

Rooibos and Honeybush moves give small-scale farmers a leg up

Innovative use of products to replace traditional oak and other costly imported wood derivatives led to recent launch of no-sulphur-added red wine

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Hangoverless: Audacia's Code-Breaker no-sulphur-added red wine is said to allow people who are sensitive to sulphur or sulphites often used in wine making to enjoy a glass without the normal side effects. It will be available in the near future at selected stores of a national retailer and at the Audacia Root44 market near Stellenbosch. Picture: SUPPLIED

The names Rooibos and Honeybush are as proudly South African as braaivleis, boerewors and the Springboks — and the

plants are now being used to produce a healthier wine.

The unique characteristics of the Rooibos and Honeybush plants spring from the climatic and geographical conditions in the Western Cape biome.

Rooibos grows in a narrow 60,000ha belt of very specific soil and terroir in the Cederberg area, but Honeybush grows throughout the Western Cape.

The extensive trademarks and patents protecting these two unique botanical treasures were presented as part of an official South African address at the 56th general assembly of the World Intellectual Property Organisation conference that was held in Geneva, Switzerland, in October 2016.

Rooibos and Honeybush were singled out at the conference as "South African treasures" since they are both endemic to SA and are among the most widely commercially cultivated botanical species originating in the country, with more than 300 trademarks and 20 patents to their name.

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Traditional knowledge is important in the sustainable cultivation and harvesting of the plants. Centuries ago, the Khoisan dried and infused the leaves into a tasty drink with medicinal properties.

In the early 20th century, Pieter le Fras Nortier began researching its medicinal value and agricultural potential. Commercial harvesting started in the 1930s. Nowadays, Rooibos and Honeybush plant derivatives enhance a wide range of products — from tea and cosmetics to natural wine

preservation.

The word has spread about these unique and iconic herbal products now promoted and sold worldwide, but for a decade the South African industry was caught up in legal wrangling, particularly with the US and France, over trademark registration of the Rooibos name. In July 2014, this was resolved and the names Rooibos and Honeybush were given geographic indicator status in the economic partnership agreement between Southern African nations and the EU. The ensuing trademark protection means these names are protected and SA's alone.

The Department of Trade and Industry declared Rooibos a prohibited mark under the country's Merchandise Marks Act in February, making unauthorised use a criminal offence. Traditional knowledge legislation is now also enforced.

The protected status means jobs and increased revenue for rural communities where development initiatives are encouraging and supporting emerging and small-scale farmers to succeed. It provides some quality assurance — there are guidelines on production of the products to ensure high quality and a certain amount of control over the harvesting and use of plants that grow in a potentially endangered ecosystem.

While he was researching wine additives, Trevor Strydom, director of Red Dawn Holdings of Stellenbosch, was struck by the idea of replacing traditional oak and other costly imported wood derivatives used in wine production with Rooibos and Honeybush wood derivatives.

Strydom initially embarked on a programme of research and development into wood chip production with Cape Natural Tea Products, which supplies the "wood" to the wine industry, and more recently, with Afriplex in the production of natural tannin extracts.

The department of viticulture and oenology at Stellenbosch University did the initial wood research in 2011 and 2012 and

the Agricultural Research Council's Infruitec-Nietvoorbij helped with some research.

This led to the recent launch of Audacia's latest Code-Breaker no-sulphur-added red wine.

Audacia's Michael van Niekerk, who has been instrumental in pioneering the new no-sulphur-added wines, describes the Code-Breaker wine as having "intense aromas with a bouquet of sweet cherries, roses, Turkish delight and fynbos. The palate is elegant with a balanced tannin structure.

THE PALATE IS ELEGANT PREDOMINANT.

The wine's predominant flavours are also reminiscent of fynbos and spices, and it exhibits a pleasant, sweet red berry finish.

"Many discerning wine drinkers today are looking for a no-sulphur-added product like this, but have been unable to find it, up until now," he says.

The wine will be available in the near future at selected stores of a national retailer and at the Audacia Root44 market. "We have had phenomenal support over the years from the administering officer of the Liquor Products Act of the directorate of food safety and quality assurance in the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries as well as the technical and management committees of the South African Wine and Spirit Board, and are extremely grateful for their ongoing support in the process of innovation," Strydom says.

"The legal limit of sulphites allowed in South African table wines is 150mg/l, while the initial batch of Code-Breaker red wine contains 0mg/l of naturally occurring sulphur, well below the total of 10mg/l maximum permissible, which allows wine producers to include the words 'no sulphur added' on a wine label.

"This wine allows people who are sensitive to sulphur or other sulphites often used in wine making, to enjoy a glass without the normal side effects."

Red Dawn aims at the responsible promotion of a unique category of natural "lifestyle" South African wines on local and international stages, as well as opening up a new market segment that offers shelf life-comparative alternatives to sulphur preservative-laden and pasteurised wines.

"We are totally committed to doing what is best for the South African wine industry and have attempted to involve all players and stakeholders at every opportunity by keeping as many people as possible fully informed of all progress made to date," Strydom says.

"Our purpose is to create and maintain a sustainable future for all South Africans. We seek to achieve this goal by sharing our intellectual property with all South African wine producers, thereby giving them the ability to produce unique patent-protected products, with 'real', unique consumer benefits.

"They will be able to do this under licence to Red Dawn for the duration of the respective intellectual property terms, in the jurisdictions where the patent is registered and in force.

"All potential patent licensees will need to subscribe to this common purpose as the sine qua non of the establishment and ensure maintenance of wine quality and [through it] obtain economic integrity and protection," he says.