



TRIPPING THE Light Red FANTASTIC

Transcendent light reds illuminate the past while ushering in the future of viticulture. Malu Lambert investigates.

The thirst for 'light reds' at first glance seems a modern affectation, a consequence of hipster wine bars and the like. Look deeper and the truth is South Africa has always had a penchant for lighter styles of wine. Not completely by design as the use of new oak is rather more contemporary, the increased availability in the mid-80s saw the onset of the Parker-approved blockbusters. Before that, juicy Cinsault dominated the red wine industry.

You may have been unwittingly imbibing cinsault long before it got its hipster credentials. It was the main component in blends like Tassenberg, and Chateau Libertas. The former dates back to 1932 and is thought to be South Africa's oldest red blend. Before 'sense of place' was a thing in

South Africa, the majority of the wines were blends based on Cabernet and Cinsault with some Syrah, Tinta Barroca and Pinotage. Most of which were labelled as 'Dry Red'.

Sommelier and fine wine consultant Higgs Jacobs has long been a champion of light reds. In his work for Strauss & Co Fine Wine Auctions he unearths rare wines that offer a snapshot view into the past. These wines illustrate how well South African wines can age, particularly Pinotage as well as Cinsault blends. He also enjoys drinking them. Drinkability being the keystone of this refreshing category.

Says Jacobs: "The idea of holding out on reds until dinner, or even worse, winter is out-dated and limiting. I can't think of a better al fresco companion than a crunchy Cinsault or Grenache Noir. There's just

something about the drying, appetising effect of fine tannins on a light, chilled red that I find more refreshing than many whites."

Cinsault has long rode tandem with Chenin as a workhorse variety in the national vineyard. Capable of producing high yields, it delivers large bunches with big berries. Meaning plenty of juice to keep wine farms afloat. For this reason it was planted prolifically post-phylloxera. Then called hermitage it bulked up blends and lent red fruit flavour to brandies and fortifieds.

When Cabernet Sauvignon was in short supply in the '60s and '70s, Cinsault was indiscriminately used to fatten up volumes. That was until the party was deemed over when the Wine of Origin legislation passed in 1973, and percentages had to be declared.

Going above the call of duty, Cinsault was also used to literally lubricate the press. When Cabernet's tiny berries clogged up equipment, juicy Cinsault got things moving. One basket of cinsault for every three baskets of Cabernet was the informal ratio. So intertwined were the grapes that farmers planted Cinsault at the end of Cabernet rows so that they could be co-harvested.

Chris and Andrea Mullineux took inspiration from this history for their Leeu Passant range: a modern interpretation of mid-century wines.

Drawing on wines from Rustenberg, Alto, Chateau Libertas and Lanzerac from the 1940s to the 1980s and impressed with the longevity of these wines, winemaker Andrea enthused: "The fruit and tannins woven through with spice had this incredible, viscous mouthfeel that gave a perception of sweetness, even though the wines were bone dry. The Cinsault is what gives the perception of glycerol viscosity as it ages with the Cabernet acting as the backbone."

The resulting Dry Red is now in its fifth vintage (2019). The Cabernet-Cabernet Franc-Cinsault blend is a tribute to the age

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worthy, lighter styled wines of the past.

Much like Chenin, Cinsault benefits from its workhorse history in the form of old vines. The Cinsault in Leeu Passant's Dry Red hails from South Africa's two oldest registered red wine vineyards: dry-farmed bush vines in Wellington planted in 1900 as well as a parcel of Franschhoek bushvines, planted in 1932.

Single varietal bottlings are gaining traction too. The wines can be expressive without being taxing, light-footed yet still meaningful. Successful as a bushvine, it is both heat and drought tolerant. Wines coming from drier areas, such as the Swartland or the Piekenierskloof often display an appealing red-dust earthiness and tomato leaf character. Coastal cinsault from Darling is the industry's best-kept secret; the fruit there is capable of producing ethereal, perfumed examples.

SEEING THE LIGHT

While Cinsault may be the flag-bearer for the light red category, there are plenty of other Mediterranean grapes proving successful as both single bottlings and blends.

Radford Dale is on a tireless mission to produce a host of lighter bodied wines from Syrah, Pinotage, Grenache, Pinot as well as excitingly, gamay Noir. On a recent trip to Elgin I visited Alex Dale, the founder and managing director, at his estate Radford Dale Organic. He took

me to see the newly planted, organically certified, block of the Beaujolais grape.

Dale can be thanked for reviving gamay in South Africa. The cuttings to establish this nascent vineyard come from a Stellenbosch site in the Polkadraai Hills, which has been managed by their team.

His mission is noble: "There are less than 10 hectares of Gamay currently planted in the Cape. This site will now also serve as the mother block for Gamay cuttings, which we will make available to the industry. I want to grow the category."

Pinotage too is enjoying a renaissance. Many producers are making terroir driven versions that reflect the variety's beautiful berry fruit, in comparison to the oakier, more luxury styles.

With consumer recognisability and price points being inescapable realities, noble varieties may continue to dominate vineyard space. Though rising temperatures will start to force the agricultural hand. Heat tolerant, more drought resistant Mediterranean varieties will only become more economically appealing.

With a warming world being a consideration it's fortunate then that light reds happen to be refreshing to drink on a hot day, too.

'LIGHT RED' is a catchall term used to describe wines of medium to light body, that are generally unoaked or only lightly so, more on the crunchy red fruit side than black-fruited, defined by a refreshing acid structure and fine tannins. The category is dominated by Rhône varieties such as Grenache, Syrah, Mourvèdre, and overwhelmingly with Cinsault as well as our own quite unique grape, Pinotage. The wines also lend themselves to being served slightly chilled.