

FRANCOIS NAUDE'S LE VIN DE FRANÇOIS NOW A TRUE ICON AFTER 11 YEARS

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Eleven years after launching his unique Pinotage under the Le Vin de François label, legendary wine maker Francois Naudé is seeing his annual once-off offering taking its place at the top of South Africa's wine offerings, both in terms of quality and in the high-end prices the wine commands.

In a time where many South African wineries are realising the importance of promoting the country's premier wines at prices underscoring quality and image, Naudé's Le Vin de François concept can be seen as one of the first exponents of a uniquely tailored luxury wine offering – both in the creation of the annual wine as well as the selling therefore, which happens by means of a unashamedly glamorous by-invitation-only auction.

This year saw 120 invited guests invited to the 10th Le Vin de François Auction, held at the Old Tannery venue in Wellington. Some 200 x 12 bottle cases were put up for auction, realising total sales of R1,8m rand at an average price of R8 150 per case.

According to Naudé, he is humbled by the fact that eleven years after the first Le Vin de François Auction, the event is still regarded as a highlight on the wine calendar, attracting international and local buyers willing to pay top dollar for South African Pinotage.

The Naudes Francois snr Melissa and Francois jnr. e1523258570695 Francois Naudé's Le Vin de François Now a True Icon after 11 years

The Naudes – Francois snr, Melissa and Francois jnr.

“The local wine scene of today is very different to the one in which we launched Le Vin de François with the first auction in 2008,” he says. “In those days we were one of the few Pinotage labels achieving over R400 a bottle of wine. Over the past decade there has been a concerted drive among South African producers to price their wines in line with our peers in Europe and America in order to raise the perception of our image as a quality wine country. It is thus extremely rewarding to see Le Vin de François still commanding such interest among wine aficionados as well as the good prices we think the brand deserves as a limited edition wine, original in the way it is made.”

The originality lies in the sourcing of the wines from which the Le Vin de François is annually crafted. Naudé, a recognised Pinotage expert having won seven Absa Top 10 Pinotage Awards during his career as wine maker at L'Avenir in Stellenbosch, approaches the country's leading Pinotage cellars with an option of buying their top barrels from each vintage.

“The selection process is extremely rigorous, with myself and my son, also Francois, tasting a copious number of Pinotage samples from these wineries and making detailed notes,” he says. “After the final candidates have been selected, the barrelled wines are bought and blended before bottling.”

For the Le Vin de François 2016, which was auctioned this year, Naudé, found what he was looking for in Pinotages from Stellenbosch stalwarts Beyerskloof, Kanonkop, Simonsig, Lanzerac and L’Avenir, with Rhebokskloof from Paarl and Tulbagh icon Rijk’s making-up the balance of the blend for this year’s auction.

“My role is overseer of one wine annually released representing the crème de la crème of South Africa’s Pinotage producers,” he says. “With Le Vin de François I want to offer a limited number of wine-lovers access to a bespoke wine showcasing the wonder of Pinotage in a format I believe is original and complements South Africa’s wine offering. Which, at this moment in time, is the best it has ever been in terms of quality and image.”

A part of the success of the auction as well as the critical claim for each year’s Le Vin de François Pinotage lies in that there is not only vintage variation, but also in the stylistic make-up due to the variation of the components.

“The wine just has to be great, that is number one,” says Naudé. “My buyers have come to expect this, and I have to deliver. The Pinotage has to appeal to two different groups of buyers. The first want a luxurious red wine that can deliver instant gratification in being accessible and drinkable upon purchase. The second group of purchasers are aficionados who want to add the Le Vin de François to their collections where they know the wine will mature magnificently over the next fifteen to twenty years.

“And this is what fine Pinotage does – drinks well in its youth and ages into a thing of incomparable beauty.”

The Le Vin de Francois 2016 was made from a dry, hot vintage in which yields were substantially down from 2015. “It is such a pleasure going through the selection process, as each year I am reminded as to how great a grape Pinotage is as well as the extraordinary craftsmanship shown by the wineries,” he says.

“The 2016 is characterized by a rich violet–red colour and a nose that hints of black cherry and toasted savoury spice. The product of a dry hot vintage that brings about pronounced earthy flavours together with smooth cloves, sundried tomatoes and dried herbs. This wine suggests a palate of dark chocolate and chilli underpinned with soft leather aromas. The perfectly intertwined tannins and oak flavours show a wine with the potential to age magnificently.”

Besides Naudé’s prowess in compiling this extraordinary Pinotage wine, his astuteness on the marketing front cannot be disregarded. For the “show” put on for the selling of the wine is a major contributor to the overall success of Le Vin de François.

“If you want people to pay the best prices, you must give them the very best treatment,” he says. “The 120 invited guests are chauffeured to the location, this year to the Old Tannery in Wellington. Champagne is sipped, Chef Annelize Buchanen created a spread of gourmet artistry and auctioneer Joey Barker saw that the auction was conducted to a high degree of professionalism. The standard of the event itself is as much a part of the Le Vin de François experience as the wine itself. And I am glad to say that this experience is exclusive to Le Vin de François.”

Besides the 200 cases of Le Vin de François 2016, various art works as well as other wines were auctioned. A part of the auction proceeds are annually given to charity, with the Somerset-West Night Shelter being this year's recipient.

But it is about the wine, and what began as an innovative and ambitious venture has turned into a true South African classic from a true South African wine pioneer.