

The 2018 Hemel-en-Aarde Pinot Noir Symposium - held annually at the end of January - has come at a very interesting time in the life cycle of cultivar in the Cape. Introduced commercially in South Africa less than 40 years ago, it took pinot noir many years to achieve real recognition amongst the majority of the country's fine wine drinkers. Stylistically it was out of step with the fashions of the 1980s and 1990s. The best pinot noirs are refined, delicate, perfumed. In an age when big rich blockbusters prevailed, its lack of tannin and colour intensity counted against it. The majority of pinot plantings yielded fruit destined for the production of Cap Classique - leaving the few dedicated exponents of the still wine version with a chance to develop a high value niche.

This strategy coincided with the rise of a pinot noir fashion elsewhere the world: until the mid-1970s almost all the internationally recognised examples were produced along a narrow strip of land in Central France: the Cote d'Or of Burgundy. Here the top wines commanded extraordinary prices, but because even in this tiny band of vineyard (on average a few kilometres wide and running from Dijon in the north to around Beaune in the south - a distance of less than 40 kilometres), there were so few great sites it was generally assumed that great Pinot could only be produced in a finite number of places.

Pinot pioneers - many either masochists or contrarians (or both) - in places like New Zealand, Australia, California, Oregon and, of course, the Cape have since disproved this assumption. They generally sought out cooler sites (the cultivar is heat sensitive - though not significantly more so than sauvignon blanc) and where possible aimed for lime-rich soils. Their successes are fine wines in their own right - but very few of even the very best examples would fool a Burgundy expert for a Cotes de Nuits Grand Cru. This is as it should be - the aim is not to fake a Richebourg or Chambertin, but to produce a wine which offers equal drinking pleasure.

In the four decades since the late Tim Hamilton Russell chose a site near the family's holiday home in Hermanus to aim for a Cape interpretation of premium pinot noir, a great deal has been achieved. Despite years wasted fighting the regulatory authorities for permission to open a new vineyard area, and even more time lost to poor planting material, he was able to provide incontrovertible proof that the Hemel-en-Aarde Valley behind Hermanus had the potential to become the South African heartland of pinot noir. This in turn led to other growers taking up the challenge. By the early 2000s progress had been substantial enough for the region's producers to obtain recognition for three separate appellations viz. Hemel-en-Aarde Valley, Upper Hemel-en-Aarde Valley and Hemel-en-Aarde Ridge.

It's taken another decade for the wines to catch up with the vision: at this year's symposium it was clear to me for the first time that each appellation has stylistic cohesion. Whether this is a function of site alone, or whether it is also because growers and winemakers in each location have begun narrowing down options in their management strategies is neither obvious, nor, probably, all that important. What is evident is that the original vineyards (Hemel-en-Aarde Valley, closest to Hermanus) are associated with more structured, less immediately accessible wines, while those more inland, and at higher altitudes deliver slightly softer, easier-to-drink styles.

For those seeking pinots made in the more austere, classical style, Hamilton Russell, Bouchard Finlayson and Storm's Vrede vineyard are the obvious buys. The Upper Hemel-en-Aarde yields richer, denser wines, of which the Newton Johnson bottlings (Seadragon and Family Vineyards) are probably the most successful - though it must be said that the Storm Ignis shows great site specificity. When it comes to the wines from the Hemel-en-Aarde Ridge, your shopping list include Ataraxia, La Vierge, Creation, Domaine des Dieux, Storm Ridge and Tesselaarsdal.