

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.

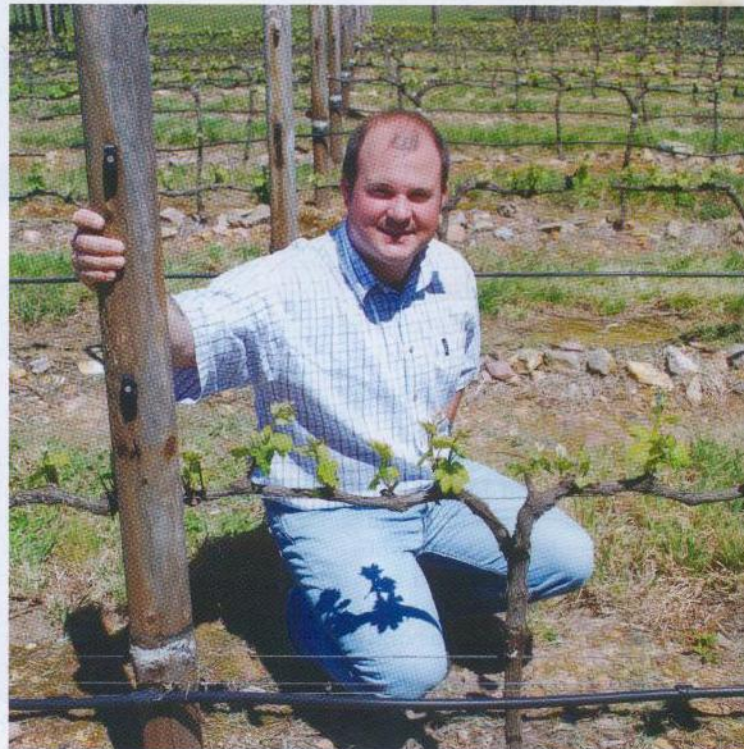
Advised that the cooler area was most suitable for Pinot Noir and Sauvignon Blanc, with Merlot on warmer slopes, James concentrated on these varieties despite a warning that Pinot and Merlot were "tricky" in South Africa. He's learnt this means hard graft in the vineyard, and he's welcomed the challenge.

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.

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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.

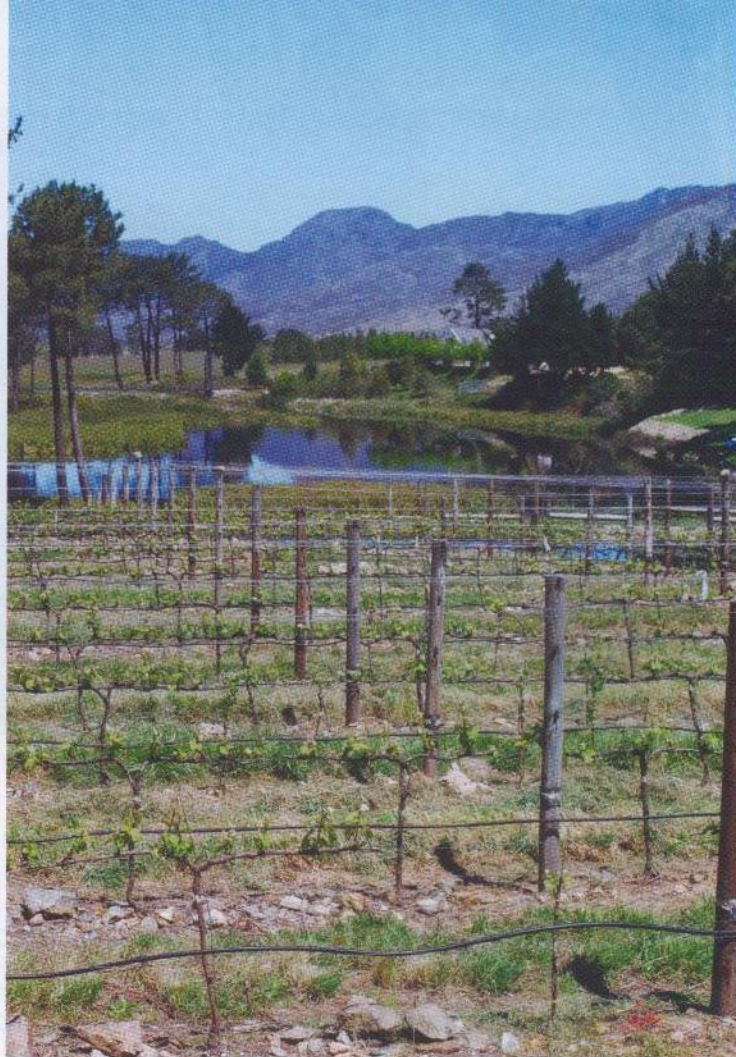
His approach is something like this: using Pinot Noir clones 113, 114, 115, 667 and 777, the corresponding berry flavours range from simple strawberry, raspberry and youngberry,

