

Picked to multi-clonal perfection

Launching a wine label in a saturated market is tricky. Shannon Vineyards researched clones and picking times for their own wines by supplying boutique winemakers. KIM MAXWELL reckons the seven-year wait was worthwhile.

Gaining experience can never be underrated, irrespective of the field. It also helps to have good mentors, decent raw materials and sound theoretical principles as guidelines. Spend time in front of an office whiteboard with viticulturist James Downes scribbling graphs and diagrams on Elgin farm Shannon Vineyards, and it's clear that he ticked all those boxes over the past seven years.

Planting 15.5ha of vines on virgin soils, and ultimately crafting the wines of his dreams, James approached Pinot Noir and Merlot as long-term research projects, aiming to improve on varieties South Africa hasn't had universal success with. With nature the only unknown, little was left to chance.

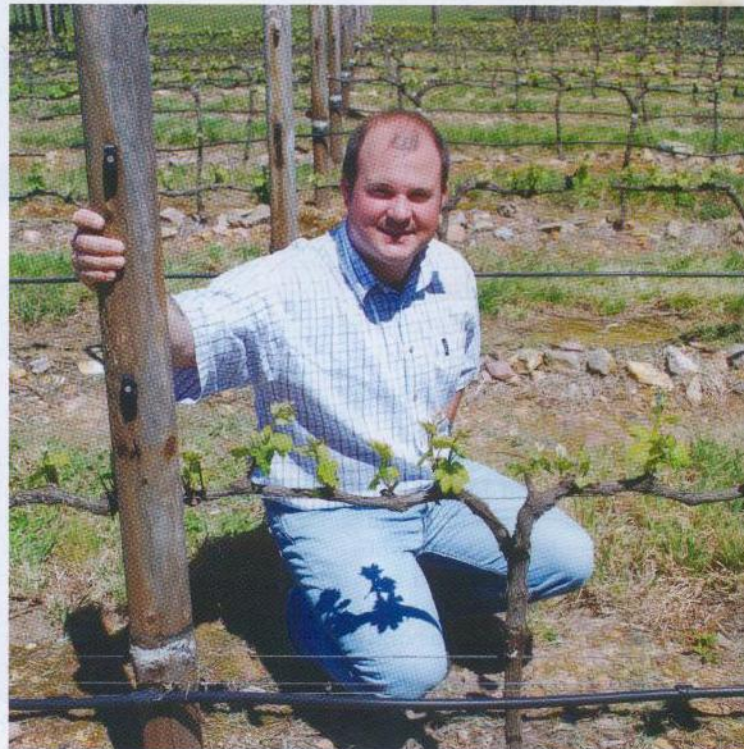
Advised that the cooler area was most suitable for Pinot Noir and Sauvignon Blanc, with Merlot on warmer slopes, James concentrated on these varieties despite a warning that Pinot and Merlot were "tricky" in South Africa. He's learnt this means hard graft in the vineyard, and he's welcomed the challenge.

James also disregarded the advice of a viticultural consultant in 1989. "We were told to plant all our hectares as quickly as possible, to make wine and get it on the shelf as quickly as possible, because the wine competition is immense." Many new wine labels take this route, producing inferior wines at inferior price points. Instead James and his brother, marketing partner Stuart Downes, waited seven years to release Shannon Vineyards wines in December 2008.

The Pinot Noir 2007 has a price tag of around R250 cellar door, while the second red, Mount Bullet '07, costs around R200. The Sauvignon Blanc 2007 (R90 cellar door) has 15% barrel-fermented Sémillon to "round off the acidity" of the flinty Sauvignon.

... staggering the picking over 11 days produces a representation of clones, and a range of flavour spectrums within those clones.

It's confident pricing for a first release, but indications from tasters at Cape Wine 2008 suggest the wines punch above their weight. The Downes family had a financial crutch – the farm has 50 ha planted to modern apple and pear varieties, which on a per ha basis, are a lot more profitable than vineyards!



James Downes with his Pinot Noir vines. He is known for meticulous viticulture.

Working vintages in a few countries, James' decision to hold back was influenced in 2001 by Martin and Josephine Prieur at Domaine Jacques Prieur. "The Burgundian philosophy is to work at the pace of your vineyard and nothing else. They have Grand Cru vineyards with some sections replanted. But they'll only use that replanted section when the vines have reached a 'satisfactory' age, anything from seven or eight years, and often older," he explains. In South Africa, economics generally mean vines are harvested for wine from three years old.

Early Pinot Noir grapes were sold off to boutique Pinot Noir winemakers Clive Torr, Gordon Newton-Johnson and Cathy Marshall, who all still source this Elgin fruit. The benefit was mutual: vibrant young fruit for the winemakers, while James could pinpoint his desired wine flavours from observing their picking times and methods.

His approach is something like this: using Pinot Noir clones 113, 114, 115, 667 and 777, the corresponding berry flavours range from simple strawberry, raspberry and youngberry,