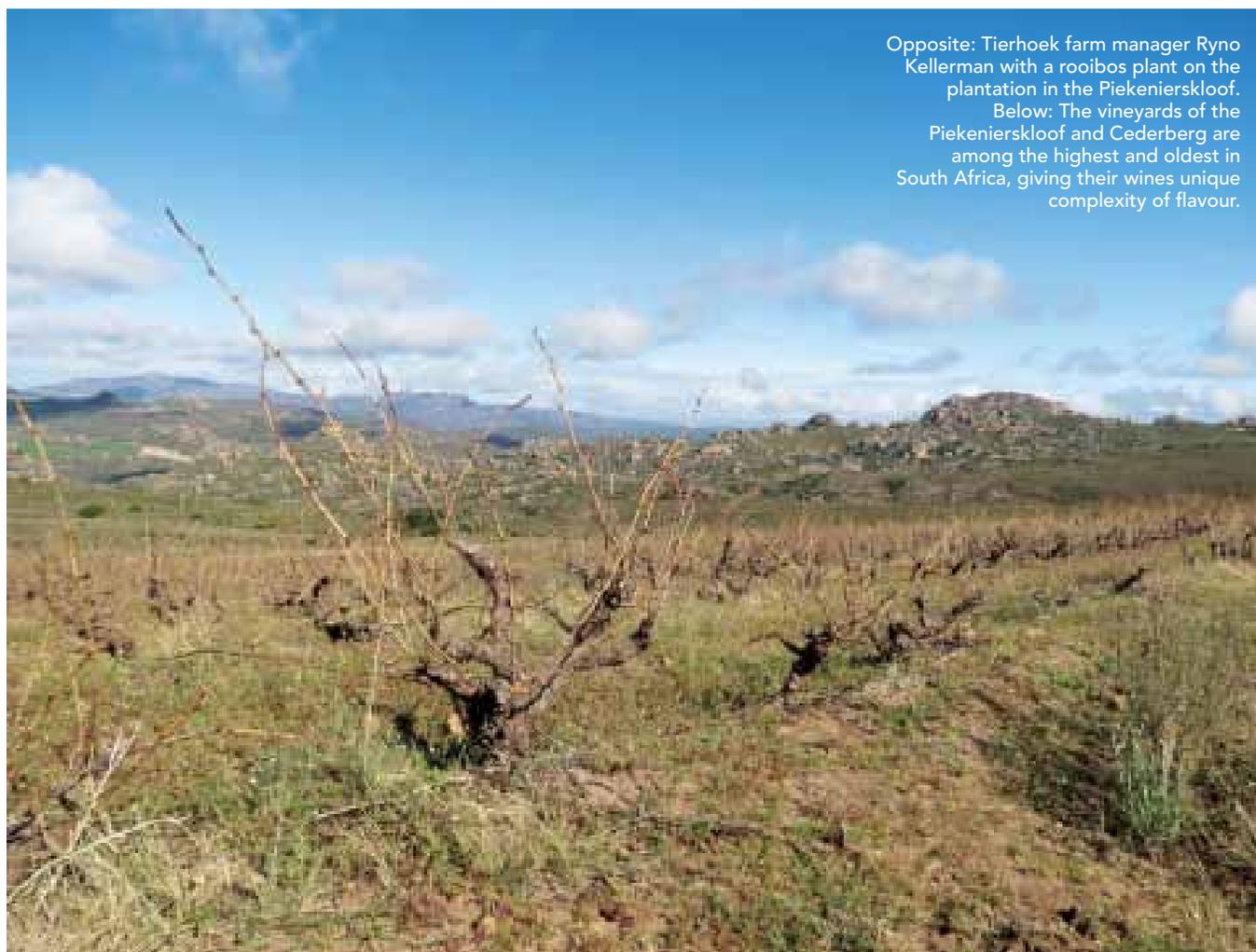


— THE —

ROOIBOS

phenomenon

THE WORLD'S QUEST FOR NUTRITION HAS PUT THE FOCUS ON SOURCES SUCH AS THE UNIQUELY SOUTH AFRICAN ROOIBOS, WHICH HAS MORE THAN A FEW LINKS WITH WINE TOO. CLIFFORD ROBERTS REPORTS.



Opposite: Tierhoek farm manager Ryno Kellerman with a rooibos plant on the plantation in the Piekenierskloof.
Below: The vineyards of the Piekenierskloof and Cederberg are among the highest and oldest in South Africa, giving their wines unique complexity of flavour.

Overlay a map of the Olifants River wine region with that of the world's only natural plantations of rooibos and the similarity is uncanny. The question arises: might there be other links between these vines and this unique plant renowned for its curative properties?

The subject has been looked at for decades, particularly in the context that the mysteries of plants continue to be unravelled as technology allows science to delve deeper. So too was the case for rooibos, whose fame first grew as new discoveries were made about the plant and its viability as a commercial product. Most people know the tea of course, which is exported worldwide, but it is also used in numerous other products including wine.

Significantly, in July it was announced that rooibos had secured similar protection to that of Champagne by being granted 'geographic indicator status' in an economic partnership agreement between the Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries and the European Union.

