



26 février 2007

Back to the Future

26 February 2007 by Neil Pendock



Tinus Els



Michel Laroche

*The future of South African icon wine includes Pinotage most definitely, writes **Neil Pendock** after a recent visit to L'Avenir - latest addition to Portfolio Laroche.*

*There'll be the breaking of the ancient western code
Your private life will suddenly explode
There'll be phantoms
There'll be fires on the road
and the white man dancing*

Leonard Cohen, *the Future*

French Canadian griot Leonard Cohen chose a logo consisting of three superimposed symbols – a blue heart, a humming bird and a pair of broken handcuffs, on the cover of his seminal 1992 LP *the Future*. Fifth generation French wine legend Michel Laroche also appropriates three symbols, superimposed to form the logo displayed prominently on his elegant tasting glasses: a pair of eyes, lips and a nose; the three sensory organs of wine appreciation. Although in the case of his grippy Merlot and Cabernet Franc, addition of a tongue for testing texture would be appropriate. Then again, the Rolling Stones might object.

Laroche is the new owner of L'Avenir – French for “the future” – which is quite appropriate as Michel is an incarnation of the future of wine. First up is globalization – Michel makes Chardonnay on three continents: Europe (where his family have been making Chablis for five generations); South America, where he calls the Casablanca Valley home; and now Africa, on the Simonsberg. Although he uses the same recipe (limited oak character from typically 15-25% barrel ferment and malolactic fermentation only if the acid levels can support it), different sites produce different expressions of the great grape of Burgundy.

The second futuristic feature is the use of screw caps as closure. Michel reckons he has “never had a cork closed wine that tasted better than a screw cap closed bottle.” After experiencing cork problems in around 10% of his bottles (mainly TCA contamination and oxidation) he took the commercially brave decision to bottle his range in screw caps. 2001 was the first vintage to be screwed and today as much as 3% of the wines he sells in France are closed with screw caps (against 60% worldwide). “France will take time” he laughs.

Next up are labels. Anthony Lane has a well-deserved near monopoly of top end label design in SA, but the new L'Avenir labels, designed in Paris, inject a much needed dose of whimsy and elegance onto the bottle store shelf: midnight African landscape in profile with a tiny Stone Pine on the horizon for the Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Chenin; a cartoon hummingbird for the Rosé. With his labels sorted, the main aesthetic offence outstanding is the Sentinel Castle on the R44 above the farm. Michel felt compelled to buy it and next Bastille Day, promises to turn the canons around and blow the monstrosity up. Just like his



forefathers did to another eyesore in another city at the end of the 18th century.

Fruit is the future. "You can never have too much fruit in a wine" he insists. "Fruit is something you lose everyday. The challenge is finesse. Sumo-style wines are not my model" he adds.

Perhaps the most controversial feature of his vinous futurology is an enthusiasm for Pinotage. "I really believe Pinotage has the potential to be as good as Cabernet" he enthuses. "Just use some drip irrigation to control the tannins. Wine is too complex. Who can grasp complexity? Consumers need direction. A brand like ours is one direction. A country and varietal, is another."

Music to the ears of the Pinotage Association no doubt, and doubting Thomas's should ask winemaker Tinus Els for a barrel tasting of the Grand Vin Pinotage. Joining the Heritage Block Pinotage from Meerendal and Ashbourne from Hamilton Russell, the Grand Vin confirms the future of South African icon wine includes Pinotage most definitely.