

Ashbourne

Ashbourne 2005 is only the third release of a now 14 year quest to produce a distinctly South African, classically styled, site expressive and soil driven red wine (the maiden 2001 vintage was released in October 2002). The aim is for Ashbourne to belong firmly in the company of the world's great benchmark red wines, without in any way replicating them or seeking to taste and smell like them.

When Anthony Hamilton Russell (owner of Hamilton Russell Vineyards and founder of Southern Right) returned to South Africa in 1991 he was enthused with the idea of creating something particularly classic and individual from South Africa's red grape variety Pinotage. At that time – and even to this day – Pinotage was not widely respected within the industry, despite some really exciting wines being made from the variety.

The absence of French, Californian or Australian benchmarks to work towards, seemed to scare off many of the top winemakers and producers, who preferred to work with varieties or blends that somebody else had established a market for internationally and where the efforts of others had showcased the quality potential of the varieties or blends. The many ordinary wines made from Pinotage were blamed on the intrinsic character of the grape and not on the inappropriate choice of site or the viticulture or winemaking.

It was Anthony's conviction that with the correct choice of site and soil and with the right viticulture and winemaking, great wine could be made from Pinotage. Furthermore, a wine could be made which was not defined by comparison to some other international region's benchmark.

As an early ripening variety, Anthony believed Pinotage was better suited to cooler areas of the South African wine lands (warm areas anyway in international terms) whereas most existing Pinotage plantings are in warmer sites. Anthony's research into the impact of soil structure on wine style had also pointed to low-vigour, very clay-rich soil as the best route to more classic styling. Most existing Pinotage is planted in fairly high vigour, lighter structured soil. As a thick-skinned, tannic variety, lack of physiological ripeness punishes Pinotage particularly hard, with potential bitterness and simple almost excessively prominent (often estery) fruit aromas. In a cooler area physiological ripeness can be achieved at or below 14% alcohol. In a warmer area 14.5% to 15% may be required, often leading to the negatives of hotness and a sense of sweetness and clumsiness. Pinotage (a large bunched variety) is particularly susceptible to over-cropping and low yields are essential to facilitate full ripeness and concentration at low pH's and high acids. Research at Southern Right showed the best results in our soils at around a kilogram per vine, whereas most Pinotage is harvested at yields well above this. As a site and soil specific variety, particularly sensitive to yield and cellar handling, Anthony believed that Pinotage does not lend itself to mass production.

The best results are achieved where it is the red wine focus, usually in a boutique environment. Most existing Pinotage is made

in a Cooperative environment. When it is made in smaller cellars it is usually part of a range of reds and is very seldom the flagship. Pinotage generally benefits from fairly high levels of expensive wooding – often for a period of more than a year.

In 1994, Anthony founded Southern Right as a Pinotage specialist, and initiated a series of joint venture plantings in the Walker Bay, in carefully chosen clay-rich Bokkeveld Shale derived soils. The Bastenburg vineyard was planted in 1996, on the lowest strip of clay-rich soil in the Hemel-en-Aarde Valley, just before the Northeast-facing bank of Bokkeveld Shale dips under the Table Mountain Sandstone derived soils of the South facing slopes. This vineyard was planted with the specific intention of producing Ashbourne. By 1998, Anthony had managed to purchase for Ashbourne, the beautiful 113 ha farm of the Hemel-en-Aarde Valley joint venture grower for Southern Right, on the Eastern border of Hamilton Russell Vineyards.

The goal with Ashbourne was to start with the best, most classic, age-worthy, site expressive Pinotage that could be made – and then decide if blending in small components of other red grape varieties would enhance the wine. While the plan is always to have a Pinotage driven wine, over the coming years small component blending trials will be concluded. To this end two vineyards (now in production) were planted on Ashbourne, each with different trellising systems and viticultural approaches and each with a few

rows of five different red wine varieties – Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz, Cabernet Franc, Malbec and Petit Verdot.

In 2009, the first white wine partner to Ashbourne was released – the Ashbourne Sandstone 2006. After a number of years of research and trials, the decision was made to release the 2006 in August 2009. Our goal was to create a long-lived, lower alcohol, un-wooded wine from a blend of white grapes all grown on light structured, free-draining, Table Mountain Sandstone derived soils for a completely different expression to the Ashbourne, which is all grown on heavy clay-rich shale derived soils. Our plan was to release the wine after a certain amount of secondary bottle-age character had developed. With our research pointing to Sauvignon blanc being particularly successful on sandstone soils, we aimed to have this as the lead grape, structurally and aromatically, with other partners contributing to the age-worthiness and palate depth and structure without competing with the aromatics.

Ashbourne wines do not carry the varieties on the label as a statement of Anthony's belief that the varieties are more a medium for expressing the character of the site and soil, than the site and soil are for expressing the character of the varieties. It is also his wish that people enjoy the wines as something totally new – without any preconceptions, bias, or attempts to find similarities with other wines.

The name Ashbourne is a family name from Anthony's grandmother's side. Lord Ashbourne, Anthony's great, great grandfather, was Lord Chancellor for Ireland in the late 1800's. The house on the label is Anthony's home, Braemar that he built in the Hemel-en-Aarde Valley the year he planted the first vineyard for Ashbourne – and where he now lives with his wife Olive.

