

The modern era of the Hemel-en-Aarde Valley as a wine producing region dates back to the establishment of Hamilton Russell Vineyards some 35 years ago. Just over ten years after the cellar's first vintage, a second wine property appeared. By the end of the last century there were three producers in the vicinity. Today that number has trebled, the region has three relatively distinctive wards, and there is a vibrancy and dedication in the way its growers and winemakers are making wine and creating a regional identity.

An annual Pinot Noir celebration - hosted by the producers - is held at the end of January. This year it took place in the midst of a heat wave which appeared to cast doubt on the Valley's cool climate USP. In fairness, the vineyards adjacent to Hermanus have been significantly cooler than most of the other sites in the so-called Coastal Region, and, for that matter, cooler than Burgundy in July 2015. While any number of factors, including diurnal temperature change, vine canopy and water stress can play an important role in determining fruit quality and potential wine complexity, intense heat can be bad news for pinot. If the ambient temperatures at harvest time are reminiscent of the Sahara in mid-summer, you can be sure the grapes will lose some of their elegance and nuance.

The history of pinot noir in South Africa has been anything but simple. For the first decade or so there was only one clone, the Swiss BK5 - suitable for making the pinot component of a sparkling Cap Classique but unlikely to yield the aromatics or colour vibrancy associated with a complex red wine. In the 1990s some of the modern French or Dijon clones were released but almost all the earliest plantings succumbed to virus (which suggests that root-stock may have been the culprit.) Only in the past decade have the vineyards begun to deliver the appropriate fruit purity. This is not to dismiss the earlier efforts of Hamilton Russell and Bouchard Finlayson, which were achieved at the price of constant and regular replanting programmes. Both producers displayed extraordinary skill and dedication in coaxing the berries to ripeness while minimising the stress fruit characters.

Given the history and the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that until recently there has been so little consistency in the wines produced from South Africa's pinot vineyards. However, with the impediments which plagued the pinot pioneers largely a matter of history, the latest vintages - certainly from the Hemel-en-Aarde appellations - reflect an increasingly confident and coherent stylistic.

The importance of this should not be under-estimated. For the first time it is possible to look at a line-up of wines from all the cellars in the region and identify a number of unifiers. Just as importantly, the wines are recognisably pinot in the international sense of the word and can take their place alongside quality products from Burgundy, Oregon and the Antipodes. From this perspective, the Hemel-en-Aarde wines are no longer just work in progress. Sure, most of the current releases come from young vineyards, but the fruit has been sensitively handled and the oaking has been precise and correct. Many of the examples I tasted at the Pinot Celebration offered the same drinking pleasure as comparably youthful village Burgundy.

I'm not suggesting that the Cape is about to make the Grand Cru producers from the Cotes de Nuits run for cover: the best estates of the Cote d'Or have a considerable advantage in terms of terroir, age of vines and generational experience. But you could happily buy any of the Newton Johnson, Crystallum and Storm wines, the more recent La Vierge and Domaine des Dieux bottlings, or the maiden Ataraxia, (or dip deeper in your pocket for the top end Creation, Bouchard Finlayson or Hamilton Russell), and get more

enjoyment from your purchase than entry level Burgundy offers for at least twice the Rand amount. That's not something that even seemed possible three years ago.