

The Rooibos Revolution

From Tea to Wine

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Last year, a small Stellenbosch winery launched the world's first wine created by using wood from indigenous fynbos plants commonly known as rooibos and honeybush. The wine, a Merlot from the 2013 harvest, not only represents an entirely new category of wine, but a potential revolution for the South Africa liquor industry.



■ IT'S AMONG South Africa's most iconic exports, drunk around the world, but known primarily as a hot beverage – a herbal tea with recognised health benefits. Yet, although endemically grown rooibos – and its cousin, honeybush – have been known to the region's indigenous people for centuries, only in 2011 did it dawn on a local wine farmer that these plants, with their natural health-promoting properties, may be of benefit to the local liquor industry.

Situated in Stellenbosch's prime grape-growing region, on the banks of the Bonte River, Audacia is a wine estate with a history stretching back to the 1930s. Yet, despite its location within the so-called "Golden Triangle" which is acclaimed for producing some of South Africa's best red wines, Audacia's co-owner, Trevor Strydom, says that the extent of the modern wine industry makes it virtually impossible for smaller wineries such as his to stand out from the crowd.

At 32 hectares, Audacia had dubbed itself "The Red Wine Boutique Winery", with a focus on varietals for which the region is known, but Strydom says he still wanted – and urgently

needed – to find ways of distinguishing his wines from literally thousands of other choices out there, and was keen to bring something revolutionary and uniquely South African to his brand. Strydom spent almost a year attempting to identify an appropriate wood that could be used in the same way that imported oak is used for the barrelling and aging of wines.

His lightbulb moment struck four years ago during a tea break. On the verge of despair, Strydom says a cup of rooibos tea his daughter brewed for him set the wheels of innovation in motion. What if wood from rooibos (*Aspalathus linearis*) and honeybush (*Cyclopia genistoides*) plants could be used to replace oak in wine production?

Little did Strydom imagine the repercussions of this "eureka" incident. On the one hand, there was the possibility of introducing a wholly South African wood as a replacement for an expensive import. But of even more significance was that the known health benefits of these fynbos plants might be passed onto the wines they were used to age. Naturally caffeine-free and low in tannins, rooibos has long been known as a rich source of phenols, which imbue teas made from the



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plant's leaves with anti-oxidising properties, meaning that they counteract the normal, damaging effects of oxidation, which is the interaction between oxygen molecules and whatever they come into contact with.

Strydom was well aware of the wine industry's ongoing quest to reduce the use of chemicals such as sulphur dioxide to preserve wine, which is always at risk of oxidation. Despite widespread experimentation aimed at producing sulphur-free wines, it has remained a hugely risky undertaking to bottle and ship wine without the use of at least some preservatives.

But what if the natural anti-oxidising properties of rooibos and honeybush could somehow be imparted to wine? Prompted by Strydom, researchers at Stellenbosch University's Department of Viticulture and Oenology determined that the phenols imparted by these fynbos woods had the potential to preserve wine naturally.

In the same way that rooibos tea is infused with natural antioxidants, the wood imparts antioxidants to the wine, eliminating the need for the further addition of chemical preservatives. What's less clear is how this actually works, and also whether or not there is any anti-microbial action as a result of the presence of these plants, but Audacia winemaker Michael van Niekerk says that as far as he's concerned, the presence of these woods during certain stages of fermentation and aging has eliminated the need for added sulphites.

Following initial experiments involving tea bags, van Niekerk and Strydom started adding wood from rooibos and honeybush plants to their 2012 Shiraz as part of an in-house experiment. In 2013, they made their first batch of commercially available Audacia "No Sulphites or Preservatives Added" Merlot – the first ever wine made with indigenous fynbos woods. The process involved adding wood chips to the fermentation tanks for periods of between two weeks and two months. The Merlot contained a mere 3 mg/l of naturally-occurring sulphites, which is vastly below the legally permitted limit of 150 mg/l for South African table wines.

Besides the benefits to the wine and consumer, says Strydom, there are huge economic and ecological implications, including the fact that the woody parts of the fynbos plants that are used in the winemaking process are usually discarded after rooibos and honeybush harvesting. This makes the wood a far more sustainable option than imported oak, says Strydom.

What's more, the fynbos wood adds distinctive characteristics that are discernible on the palate. Experiments with the wood chips, including toasting the wood prior to adding it to the fermentation tanks, has shown that the wood enhances the nose and taste of the wine, with honeybush impacting the aroma and rooibos mainly enhancing the palate.

While Strydom's innovation is a coup for Audacia, it has also led to a groundbreaking wine industry patent, giving the boutique winery exclusive right to use these indigenous woods in wine production.

The realisation that rooibos can be used to enhance





the flavour profile of wine has led to associated experiments with beer and cider, which are covered by the same patent that Strydom has petitioned for, locally and internationally. Internationally awarded craft brewery Stellenbrau, also based in Stellenbosch, has run with Strydom’s innovation to produce Governor’s Red Lager, the world’s first beer to be made with the addition of rooibos and honeybush leaves during the brewing process. The result is a traditional, malty lager with a few subtle flavour surprises, described by the brewmaster as “honey-like scents and earthy, floral notes”. Unlike anything else on the market, the beer also happens to be relatively low in calories and carbs, and its producers surmise that traditional

rooibos-derived health benefits will also be passed along to drinkers. Elgin-based Windermere Cider has produced the world’s first apple cider made with rooibos plant materials, again eliminating the need for added sulphites or preservatives.

Strydom says that it’s impossible to predict the extent to which what he’s unlocked will revolutionise the industry, but the timing of his innovation couldn’t be better. It comes just as rooibos has finally been accorded EU-recognition as a region-specific South African product. In much the same way that Champagne and Port are name-protected for their geographic specificity, plain old rooibos is now fundamentally – and legally – “South African Rooibos”. ■