Rooibos is special because it occurs naturally in only a single, small region of the world – on the western reaches of South Africa. The area is bordered by Piketberg, a village some 100km north of Cape Town, Nieuwoudtville at its northernmost point, the Atlantic coast and Wupperthal.

The rooibos territory roughly mirrors vineyards planted in the wider Olifants River wine region, home to the country's three biggest wine cellars – Vredendal, Lutzville and Spruitdrift. The concentration of the latter producers in the north sometimes results in the region's other smaller, excellent vineyards being overshadowed. While

there are fewer independent cellars at its southern part, places like the Piekenierskloof have some of the most fascinating and ancient vines growing in the breathtakingly beautiful mountain landscape. Cederberg Private Cellar, the producer with the country's highest vineyards, lies south-east of Clanwilliam. David Nieuwoudt's endeavour is among others a class and gold-medal winner at the past SA National Young Wine Show and regional trophy winner at the 2014 *Decanter* World Wine Awards.

Cederberg Private Cellar is the only wine farm in the Cederberg ward, a classification based on its singular terroir in the eponymous mountain area. This is the same terroir where rooibos thrives.

While the town of Clanwilliam and the narrow margin that runs alongside the Olifants River are most familiar for their citrus plantations, it is here too that vineyards and rooibos fields are often encountered alongside each other. The town, whose name celebrates its 200th anniversary this year, is considered the heart of the rooibos industry and the greater Cederberg is the only place where rooibos occurs naturally.

Its journey to the rest of the world is likely to have truly sped up with the arrival on the shores of South Africa of 17th-century, ocean-faring traders. Jan van Riebeeck's mission to establish a supply station and expeditions to the interior would have brought explorers into contact with the locally used plants and herbs.

The first big commercial push for rooibos, however, came in 1904, when Russian immigrant and tea trader Benjamin Ginsberg introduced it to international markets. In 1929, he launched the Eleven O'clock Rooibos tea brand.

Like most quality vineyards, rooibos is farmed by hand. Many of the farms grow the plant on contract to large processing companies and distributors.



A year later, Dr Pieter Lefras Nortier, a local GP and amateur botanist, made an astounding discovery. Up until then, the plant grew wild – harnessing its life cycle would catapult its commercial prospects, but no-one knew how. Nortier discovered how rooibos seeds germinate. Together with a local farmer of the time, Olaf Bergh, they developed ways to farm the plant from seed to harvest and an industry was born.

The rooibos industry thrived and was deregulated in 1993, giving rise to Rooibos Limited, which today has 70% market share and 200 farmers contracted to supply its factory in Clanwilliam. Other major producers and distributors include Cape Natural Tea Products, Khoisan Tea and Carmiën Tea. The total harvest for the past year was around 12 500 tons.

In terms of production, rooibos is very different from the leafy shrubs that make up the bulk of tea consumed in the world. It's a reed-like fynbos species. Production starts with planting seeds in sandy seedbeds, in February and March. During July and August, seedlings are transplanted and the first crop can be expected 18 months later. Harvest, once a year between January and April, involves workers using scythes to cut about 30cm above the ground. Up to four crops can be harvested before plants are replaced.

Cuttings are then heaped, watered and aired, followed by bruising to release enzymes for oxidation. Green rooibos, a relatively new variant, does not undergo fermentation. The tea is spread across a

'The **rooibos territory** roughly mirrors vineyards planted in the wider Olifants River wine region, home to the country's three biggest wine cellars...'





WINE MADE WITH ROOIBOS WOOD

The applications of rooibos and honeybush have long been the subject of research. Stellenbosch University's Prof Wessel du Toit has investigated the use of its wood as an alternative to oak in winemaking and whether its antioxidants could be used to reduce the level of SO₂ used in winemaking.

The research links to a Stellenbosch farm. Towards the end of 2010, Audacia owner Trevor Strydom was at his wits' end. He'd acquired the property in 1997 and quickly realised the only way to compete in a competitive business dominated by large players was through innovation.

Strydom knew that legal restrictions allowed him to tinker only with wood and enzymes in his pursuit. 'I don't know anything about enzymes, so I looked at the 'wood' alternative,' he says.

They considered all kinds of "wood" alternatives, even eucalyptus. Then, one afternoon in December, his daughter accidentally solved the riddle. 'I was wracking my brain over this when she came in and offered me a cup of rooibos tea and the idea was hatched.'

Experiments began by putting rooibos tea bags into wine and leaving it. 'Even after 60 days it was still drinkable,' says Strydom. Still, this broke the rules in terms of wine additives, so they turned their attention to the plant's woody stem

The process was quickly proving Strydom right; in his former life as a banker, he'd adopted the belief that 'Change only occurs when pain exceeds joy' and this idea was born through the pain of having to compete in an overtraded wine label market.

'Rooibos farms replace plants annually,' says Strydom. Many are chipped and returned to the soil or simply burnt, but Strydom saw the opportunity to use the chips for wine production, in exactly the same way that oak chips are used.

