

## S African Pinots make progress

5 Oct 2009 by Tim James

Pinot Noir was probably first planted in South Africa in the 1920s (the crossing with Cinsaut to produce Pinotage was made in 1925), but serious Pinot wine-making began only in the late 1970s. That was when a rich, wine-loving businessman, Tim Hamilton-Russell, decided to establish, against all sorts of traditional and regulatory odds, a hopeful Burgundian outpost in the Hemel en Aarde ('Heaven and Earth', pictured here) Valley just inland from the Atlantic village of Hermanus – unprecedentedly southerly and cool for Cape wine-making.

This was a time when Oregon's now-great Pinot industry was starting to gain international recognition, giving hope – despite the legion of scoffers – that something credible could emerge outside Burgundy. In the Cape, things didn't exactly leap forward, but fairly soon there were a few more serious producers – notably Bouchard Finlayson, founded by Peter Finlayson, who had been the first Hamilton Russell winemaker. Crucially, they started using the best international (Burgundian) clones rather than, as earlier, the Swiss one originally developed for sparkling wine. These clones are now standard throughout the local industry – though I should point out that most local Pinot Noir goes into champagne-method bubbly.

After a few decades of effort from the true believers, it became clear that (thus far, and despite some isolated good examples from elsewhere, including Stellenbosch) the most promising areas for good South African Pinot are Hemel en Aarde and parts of the equally cool inland plateau called Elgin. These were the sources for a recent blind tasting of a dozen local labels (most represented by a few vintages) together with 14 New Zealand Pinots and 10 red burgundies. How would the South Africans fare in terms of quality? Would they reveal any distinction of terroir or winemaking? And could we draw any tentative differentiation between the two home areas?

It was a fascinating and splendid experience, for some 40 aficionados, of 50 inevitably mostly youthful Pinots, organised by Jörg Pfützner, the German-born former sommelier who is Cape Town's great impresario of fine wine events. To indicate the quality of the benchmarks I'll immediately reveal my top ten wines – the first five I scored 18/20, the second five a point lower (both groups are alphabetically ordered):

- Dom Armand Rousseau, Grand Cru 2006 Clos de la Roche
- Dom Dujac 2006 Morey-St-Denis
- Koru Pinot Noir 2006 Marlborough
- Newton Johnson Pinot Noir 2008 Upper Hemel en Aarde Valley
- Wither Hills Pinot Noir 2001 Marlborough
- Dom Marquis d'Angerville, Champans Premier Cru 2002 Volnay
- Felton Road, Block 5 Pinot Noir 2007 Central Otago
- Hamilton Russell Vineyards Pinot Noir 2006 Hemel en Aarde
- Pegasus Bay Pinot Noir 2006 Waipara
- Radford Dale, Freedom Pinot Noir 2008 Elgin (made from fruit bought in from the Winery of Good Hope)

Virtually all the carefully chosen Kiwi wines at the tasting showed very well, with notably lovely pure fruit precisely expressed; as did most of the burgundies – though one or two of those, perhaps simply too young, seemed surly and ungracious. It was pleasing, of course, that a few locals did particularly well, especially (not just for me, although there were a few dissenters) the yet-to-be-released maiden version from the home vineyards of Newton Johnson, who have made a decent version from Elgin fruit for many years. There's probably little point in discussing here the other New Zealand and Burgundy wines, but I'll list at the end of this article the other South African wines I rated well.

One crucial aspect of the quality question was satisfactorily answered by this tasting: the best of the local Pinots can bear some comparison with the best from elsewhere. In their youth, that is, at least – I rather doubt if in 20 years the Newton Johnson will score the same as Rousseau's Clos de la Roche. But will, indeed, those lovely New Zealanders? Wither Hills and Hamilton Russell did show that the two New World pretenders can do very well with seven or eight years in bottle, and at dinner later, the Hamilton Russell 1997 was still fresh and compelling. It must also be noted that there are unlikely ever to be anything remotely like the number of good Cape Pinots as there are in New Zealand: water scarcity and a dearth of cooler areas limit Pinot Noir to a pretty small niche here.

Identity is a less easy matter. We were asked to give origins for all of the wines. My overall rating was 75% correct, but much higher for the South African wines: I got 22 of the 25 right. A degree of confusion with the others, including occasionally putting New Zealand wines in Burgundy and vice versa was presumably consequent on my much-regretted lack of great depth of experience of either. So, to someone who knows South African red wines pretty well, the Pinots conformed to expectation (and scarcely a hint of burnt rubber in the room!). Looking through my notes for them I see frequent mentions of tannin and sweetness (fruit and alcohol sweetness rather than sugar), and sometimes oak, suggesting a degree of lack of finesse and balance in these things. They were matters of wine-making, mostly, I think – although a sweetish finish is fairly often a less-than-perfect feature of South African reds for me, and was also present on some of the New Zealand wines. The best burgundies were perhaps marked by the quality of their tannins and their tannin/acid harmony, and the New Zealand wines by a fantastic focus and clarity of fruit.

As to distinguishing between Hemel en Aarde and Elgin – well, I was right slightly more often than I was wrong, but frankly there was more intuition and guesswork involved than judgement. I largely agree with Andries Burger, the winemaker at Paul Cluver, pictured here (whose very good wines seem to improve each year, and what more can one ask than that?), who suggests that perhaps the Elgin wines are slightly more driven by fruit, the Hemel en Aarde wines slightly more rustic (more earthy, I would say) – but there were exceptions to this tentative rule. We are still far from fully understanding the terroirs, and while winemakers are relatively inexperienced with this variety, the effects of their wine-making is often too marked.

But Andries Burger was undoubtedly right in another thing: speaking as a winemaker he was impressed by 'the progress we all have made in the last couple of years.... There were far fewer faulty wines (although I do feel there were still a few) than there had been in the past. We have moved away from the over-extracted, bigger styles to more elegant wines driven by the purity of fruit.'

Other South African wines that impressed me, beyond my top 10, were:

- Crystallum Pinot Noir 2008 Hemel en Aarde (a new winery)
- Bouchard-Finlayson, Galpin Peak Pinot Noir 2006 Hemel en Aarde
- Chamonix Pinot Noir, Reserve 2007 Franschhoek (a vastly improved interloper included here as a 'pirate')
- Hamilton Russell Vineyards Pinot Noir 2000 Hemel en Aarde
- Paul Cluver Pinot Noir 2007 Elgin
- Paul Cluver, Seven Flags Pinot Noir 2007 (Elgin)
- Sumaridge Pinot Noir 2007 and 2006 Hemel en Aarde (an improving producer)

Also, not far behind and certainly good wine, Oak Valley and Shannon from Elgin, the Newton Johnson from Elgin fruit; and Creation, a new Hemel en Aarde winery. Cathy Marshall's first Pinot from all-Elgin grapes, a recent unanimous hit with the panel judging five-star candidates for the annual Platter Guide (where the Newton Johnson Hemel en Aarde also shone), did not show well at this tasting – some unfortunate problem with both bottles.

