

The early history of Pinotage

Abraham Izak Perold (*20.10.1880 - 11.12.1941) was a fourth generation descendant of Roland Perot of Bretagne, France, who arrived in the Cape during 1814 as a prisoner of war. Perold matriculated at the Boys' High School, Wellington, in 1898 and in 1901 obtained his degree in the first class, majoring in Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry. This feat earned him a bursary for further study overseas, and at the end of 1904 he obtained his Ph.D. in Chemistry (summa cum laude) at the University of Halle an der Saale in Germany.

Upon his return to South Africa in 1906, Perold was first appointed as a temporary professor in chemistry at the University of Cape Town. The Cape Government sent him on an extended overseas tour with the brief to collect grape varieties which could be established in the Cape. He returned with 177 varieties which formed the core of a collection still in existence at the Welgevallen Experimental Farm of the University of Stellenbosch (US).

Perold was appointed as the first professor of Viticulture at US and later became Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture at this University.

In view of his phenomenal knowledge of the grape varieties of the world, his selection of breeding parents for Pinotage would seem strange. Why did he want to cross Pinot Noir, the prince of French red grape varieties, with Hermitage, a much more humble variety which did, however, perform well under local conditions? Did he, being the intellectual giant that he was, perhaps have a good idea of what the end product could be? He did not leave any notes to explain his choice.

The cross produced only four seeds, not thousands as are common in today's breeding programmes. The fact that Prof Perold planted these seeds in the garden of his residence at Welgevallen during 1925, and not in the University's nursery, leaves one wondering whether they were so special to him that he actually wanted to keep them under his eyes.

At the end of 1927 Perold took up a position with the KWV in Paarl. His official residence at Welgevallen stood unoccupied for some time, so after a while the University sent a team to clean up the overgrown garden. The well-known Dr. Charlie Niehaus of SA sherry fame, then still a young lecturer, knew about the four seedlings. Through a twist of fate he cycled past Perold's former residence, and was just able to save the four seedlings from the team's sharp spades which cut through the weeds and plants alike. They were re-

established in the nursery at Elsenburg Agricultural College by Prof CJ Theron.

During 1935 Theron grafted material of the Pinotage seedlings on Richter 99 and Richter 57 rootstock which were then just established at Welgevallen. This was another twist of fate to protect Pinotage. It was thereafter established that the older rootstock varieties at Welgevallen were so severely infected with viral diseases that they had to be destroyed.

Prof Theron showed the four grafted vines to Perold and he was very enthusiastic about the possibilities of the new variety and wanted to have it propagated immediately. At that stage the crossing was still merely known as "Perold's Hermitage x Pinot", but the name Pinotage, a derivative from its breeding parents, was clinched by Perold and Theron during that visit to the vineyards of Welgevallen.

One of these grafts performed markedly better than the rest and was eventually selected to become the mother material of all Pinotage vines.

It must be assumed that the first experimental vineyard of Pinotage was established at Elsenburg, since C T de Waal, then a lecturer at Elsenburg and later considered to be one of the greatest red wine pundits ever, made the first Pinotage wine in small casks there during 1941.

The first recorded commercial planting of Pinotage was made on the farm Myrtle Grove near Sir Lowry's Pass in 1943.

The first wines that were made with normal wine-making procedures from Pinotage vines in full bearing had an attractive and more intense colour than those of both parents, frequently displaying a distinctive vinosity, somewhat "acetone"-like, which were pleasing and intriguing for some but less appealing to others. It was found to disappear after about two years' maturation, resulting in the wine becoming more fruity and well-balanced, tending to be soft, ranging from medium to well-bodied.

The designation of the Pinotages of Bellevue and Kanonkop as the champion wines at the Cape Wine Shows of 1959 and 1961 caused a sensation as few people could believe that the classic red cultivars could be beaten in a competition such as this.

Stellenbosch Farmers' Winery was first to use the name Pinotage on a wine label when they marketed the 1959 harvest of Bellevue under the name Lanzerac Pinotage during 1961.