to more 'mature' cherry, meaty/marmite and liquorice flavours. James discovered that picking clone 113 fruit at optimal ripeness delivers dominant strawberry fruit, but won't produce cherry or marmite characters. Clone 114 delivers raspberry and youngberry, while 667 (cherry) and modern clone 777 (youngberry/cherry to marmite/liquorice) delivers a wider spectrum of flavours including more 'mature' fruit flavours. Picking all clones at the same time will produce one-dimensional strawberry and none of the desired cherry/marmite flavours. But staggering the picking over 11 days produces a representation of clones, and a range of flavour spectrums within those clones.

James developed a pyramid of percentages of older (113, 114, 115) and newer (667, 777) Pinot Noir clones he wanted in his glass, and then re-jigged through adjusting picking times for maximum expression and mouthfeel – more clone 115 for structure, a boost of 667 for silky tannins, etc. He also used different clones from 12 different vineyards. Hence the 2007 Pinot Noir incorporated five different blocks and four clones, and only a small percentage of new wood. Batches were fermented separately, using natural ferments so a commercial yeast wouldn't 'corrupt' the vineyard purity.

Studies in salmon breeding in Scotland probably contributed to James' approach. "My background is marine biology, using selective breeding. It's maximising different genes in salmon to get the best representation. You want the best texture, shape, flavour and colour so that a chef would want to cook with it," he says. "I suppose I take a similar approach with a glass of wine. You want that representation of different flavour profiles in the glass."

If it all sounds fairly nitpicky, it is! Winemakers Gordon Newton-Johnson and wife-to-be Nadia were entrusted with the Shannon Vineyards winemaking, doing a valiant task of



Shannon Vineyards in Elgin. Mount Bullet is the dome-shaped mountain in the Kogelberg, and the Palmiet river runs through the farm.

translating James' aims into the bottle. A tough task? On the contrary, Gordon says it's a pleasure working with quality grapes and a game plan. "And buying grapes from James for Newton Johnson wines is great because he works so hard. Most growers try to maximise their yields for the price, but James is forever offering to snip off more for better quality," Gordon adds.

To return to the Mount Bullet 2007, the wine fools many tasters when it's revealed as a Merlot.

It has the tannic structure of a Cabernet Sauvignon, the fleshiness of a Merlot-dominated Bordeaux and a Cabernet Franc nose. Like the Shannon Pinot Noir, the Merlot wine incorporates an 11-day picking difference between the first and last grapes. Five blocks and five clones were used, French MO343 and 343, plus MO192, 12 and 3, probably of Italian origin. James is unapologetic that he approached the Merlot as a Pinot Noir. "The Merlot isn't as complicated: only one vineyard and one soil type, but five different clones. The norm is two clones," James explains. "I don't think enough attention is given to clonal selection and picking dates in South Africa because Merlot has always been a blending component in Cab."

Mentioning L'Ormarins viticulturist Rosa Kruger as a mentor, James discusses the drawbacks of "minty" Merlot and waiting out the flavours to mature, and how Elgin's warmer slopes achieve phenolic ripeness without excessive alcohols. After a seven-year wait, what is certain is that the wine is a quality non-standard South African Merlot. James and team can be very proud.



Photography by Kim Maxwell.

Shannon Vineyards Pinot Noir and Mount Bullet