

## Audacia's 'tea wood' wine

Finding a 'Blue Ocean' strategy in today's competitive wine market is crucial, especially for new and smaller wineries. Red wine boutique winery, Audacia Wines in Stellenbosch, found theirs by launching an exclusive new product – a Merlot with no added sulphites or preservatives, made using Rooibos and Honey Bush wood.

by **ELONA HESSELING**

**W**hen proprietor of Audacia, Trevor Strydom, was challenged by his business partner, Paul Harris, to create a unique, 'Blue Ocean' product, he started studying the South African Wine Law, searching for opportunities.

In the section *Substances which may be added to wine*, he found that there are no specifications as to the type of "wood" or "enzymes" that can be used. Working with Audacia winemaker, Michael van Niekerk, he focused on finding a unique wood alternative to oak derivatives currently used in winemaking. After many months of struggling to find viable options, the search was concluded when his daughter made him a steaming cup of Rooibos tea after a hard day's work ...

Trevor and Michael started experimenting with adding Rooibos and Honey Bush tea bags to wine and the results were promising. Following the success of these initial "home" trials, they shifted their focus to the Rooibos and Honey Bush plants' wood – the part which may legally be used in winemaking.

Rooibos (*Aspalathus linearis*) and Honey Bush (*Cyclopia genistoides*) are popular indigenous South African herbal teas and have multiple traditional medicinal uses. The wood of these plants are also unique, containing high levels of antioxidants, no caffeine and low tannin levels. Rooibos grows naturally in the Cederberg area, while Honey Bush is found along the coastal districts and mountainous areas of the Western and Eastern Cape.

Trevor and Michael are working closely with a producer in the Western Cape to source high quality wood chips. "The woody parts are usually discarded after the harvesting process. We are essentially 'rescuing' the wood, adding value to a waste product," Michael says. "Aside from being a sustainable product, the wood is also very cost effective and it may eventually have a massive economic impact on both the local wine and Rooibos industries."

The Rooibos plant's wood, used as an alternative in winemaking.



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Audacia Wines' winemaker, Michael van Niekerk.

The scale of the experiment is continuously expanding and during the 2014 harvest, three batches were made using the Rooibos and Honey Bush wood – a Merlot, Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon.

With regards to the use of Rooibos and Honey Bush as a wood alternative, Michael explains that the Honey Bush primarily impacts the aroma, while the Rooibos contributes to the palate, creating a soft, elegant and balanced wine. The 2013 Merlot has ample red fruit, Turkish Delight, rose, fynbos and tea leaf flavours. "Unlike coffee Pinotage, the tea flavours don't overpower. It just accentuates and lifts the red fruit character," he says.

A consumer study by Prof Wessel and Masters Student, Alet de Wet, was conducted at the Root 44 market, on Audacia. The aim was to see what the consumers think of the wine in a blind tasting environment. Prof Wessel explains that although the Rooibos and Honey Bush Merlot wasn't always the preferred choice, it was never seen as "unacceptable" by the public. "During this study we also asked the consumers whether they would prefer a wine with no/low SO<sub>2</sub> levels – and many of them said yes," he explains.

The 2013 Merlot sells for R180 per bottle and being a proudly South African wine, it was selected as one of the 450 officially recognised projects of the World Design Capital Cape Town 2014 initiative.

Although it's still early days, Trevor and Michael may well have succeeded in creating their own 'Blue Ocean' product. But they're not finished yet – this dynamic team recently started doing new "home" trials by toasting the Rooibos and Honey Bush chips in the oven...

Despite having no sulphites or preservatives added and made using Rooibos and Honey Bush wood, the wine's quality remains the most important feature for Michael. Although this is very much still a work in progress, there is no doubt that this patented technique has enabled Audacia to produce a truly unique South African wine. **W**

One of the main advantages of using Rooibos and Honey Bush wood is its antioxidant action, making it a potential alternative to Sulphur Dioxide (SO<sub>2</sub>) – this is also one of the uses for which the patent has been registered.

Professor Wessel du Toit of Stellenbosch University's Department of Viticulture and Oenology is currently investigating the use of Rooibos and Honey Bush as a potential sulphur replacement and wood alternative. He explains that these species are rich in phenols, which are extracted relatively quickly and acts as an antioxidant. "However, the process and whether or not these phenols have any antimicrobial effect, is still relatively unknown," he says.

By using these wood chips, Michael explains that he doesn't need to add any SO<sub>2</sub> – "as long as the grapes are clean and healthy". Rooibos and Honey Bush wood was used for the first time during the 2012 vintage on their Shiraz – mainly because there were enough grapes for these experiments. The first wine to be commercially available is the 2013 Merlot.

The wood chips are left in contact with the wine for anything between two weeks and two months, depending on the flavour development. The dosage is very important and has been adjusted along the way.

Michael explains that the initial 2012 wine was aged in barrel and closed under cork – "and the wine is still in perfect condition". However, from the 2013 vintage, the wines are bottled under screw cap to ensure that it remains as reductive as possible.