

# Elegant in Elgin

**Wine: Sidebar**

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The life of a wine writer is not all beer and skittles. Sometimes there's real danger and mud.

An invitation for oxtail (preceded by an impromptu cellar tour) at Adi Badenhorst's Kalmoesfontein operation on the suddenly-fashionable Paardeberg saw me lose a pair of elegant Woolies moccasins in a vicious quicksand. Adi's son Samuel Sunnyskies gurgled at my misfortune and jumped in, immune in his sheepskin-lined, Pep Wellies. Sunnyskies is about to be supplemented, as Adi's wife Cornelia is in the family way.

What to call the next Badenhorst has not been decided but the middle name is fixed: Kalandar (weevil). It could be worse: Adi has acquired a new gogga book with options such as Oogpister (a pugnacious ground beetle) and Blaartrektor (a blister beetle).

Choosing names is vital for the Badenhorst Family Vineyards: with family members as shareholders, huge pressure may be brought to bear to name wines Sannie and Japie, and Adi needs options to counter Vaaljapie and a whole bar full of inappropriate jokes.

Over in Elgin, sheepskin-lined Wellies are best sourced from the farmer's co-op in Grabouw and they all look the same. On De Rust farm, writing your name on the sheepskin's inside with a black koki pen doesn't help as everyone is called Paul Cluver. The chairman of the Elgin Valley Wine Guild is Paul Cluver IV and dad is Paul Cluver III, so presumably 4 and 3 do the trick. At first I thought they couldn't be very good winemakers if they can't pick their own using their sense of smell, but then very few winemakers can pick their own wines blind so why should it be different with Wellies?

Elgin is that kind of appellation, the kind where owners of farms larger than Switzerland claim their boots with a koki pen. But then the appellation has a profile lower than the tyres of Jenson Button's Formula 1, an analogy made more apt by the fact that the N2 highway is the main feature of the appellation.

To paraphrase Gertrude Stein, there's no there, there, in Elgin. Just a strip of farms set back from the national road, down which fly hordes of tourists and old Cape money, en route to hedonism's hot spot, Hermanus.

Yet this is the appellation for seriously idiosyncratic wines. The aforementioned Cluvers make a classic riesling and the 2004 vintage is just about the most complete SA riesling I've ever tasted. Jo'burg mining-supply mogul Max Hahn owns Elgin Orchards. His 30ha vineyard produces cool-climate syrah grapes that last year won

Alsatian winemaker Julien Schaal a Coup de Coeur award from a judging panel assembled by French newspaper Le Figaro to rate wines made by French winemakers outside France.

The main prize went to Rhône superstar Michel Chapoutier, who makes stunning syrah at Mount Benson in South Australia, while Schaal picked up a special prize for his Elgin effort.

While Elgin may lack a Mount Benson, it does have a Mount Bullet on which the Downes of Shannon Vineyards make a mean merlot you've never heard of. So rather than racing past faster than a speeding bullet, taking a detour via Arumdale, Belfield and Bloemendahl (to start with the first two letters of the alphabet) can pay huge and unexpected dividends.

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