

Elgin, Elgin

Published: 21 May 03

Gone are many of the Granny Smiths and Golden Delicious. In their place are Merlot and Sauvignon Blanc. Long heralded as a great potential wine area, the apple kingdom of Elgin is awakening to vineyards. F



Iona McDonald reports. Internationally renowned for many years for the quality of its apples and pears, Elgin has expanded its repertoire, commanding increasing respect as a fine wine-growing area.

Since 1985 there have been rumblings in the South African wine industry about Elgin being "the next big thing".

Fast forward to 2003 and things are really hotting up in Elgin. Although there is as yet only one cellar in the valley (Paul Cluver) and three labels which proclaim their Elgin origins (Paul Cluver, Iona and Thandi), like popcorn in a pan, names of just who has bought farms in the valley pop up in every conversation. The enthusiasm and excitement are tangible.

Is this the turning point for the area - the moment when Elgin finally takes the big step to becoming a wine valley?

Recent land acquisitions suggest this might well be the case. Klein Constantia winemaker Ross Gower has bought an 83 hectare farm and already planted five hectares of a planned 30 hectare vineyard.

Former Gauteng radiologist and Cape Wine Master Cornel Spies relocated to his 72 hectare spread in the valley in 2002 and plans 20 hectares of vines and his own cellar. Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon will be planted this year with Pinot Noir planned for 2004.

The Downes family has long been associated with apples in the Elgin valley, but 30-year-old James Downes has 16 hectares of Merlot, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Franc, Viognier, Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon in the soil at Dun-manway farm. Some of those grapes have been snapped up by Neil Ellis, Clive Torr (Cape Wine Academy principal) and Gordon Johnson of Newton Johnson.

Andrew Gunn of Iona has hived off 25 of his 120 hectares and sold it to Tokara owner GT Ferreira, while Gyles Webb has bought a 100 hectare property to boost Thelema's white wine capacity.

Webb is adamant that the quality of Sauvignon Blanc from Elgin is potentially excellent - and hasn't yet been tapped.

A group of four businessmen - Kevin King, Dave Hooper, Peter Clark and George Mayer - bought a 70 hectare farm and have already planted 13 hectares of vines. But these are only a few of the

newcomers... Over the next five years it's predicted the vineyards of Elgin will grow from 100 to 400 hectares.

SO WHY HAS ELGIN TAKEN SO LONG TO TAKE OFF AS A WINE-GROWING AREA?

The first explanation is also the simplest: the apple farmers were making too much money. Until the slump that began five years ago and lasted till last year, it was far more lucrative to cultivate apples and pears than grapes.

Another reason is that planting grapes in places like Elgin was taboo. KWV quotas were nigh impossible to obtain and their advice on what to plant - even as recently as five years ago - didn't gel with the wisdom of those already in the area.

Traditionally a summer grazing area, Elgin has been cultivated with apples and other deciduous fruits from around the turn of the century, but it was really only after the Second World War that the area boomed. It went from being a fairly poor farming area to one of the richest in South Africa, with net profits per hectare in the five and six figure bracket being recorded.

Five years ago, however, there was a major downturn in fortunes in the wake of the deregulation of the industry and as a result of the international market demanding more "sexy" varieties. (Only a few of the more visionary farmers had moved on from Granny Smith and Golden Delicious to the trendy Pink Lady and Royal Gala varieties.) Sadly, many farms were lost in foreclosures - but, as always, one man's adversity is another's opportunity.

Land prices dropped, making Elgin appealing to buyers - and forcing some farmers to consider an alternative crop: grapes.

HOW DID IT ALL BEGIN?

Two of the largest farms in Elgin were approached by SFW and Nietvoorbij in the early '80s to pioneer grape growing: De Rust, belonging to neurosurgeon Dr Paul Cluver, and Anthony Rawbone-Viljoen's Oak Valley.

Nederburg's cellarmaster Gunter Brözel and SFW managing director Ernst le Roux believed Elgin was ideal for cool climate varieties and convinced Dr Cluver to plant Gewürz-traminer, Rhine Riesling, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc.

At Oak Valley Nietvoorbij's "commercial cultivar evaluation trial" saw all of the above planted, along with Merlot and Schönburger.

"It was thought that the south-facing slopes would be risky for plantings because there were concerns about ripening the grapes fully," recalls Rawbone-Viljoen.

The Paul Cluver team initially had their wines vinified at Nederburg. Mrs Songvei Cluver recalls how the quality of the fruit amazed the Nederburg cellar staff when the first fruit was delivered. Because the pickers were used to handling fruit gently - bruises and blemishes reduce the quality and hence price - the grapes arrived at the cellar virtually intact, with no tell-tale juice sloshing around in the bins!