A chance meeting put Strydom in touch with Dawie de Villiers, owner of Cape Natural Tea Products in Blackheath. He also set the patent application in motion, acquiring preliminary rights in 2011. Quite by chance, the patent attorney Muhammed Vally happened to be a qualified microbiologist too and the specifics of the international patent were defined and secured. The rights ensure protection of the invention for wine, beer and cider too.

Everywhere he went, Strydom insisted potential advisers, researchers and partners sign contracts of non-disclosure – even

students at Stellenbosch University and Wessel du Toit, professor at the Department of Viticulture and Oenology, who undertook early studies for the purposes of the patent.

In the process he engaged sufficient interest from KVV and a large beer producer, that a partnership was established.

While Strydom and Audacia winemaker Michael van Niekerk experimented in the cellar, licensed trials also began at Dion Engelbrecht's Stellenbosch microbrewery Stellenbrau, and in Elgin by cider-maker Windermere Cider. Mark Howell of Wine, Wood, Whatever is involved in further experimentation with the actual wood chip and toasting variations, while scientists at the Agricultural Research Council – Infruitec-Nietvoorbij in Stellenbosch are involved with measuring the levels of antioxidants in wood.

Early this year, Audacia released its maiden Rooibos Merlot 2013 'No Sulphites or Preservatives' wood-matured wine. Only 1 800 cases were made, but this is to be increased with following vintages. The farm now has rooibos chips maturing a selection of its Shiraz, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon 2014 wines too.

Strydom says the process is no longer as experimental as it was in the beginning and the process is becoming more scientific as knowledge is gained along the journey.

Most importantly to the patent, however, Strydom says that in addition to the flavour components the wood imparts, it also acts as a natural preservative, which is the reason it would be attractive to craft beer in particular. For the wine, production requires none of the typical addition of sulphites – a fact that is emblazoned on the label. Notably, the only reference to rooibos on the front label of the maiden wine is oblique: the graphic is a representation of a shattered rooibos stem. It's only on the back label that consumers are told about the rooibos link.

'Our thinking was that this wine is of such quality that it competes very well with any other, even though the use of rooibos wood has essentially created a whole new category,' says Strydom. The 2013 Merlot spent eight months on the indigenous wood and sells for R100 from the tasting room and selected Pick n Pay stores. It was also selected as one of the 450 officially recognised projects of the World Design Capital Cape Town 2014 initiative under Sustainability Solutions – Rooibos Wine.



From a small and sparsely populated region, rooibos has become a livelihood to many, the subject of intense study and a tea enjoyed internationally.

yard to dry before being collected for grading, further processing in the factory and packaging.

The link between rooibos and wine may well be merely coincidental and overlap with other produce, but it remains fascinating nonetheless – especially in the light of the use of the plant and its relative, honeybush, in wine, cocktails and similar beverages.

For one, Clanwilliam was a home to C Louis Leipoldt (1880-1947), author of, among others, the book *300 Years of Cape Wine*. Also, Klawer Cellars has an African Ruby Rooibos Vermouth while Stellar Winery dries Hanepoot grapes on a bed of straw and rooibos for its Heaven-on-Earth range. In November 2012, a blend of grape juice, rooibos and herbs called Amir was launched as a non-alcoholic food pairing alternative to wine in Oman.

As in wine, most rooibos farms supply to larger processors and distributors on contract, delivering by truck and paid by weight and quality. Particularly where exports are concerned, rooibos too is subject to strict certifications and audits.

Both reflect their terroir, but this unique character in the tea is lost to some degree through blending and the steam treatment it has

to undergo. ‘At the same time, however, the process has made the flavour profile vastly more accessible,’ says Rooibos Limited quality assurance manager Colette Cronje, adding that the ideal temperature for sensory evaluation of tea is 65°C.

Wine and rooibos overlap in attributes that make them beneficial to consume and at the very least have been the subject of substantial research in the field of health. Their commercial prospects have made them the centre of endless litigation too. Both can thrive in adverse conditions, involve fermentation and develop in flavour over time.

Of course, there are substantial differences too – for one, there are no adverse effects if one doesn’t spit when tasting a flight of teas.

In August, rooibos will overlap with wine again. A new Rooibos Route will allow visitors to visit actual rooibos farms and is to be launched by the owners of a unique tea store in Clanwilliam.

Sisters Sanet Stander and Marietjie Smit opened NetMar Rooibos Tea House in 2012, offering tastings from a selection of 100 flavours and blends from 10 rooibos producers. And free tastings will be on offer again when the region’s popular flower season gets underway.

One local producer that farms both rooibos and wine is Tierhoek, owned by Shelley Sandell. It’s relatively small scale; there are 50ha of rooibos, 16ha of wine. Farm manager Ryno Kellerman ascribes the good reception they get for both from their customers to the altitude and location of the farm – at 760m above sea level it’s the second-highest cellar in the country, and located 40km from the sea. ‘In summer we get a lot of mist in the mornings,’ he says.

The soils amidst the peaks that surround the farm comprise largely decomposed sandstone that feed both the rooibos and vines, some of which are ancient – the Grenache vineyard at Tierhoek for example is over 50 years old.

It’s this marvel that draws visitors from across the world to the farm and others like it almost daily. ♦