Rooibos makes its mark

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Change occurs when pain exceeds joy — according to Trevor Strydom, owner of Audacia Wines and director of Red Dawn Holdings, a joint venture between Audacia Wines and KWV, that is pioneering the use of rooibos and honeybush plant material in wine, beer and cider making.

"Just two years ago, I was desperate to find some sort of competitive advantage in the wine business," he said at a press conference at Audacia Wines last Tuesday, where the newly patented technology was unveiled, adding that in an industry where production costs far exceed grape income, it is very difficult to make a profit.

"Around one third of the producers in Stellenbosch are running at a loss. I felt that I was just digging the hole deeper and I’d never get out. I was at that point where the joy of making wine was exceeded by the pain."

Mr Strydom said that as a small producer, it is very difficult to find a distributor.

"I even started up my own distribution business, but then I found that even if I could distribute my (and other smaller producers) wines, it was almost impossible to get onto wine lists in restaurants without paying for the privilege," he said.

This impasse led him to research wine industry legislation to look for a "blue-ocean" opportunity — an uncontested market space, untainted by competition.

The wine industry, on the other hand, is a "red ocean" industry — according to Mr Strydom, one in which there are many competitors and reduced prospects for growth and profit.

He focused on the legally permitted additives for wine, most significantly wood, and he began to brainstorm possibilities.

"Wine barrels have been made from many types of wood over the years besides oak, including yellowwood, acacia, and rooikrans," said Mr Strydom, "but you can’t make a barrel out of rooibos wood.

Audacia winemaker Michael van Niekerk had already been experimenting with other types of wood in the winemaking process, and Mr Strydom was in his own words, "becoming a little moedeloos."

One day, while drinking a cup of tea with daughter Sarah-Jane (he Ceylon, she rooibos), who urged him not to give up, the idea came to him to use rooibos plant material in the winemaking process, because of its well-known anti-oxidant properties.

"That first experiment involved putting rooibos teabags into a bottle of wine to see what would happen," he explained, adding that the idea is not to flavour the wine, but to use the natural anti-oxidant properties of rooibos plant material to replace sulphur dioxide normally used in the winemaking process, to prevent oxidation.

The first commercial wine actually made using rooibos plant material, was a 2013 Audacia Merlot.

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A golden opportunity to bring previously disadvantaged people onto the land as farmers”.

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“Rooibos wood chips in an infusion bag were added before fermentation, along with a small amount of enzyme to enhance colour,” said Mr Strydom. “No sulphur was added at any stage.”

A natural extension to using rooibos chips in wine making, was to use the woodchips as a replacement for French and other oak in the maturation process.

“Oak is aged before it is used in wine making, but we are aging with toasting,” explained Mark Howell of Cape Natural Wood Products, the company that prepares the wood chips for use in wine, beer and cider making.

“I was surprised when I first tried toasting rooibos wood, that I could take it right through from the bark out the wood combusting, but if you think about it, it’s the anti-oxidants in the wood that make it possible.”

Mr Howell said the top third of the rooibos and honeybush plant is used to make tea, while the rest is usually uprooted and discarded. “Chipping these stumps makes use of the wood and creates a sustainable product,” he said.

A research project, still under way, by a team from the Department of Oenology and Viticulture at Stellenbosch University, and the Agricultural Research Council (Infruitec-Nietvoorbij) showed that the use of indigenous plant materials could be used as replacement for sulphites in wine making, as a replacement for sulphites in the replacement process.

In February, the DTI declared rooibos a protected mark under the country’s Merchandise Marks Act, marking the start of an important battle against a criminal offence. Traditional knowledge legislation is now also officially in force in South Africa.

“Rooibos and honeybush have historically been cultivated and processed exclusively in South Africa,” Mr Strydom said.

Their characteristics and properties are the result of our unique climate and geography. In addition, there is a wealth of traditional knowledge in existence about how these plants are best cultivated, harvested and processed, as well as about their many beneficial and health giving properties.

“Europe has traditionally used geographical indication protection for products such as French champagne or Greek feta. Now we South Africans can do the same — our range of rooibos and honeybush alcoholic beverages are at the forefront of marketing Brand South Africa in a positive and unique way,” Mr Strydom said, noting that patents are pending in South Africa and 83 other jurisdictions worldwide.

Red Dawn Holdings partner KVN’s Tania Joubert presented KVN’s Earth’s Essence Pinotage, Stellenbosch artisanal brewery Stellenbrau owner Deon Engelbrecht presented their Governor’s Red beer, and Windermere Cider managing director Tamus Mullins presented their just released apple cider; all made using rooibos chips as a replacement for sulphites in the various processes.

Alan Winde, MEC for Economic Opportunities said in his keynote address: “I just love to see this sort of innovation happening, and it’s great to come here and see how these partnerships are developing. This is a prime example of adding value in the agricultural products sector.”

“It’s thrilling to see how far we’ve come since you came to see me a year ago to share your idea. It’s my department’s task to create an enabling environment, to remove the constraints which might inhibit this type of innovation,” said Mr Winde, “so you must tell us what we can do to help.”

Speaking after the formal presentations, Mr Winde told Bolander that he is excited about the prospects that this new technology will generate in the area of land reform.

“As this technology gains traction, we will need to grow more rooibos and honeybush in the Cederberg and around Elim in the Southern Cape (the two areas where rooibos and honeybush flourish).

“That presents a golden opportunity to bring previously disadvantaged people onto the land as farmers,” he concluded.