Two years after the KWV scrap-ped the quota system, the Paul Cluver team decided to erect their own cellar and go it alone, handling their first solo harvest in 1997.

The Cluvers also started Thandi wines, an empowerment project, setting aside 100 hectares for a local community - a donation matched by forestry company Safcol, who also employed members of the community. Their first wines - made at Paul Cluver with the assistance of winemaker Andries Burger - hit the market in 1999 and flew off the UK supermarket shelves.

Another Elgin pioneer was Neil Ellis, the Cape's first négociant, who also broke ground by being the first to get permission to buy fruit in one area and vinify it in another. He produced a range of Elgin wines for Woolworths.

Elgin grapes have also made commercial appearances under other labels. Grapes from Rawbone-Viljoen's plantings have been sold to Peter Finlayson and appeared (to critical acclaim) as Bouchard Finlayson's Oak Valley Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. Their Pinot Noir and Merlot appeared under the WhaleHaven label, identified as Oak Valley fruit.

The next definitive moment in Elgin's evolution occurred when Andrew Gunn bought Iona in 1997.

Admitting that he "fell in love with a place that was rundown and needed a lot of work", Gunn applied his engineering brain to analysing his 120 hectare farm, which is perched on a plateau adjacent to the Kogel-berg range, appropriately known as the Highlands area of Elgin.

One good thing about being in an established apple area is the access to long-term weather data. Gunn crunched the numbers, comparing temperature readings from his farm with those of one of the world's greatest wine areas - Bordeaux. Obviously allowing for seasonal and hemispheric differences, he found Iona was cooler during the ripening season, as well as drier with more sunshine hours.

"My research," he says, "showed that Iona had the potential to produce wines of higher quality more consistently than Bordeaux."

When Gunn presented this information to South Africa's viticultural guru, Prof Eben Archer of Stellenbosch University, he was told it was impossible - that no farm as cool as this existed in South Africa. Prof Archer later had to eat his words - and subsequently got on board as a viticultural advisor.

Merlot and Sauvignon Blanc were planted with the first Sauvignon Blanc harvested in 2001. A chance meeting with Gyles Webb led to his grapes being vinified in Tokara's brand new cellar by Miles Mossop.

Webb admits that having access to Gunn's fruit at Tokara influenced his decision to buy land in Elgin. He intends planting "mainly white" to supplement Thelema's capacity, but admits that red grapes also feature in his planning.

At Cluver they have also taken an analytical approach, going the high-tech route and contracting the services of researcher Francois Knight of Agri Informatics.

Last year general manager Paul Cluver Jnr introduced the media to Knight's studies of terroir and temperature on De Rust.

Although highly technical and scientific, Knight explained that it boils down to merging as much information as possible and making a decision based on numerous factors. These include the topography of the land, the various slopes and their aspects, differences in altitudes, the soils, terrestrial radiation (measured using satellite pictures), temperatures of various sites... and more.

Cluver's winemaker Andries Burger and viticulturist Wayne Voigt are immensely enthusiastic - and new plantings are already underway.

Gunter Brözel was contracted to oversee the cellar upgrade last year and Burger is complimentary about the changes that have seen capacity increase from an initial 150 tons to 400 tons.

Like Gunn, Cornel Spies fell in love with a farm - and the fact that the property wasn't even on the market didn't stop him. Six weeks after seeing it, he bought it. The avowed Pinotophile intends to have a Merlot-based blend in the bottle within the next five years - but will also make a Pinot Noir, naturally.

What's impressive about the new burghers of Elgin is the level of forethought they display. Plans are in place to make Elgin a destination much like Franschhoek. Even the mooted toll road to Hermanus has been factored into plans with signage points, interchanges and the like taken into consideration.

Downes shows me his 5, 10 and 15 year plans - as well as his immaculate Shannon vineyards. The fruit may already be going to Clive Torr, Neil Ellis, Paul Cluver and Newton Johnson, but if all goes according to plan, in a few years there will be a Shannon wine that's a worldbeater.

Members of the Elgin Wine Guild meet frequently to taste wine. "We benchmark Elgin against the best internationally - because that's where we see ourselves competing," says Gunn confidently.

Within two or three years Paul Cluver won't be the only winery in Elgin. Ground will be broken for Iona's cellar this year, as well as Oak Valley's. Ross Gower plans to erect his own winery, as do Cornel Spies and Kevin King.

Only time will tell whether this really is Elgin's big moment, but all the omens seem to predict it.