

Stirring the Lees with James Molesworth

Cellar Treasures Under \$40: Kanonkop Pinotage

Winemaker Abrie Beeslaar tames South Africa's problem grape



Posted: May 25, 2010 10:21am ET

Since I began covering South Africa in 2000, I haven't exactly been the biggest fan of Pinotage, the country's former signature grape. I wasn't much of a fan before that, either.

When young, Pinotage offers rustic tannins and stemmy notes that can detract from the typical core of plum and cherry fruit; when it ages it never seems to soften fully before its core of fruit fades. Made from a cross of Pinot Noir and Cinsault, aimed at withstanding the hot spells that accompany the Cape's growing season, Pinotage is more the result of a shotgun marriage than happy couple, and many South African wineries have shifted to focus on Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah instead.

There are, however, exceptions. And though the grape has receded from the top lineup of varieties now coming from South Africa to the U.S. market, there are still a few wineries that manage to make very good to outstanding versions: Southern Right, Spice Route, Beyerskloof, Warwick and Simonsig, among them. And then there's Kanonkop.

Kanonkop is one of South Africa's most historic estates, a 140-hectare property (100 hectares under vine) located on the red, decomposed granite soils of the lower slopes in the prime Simonsberg-Stellenbosch ward. A fourth-generation family estate, Kanonkop is currently owned and run by brothers Johann and Paul Krige. One of the more recognizable South African labels in the U.S. thanks to its stark beige and red label with the picture of a cannon, Kanonkop's wines have been available here since the end of apartheid in 1994.

The roster of winemakers that forms Kanonkop's history is short but substantial. Jan Coetzee, a rugby legend in the Cape, made the wines from 1968 through 1980 before leaving to start his own Paradyskloof winery where he now puts his efforts toward Pinot Noir. Following him was the affable Pinotage specialist Beyers Truter, who made the wines until 2002, before going off to start his own Beyerskloof winery. Currently, Abrie Beeslaar, just 36, is at the helm and, during his short tenure, he's managed to take the winery's Pinotage bottling to new levels. I recently tasted through a nine-vintage vertical that showed some dramatic changes. (Full notes and scores on all the wines are listed below.)



Courtesy of Kanonkop

"Jan [Coetzee] made wines very differently than today," said Beeslaar, when I asked him about the changes over time. "They did not have a lot of small oak, and most of the wines did not go through malolactic ferment. The alcohols were lower, and there was less extraction in open fermentors."

Punch downs are more frequent at Kanonkop today, one of several changes to the vinification over the past 30 years.

"At the end of the '80s, Beyers [Truter] started to use more new oak and punch the cap more regularly to get better extraction. Beyers also did a lot of work on acid adjustments at the beginning of ferment to give you a more subtle acidity on the palate."

Beeslaar now has the benefit of working with a well-established vineyard. Kanonkop's oldest Pinotage vines were planted in 1953, with younger parcels increasingly in the mix now as well. But rather than stick to a recipe of his predecessors, he's assimilated some of their techniques with his own ideas.

"In 2003 we started to hand-sort the berries after destemming to remove any green material," said Beeslaar. "I also started to filter the Pinotage after malolactic and before it goes to barrel. I think this helped a lot to get a fresher wine that is not affected by bacteria."

Beeslaar also dropped the amount of new oak just a touch and focused more attention on vineyards, looking for plots that were particularly suited for Pinotage.



Courtesy of Kanonkop

Kanonkop's aging program has changed, with an emphasis on smaller, new oak barrels, resulting in tighter structure and more focused fruit flavors.

"In general, Pinotage is an easy grape to grow, and the yields can be quite high, and that is the reason a lot of people planted it," said Beeslaar. "To make a good wine is a different story. Firstly Pinotage is as *terroir*-specific as any noble variety—you see similarities in Pinotage coming from the Simonsberg ward or the Bottelary Hills ward. If [it is] planted on unsuitable soils, you will still get big production without the right quality. We are slowly getting rid of these vineyards to improve the overall quality of Pinotage. When you take in consideration that South African winemakers only started focusing on Pinotage post-1994, it is still a very young variety."

