitously, a young lecturer, Charlie Niehaus, who knew a thing or two about seedlings, just happened to be passing by at the time and decided to rescue them from the clean-up team. In 1935, the young (and as yet unnamed) plants were transferred to Elsenburg Agricultural College under the direction of Abraham's successor, CJ Theron, where they were grafted and re-planted back at Welgevallen. Abraham continued to visit his former colleagues and it was here that Theron showed him the newly grafted vines. It was at this moment that the newly-created variety was christened Pinotage.

The first wine was made in 1941 (the same year as Abraham Perold died) at Elsenburg College, with the first commercial plantings established at Myrtle Grove, close to Somerset West. Recognition came when a wine made from Pinotage at the Bellevue Estate in Stellenbosch became the champion wine at the Cape Wine Show of 1959.

This wine would become the first to mention Pinotage on its label when, in 1961, Stellenbosch Farmer's Winery marketed it under their Lanzerac brand.

Today, Pinotage accounts for around 7% of the Cape's vineyards. Its versatility ensures that the variety can be made into a full range of styles, from easy-drinking reds and rosés to wines worthy of cellaring. The latest fad is for the production of coffee-flavoured Pinotage which, I am sure, has poor old Abraham turning in his grave...

Wine of Origin: Stellenbosch

Vintage: 2013

Alcohol: 14% vol

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"The heresy of one age becomes the orthodoxy of the next." Helen Keller

