



THE RED REVOLUTION

By Maureen Miller

Uniquely South African, the rooibos and honeybush industry is spreading its wings into areas far wider than tea

The names “rooibos” and “honeybush” are as proudly South African as *braaivleis*, *boerewors* and the Springboks. My granny drank “bush tea” for her health. In those days, there were no teabags and her ritual morning and afternoon brew-up involved spooning just the right amount of loose leaves into a heated teapot and waiting just the right length of time before a red-gold liquid was poured into her cup and sweetened with half a teaspoon of honey. To this day, the aroma of that nectar evokes fond memories.

Rooibos is indigenous and grows naturally in a narrow 60 000ha belt of very specific soil and terroir in the Cederberg area of SA. Its unique characteristics are the result of the area’s climatic and geographical conditions, and the bush has been used here for generations for its beneficial properties and delicious taste. The increasing popularity of the plant has resulted in production areas expanding south of Citrusdal, as well as to the Sandveld. Honeybush is grown both in the Western and Eastern Cape and is an emerging industry that depends on wild harvesting for 70% of its crop, much of which is exported. Commercial farming of honeybush only started in 1996, with small-scale farmers increasingly involved after 1998.

The word has spread about these unique herbs and their by-products, which are now promoted and sold worldwide, but since 1994 the South African industry has been caught up in legal wrangling – particularly with the USA and France – over trademark registration of the names. The good news is that in July 2014, Trade & Industry Minister Rob Davies announced that the names “rooibos”

and “honeybush” have secured geographic indicator (GI) status in the economic partnership agreement between southern African nations and the European Union. The ensuing trademark protection means the names are now ours alone, just as “Champagne” can only be used for sparkling wine from the Champagne region in France.

So what are the advantages of GI status? Importantly, it provides quality assurance: there are production guidelines to ensure this, as well as a certain amount of control over harvesting and using something that grows in a potentially endangered ecosystem. Equally importantly, the protected status translates into jobs and increased revenue for rural communities, where development initiatives are encouraging emerging and small-scale farmers to make a success of their forays into the industry.

Traditional knowledge is essential in the sustainable cultivation and harvesting of the plant. A quick look at the history of rooibos reveals that centuries ago, the local Khoisan dried and infused its leaves into a tasty drink with medicinal properties. In the



Above: Trevor Strydom and Michael van Niekerk checking vines in the Audacia vineyard.
Below: Deon Engelbrecht.

early 20th century, Dr Le Fras Nortier began researching its medicinal value and agricultural potential, and commercial harvesting started in the Thirties. Today, of course, rooibos and honeybush are used in a wide range of products, from tea to cosmetics and, recently, alcoholic beverages.

The economic impact of this growing industry is significant. Dawie de Villiers, Chairman of the Rooibos Council, says the potential’s massive: around 5 000 people are currently employed in either permanent or temporary positions. The benefits of GI protection therefore contribute to the socio-economic welfare and sustainable development of the region, as well as the income and dignity of those involved in the business.

From a health perspective, both rooibos and honeybush are known to be rich in antioxidants and polyphenols (micro-nutrients). They’re also caffeine-free and low in tannin, so their delicate flavours can be enjoyed throughout the day, either hot or as iced tea. Skin conditions are soothed by an application of rooibos; green rooibos, in particular, has strong anti-inflammatory properties and is said to lower lipoprotein cholesterol and high blood pressure. What’s more, a team of South African researchers has found evidence that rooibos could help decrease insulin resistance and combat diabetes ➤



and cardiac illness.

Scientists around the world are researching the bioactive components of the rooibos and honeybush plants. Studies that are either under way or have been concluded over the past decade have yielded positive assessments of their antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties, which could be used clinically and therapeutically. At this stage, though, although it's very exciting, empirical evidence has yet to be found.

THE ESSENCE IS IN THE WOOD

It's been a long haul for boutique wine farmer, entrepreneur and trendsetter Trevor Strydom, Director of Red Dawn IP Holdings in the Western Cape. After he'd researched wine law in SA, a chance encounter with a cup of rooibos tea led him to the innovative idea of replacing traditional oak wood with rooibos wood in wine production. He embarked on a programme of research with Cape Natural Tea Products, in collaboration with the Department of Viticulture & Oenology at Stellenbosch University and ARC Infruitec-Nietvoorbij. The results were more than encouraging: the antioxidants in the indigenous plant material have been shown to help preserve the wine naturally, thus eliminating the need for synthetic preservatives and providing interesting flavour notes. Red Dawn IP Holdings, owned by winemakers Audacia and KWV, has patents pending in 83 countries globally, as well as trademarks covering names and the use of rooibos and honeybush in alcoholic beverages. "Our patent covers the making of all wine, beer and cider products by adding rooibos and honeybush plant material during manufacture," says Strydom.

Recognised as an official project of the Cape Town World Design Capital 2014 initiative, Audacia's 2013 Merlot, which contains no added



sulphur or other preservatives, recently won a bronze medal at the prestigious Veritas Awards. Audacia winemaker Michael van Niekerk says of it: "We regard this as the launch of a totally new and unique wine category – rooibos wooded wines. There's nothing comparable currently available on the global wine stage."

The balance between good wine and good food is important. Mike Israel, owner and Chef at Pomegranate Restaurant on the



rooibos and honeybush leaves during the boiling phase.

Governor's Red Lager is infused with indigenous rooibos and honeybush leaves from the beginning of the brewing process, allowing its complex flavours to develop throughout maturation, says brewer Stephen de Jager of Stellenbrau. What makes it so successful, he adds, is that it retains the crispness of a traditional lager, but "simultaneously presents subtle, honey-like scents,

The word's spread about rooibos, honeybush and their by-products, which are now promoted and sold worldwide.

Vergenoegd Wine Estate near Stellenbosch, says he's experimenting with a delicate rooibos infusion into his fish stock with white wine, adding that the herb can enhance an already great velouté. A summer dessert of rooibos ice cream with a fresh fruit topping is next on his list.

Craft beer has become the flavour of the decade. In the Western Cape, we're privileged to have Stellenbrau Governor's Red Lager, the first beer to be enhanced with



earthy floral notes and a distinctive, but not overbearing, fynbos flavour". Stellenbrau brews almost 30 000 litres of beer a month, of which 15% is Governor's Red Lager, currently available in the Western Cape.

I'm a cider girl myself and at the Root 44 market in Stellenbosch, I was handed a tasting glass of Windermere rooibos wooded cider by Strydom. I find it a difficult concept to get my head around: cider's always been made from apples. But, as with the Audacia Merlot, the addition of rooibos and honeybush means that synthetic preservatives like sulphur are now excluded, the shelf life's extended and the flavour of this craft cider is, in a word, scrumptious. What's more, Elgin-based Windermere Cider won Silver this year in the Traditional Dry Apple Cider category at the second annual Australian Cider Awards. Bring it on!

Proudly South African, tasty and good for you – what's not to like? 🍏

A PLANT FOR ALL SEASONS

Rooibos isn't only a flavoursome tisane. Thanks to the SA Rooibos Council, we learn that:

- Rooibos ice-cream was served at the wedding of Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones.
- Snails don't like rooibos (they must be the only ones!), so if it's crushed and sprinkled on the surface of the garden, they'll make for other pastures.
- Rooibos can be used as a natural dye due to its rich red colour.