While Pinotage is easy to grow, it's a tricky grape to vinify, a trait drawn from its fickle Pinot Noir parentage.

"The biggest mistake winemakers are making is the selection of grapes, and the idea that they can make it the same way as other grape varieties," said Beeslaar. "Pinotage ferments much faster, has a higher pH, higher malic content and different

structure than other grape varieties. If you like to go to bed early, you should rather not make Pinotage. Pinotage is the variety that distinguishes the boys from the men."

Several of the older vintages in the vertical were holding up very well (the '01 and '99 in particular), showing mature cedar, spice and mushroom notes with relatively subtle tannins and still-vibrant fruit. But the more recent vintages showed even brighter, purer fruit and better-integrated structure. The 2006 vintage in particular should provide excellent drinking over its next several years of life. The current vintage typically retails for under \$35 and provides solid cellar potential for eight to 10 years.

In addition to the Pinotage bottling, Kanonkop also has a Cabernet-based blend called Paul Sauer; I tasted eight vintages of the wine along with the Pinotage vertical. Older vintages were far more variable, with noticeable Band-Aid aromas and overtly rustic textures that are the signs of likely *brettanomyces* contamination. The '03 vintage of the Paul Sauer bottling was among the best performers, matching the outstanding rating I gave it when it was initially released, while the '02 showed dramatic improvement since its official review on release. (In addition, a sample of the '99 Paul Sauer was corked, and the '98 was marred by a wet tree bark note, so tasting notes on these two wines are not included here.)

Samples were provided directly from the winery to ensure perfect provenance. The wines were not tasted blind, but were tasted here at my New York office without anyone from the winery present.

[Note: This is the third installment of an irregular but ongoing series here in my blog, as I taste verticals of wines that have the ability to age 10 years or more—while gaining added complexity and nuance—all without breaking the bank.]

Kanonkop Pinotage Vertical Tasting

KANONKOP Pinotage Simonsberg-Stellenbosch 2006 Score: 91 / \$33

There's a nice sappy edge to the plum and kirsch fruit, with a strong lacing of red licorice as well as fresh briar and spice notes that enliven the finish. Really racy acidity. Drink now through 2016. 8,673 cases made. *Non-blind Kanonkop vertical tasting (2010)*. —J.M.

KANONKOP Pinotage Simonsberg-Stellenbosch 2005 Score: 90 / \$33

Shows a streak of mesquite, with tangy red currant, blackberry, briar and tobacco notes. The taut, muscular finish picks up a hint of roasted chestnut. Starting to open up, and a little funkier than the 2006. Drink now through 2015. 5,976 cases made. *Non-blind Kanonkop vertical tasting (2010)*. —J.M.

KANONKOP Pinotage Simonsberg-Stellenbosch 2004 Score: 90 / \$33

Still quite youthful, with a touch of mulled plum moving in on the core of red and black licorice, raspberry ganache and maduro tobacco. Solid grip helps frame the finish, with a smoky edge weaving in. Drink now through 2014. 7,275 cases made. *Non-blind Kanonkop vertical tasting (2010)*. —J.M.

KANONKOP Pinotage Simonsberg-Stellenbosch 2003 Score: 89 / \$32

This is softening now, with mulled plum and fig notes laced with hints of tobacco, chestnut and dark earth. Picks up a rustic hint, but stays polished enough on the finish. Drink now through 2012. 8,500 cases made. *Non-blind Kanonkop vertical tasting (2010)*. —J.M.

KANONKOP Pinotage Simonsberg-Stellenbosch 2002 Score: 88 / \$38

Maturing, with a tarry hint weaving through the warm, mulled blackberry and black currant fruit and blood sausage notes, followed by hints of cedar, prune and earth on the finish. This has the range, but not quite the polish of the best vintages. Drink now. 8,536 cases made. *Non-blind Kanonkop vertical tasting (2010)*. —J.M.

