

## **Abstract**

Working two harvests in South Africa initiated a passion for the country's diversity and its even more diverse wines, including Cinsault. My first encounter with single-variety Cinsault at Radford Dale in 2020 showed its potential as a lighter, expressive red wine with floral notes and a surprising structure. In 2023, while working at Taaibosch Estate, we focused on producing a premium Bordeaux blend, however, we also held regular cellar tastings, one of which was a Cinsault-focused tasting. This tasting sparked my curiosity and reinforced my belief in its serious potential as a single varietal in South Africa. My curiosity, combined with the growing consumer preference for lighter red wines, motivated me to investigate whether the renewed interest in Cinsault is short-lived or a lasting category.

The research paper aims to determine if the transformation of South African Cinsault from a blending 'workhorse' variety to a premium 'showhorse' variety is a genuine renaissance or a marketing-driven trend. It conducts a historical analysis and reviews industry documentation, along with market reception data from Delta Wines (*in co-operation with Nielsen*). Interviews with Dutch importers such as Wijnkooperij de Lange and Smaragd Wines, as well as prominent figures in the South African wine industry, provide further insights. In addition, the research incorporates published literature and the opinions of wine experts and journalists.

Cinsault arrived in South Africa in the mid-19th century, historically known as Hermitage, it is one of the genetic parents of Pinotage. Cinsault was once South Africa's most planted red variety due to its high-yielding capabilities. It primarily served as a workhorse for bulk wine and blends driven by the KWV's volume focus. This workhorse image, issues such as undeclared blending, leafroll virus and an industry shift towards premium markets, led to its decline in plantations. Cinsault was surpassed by Cabernet Sauvignon in 1993 as the most planted red variety.

However, the 21st century marks a significant renaissance, driven by winemakers championing older vineyards, notably inspired by the Old Vine Project (OVP), which certifies vines 35 years or older for their quality-enhancing characteristics. Cinsault's natural heat and drought tolerance, coupled with its ability to achieve phenolic ripeness at low sugar levels, make it viticulturally well-suited to the South African climate and relevant amidst climate change. Modern winemaking techniques focus on purity and terroir expression, moving away from heavy extraction or new oak, and utilising gentle handling and neutral vessels, which suits Cinsault as a lighter style red very well.

Market reception underlines this renaissance. Demand for South African Cinsault has significantly improved, particularly in Europe, as consumers appreciate its versatility. Critics frequently praise its elegance, freshness, and terroir expression, often drawing favourable comparisons to Pinot Noir. This aligns with a broader consumer shift towards lighter, elegant wine styles, boosting international interest in premium South African old-vine Cinsault.

Key industry figures envision a strong future for Cinsault, noting its substantial vineyard area among red old vine varieties and significant commercial potential in the premium segment. Recent Platter's Wine Guide ratings show Cinsault's largest growth among lighter red varieties over the last decade, and leading wine reports consistently acknowledge its premium standing and fit with the trend for lighter, food-friendly wines. While some perceive single-variety Cinsault as still niche, there is a strong recognition of its potential for a long-term viable category, especially given its drought resistance and suitability for the changing climate.

The study concludes that the transformation of South African Cinsault from a 'workhorse' to a premium, single-variety 'showhorse' is not merely a marketing-driven trend. In essence, Cinsault's shift is a profound and sustainable renaissance, even if it remains niche. A unique combination of heritage, viticultural suitability, and alignment with global consumer preferences for lighter, authentic, and expressive wines makes single-variety Cinsault from South Africa a category on its own.