KANONKOP Pinotage Simonsberg-Stellenbosch 2001 Score: 91 / \$28

Right on stride, with a nice lacing of cedar and espresso bean guiding the dark, macerated plum, fig and currant fruit. Features maduro tobacco and bittersweet cocoa notes on the finish, with a graphite hint as well. Drink now through 2011. 6,307 cases made. *Non-blind Kanonkop vertical tasting (2010)*. —J.M.

KANONKOP Pinotage Simonsberg-Stellenbosch 2000 Score: 85 / \$28

Squarely in the rustic camp, with game and Band-Aid aromas giving way to slightly chewy briar, black pepper and mulled currant notes, followed by a beefy finish. Only if you like the funk. Drink now. 5,730 cases made. *Non-blind Kanonkop vertical tasting (2010)*. —J.M.

KANONKOP Pinotage Simonsberg-Stellenbosch 1999 Score: 89 / \$27

Fine-grained, with a graphite note weaving through a supple core of mulled plum, boysenberry and raspberry ganache notes. Aged tobacco and saucisson sec hints frame the finish. This still has some guts, but this has softened nicely. Drink now. 6,425 cases made. *Non-blind Kanonkop vertical tasting (2010)*. —J.M.

KANONKOP Pinotage Stellenbosch 1998 Score: 87 / \$25

Rustic-and in the mold of 2000-with a Band-Aid hint and a gamey edge to the mulled plum and currant notes, followed by pepper, spice and cedar notes on the finish. Not as aggressively rustic as the 2000, but without the polish of the best vintages either. Drink now. 6,123 cases made. *Non-blind Kanonkop vertical tasting (2010)*. —J.M.

Kanonkop Paul Sauer Vertical Tasting

KANONKOP Paul Sauer Simonsberg-Stellenbosch 2005 Score: 85 / \$43

A bit trim, with green herb, tobacco and taut cedar notes holding sway over a medium-weight core of red and black currant fruit. Rustic finish. Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc. Drink now through 2011. 3,657 cases made. *Non-blind Kanonkop vertical tasting (2010)*. —J.M.

KANONKOP Paul Sauer Simonsberg-Stellenbosch 2004 Score: 87 / \$38

Taut and tangy, with iron, grilled herb, red currant and mesquite notes that run from start to finish, leaving a sinewy feel as they move along. Not as lean as the 2005-and with better precision-but still a bit trim. Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot. Drink now through 2011. 3,661 cases made. *Non-blind Kanonkop vertical tasting (2010)*. —J.M.

KANONKOP Paul Sauer Simonsberg-Stellenbosch 2003 Score: 90 / \$39

This is solid, with mature hints of cedar and tobacco now weaving through the core of red currant, damson plum and red licorice. A nice briary edge frames the tangy finish. Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot. Drink now. 4,125 cases made. *Non-blind Kanonkop vertical tasting (2010)*. —J.M.

KANONKOP Paul Sauer Simonsberg-Stellenbosch 2002 Score: 91 / \$38

Quite ripe and rather full, with a nice velvety feel to the dark plum, mashed currant and fig paste notes, all laced with maduro tobacco and bittersweet cocoa hints. The muscular finish has an iron hint buried. Much better than on release, when it had an inconsistent showing. Drink now through 2012. 3,209 cases made. *Non-blind Kanonkop vertical tasting (2010)*. —J.M.

KANONKOP Paul Sauer Simonsberg-Stellenbosch 2001 Score: 89 / \$38

Nicely mature, with cedar, roasted vanilla, dried currant and sanguine notes that still have good grip and cut. A sanguine edge mingles with the dried fruit notes on the finish. This has held on nicely. Drink now. 2,756 cases made. *Non-blind Kanonkop vertical tasting (2010)*. —J.M.

KANONKOP Paul Sauer Stellenbosch 1997 Score: 84 / \$32

Hanging on, but only for those who like dried currant, leafy tobacco and mulled spice notes. The finish is starting to dry out as well. Pushing it. Past its prime. 3,333 cases made. *Non-blind Kanonkop vertical tasting (2010)*. —J.M.

