

# The SECRET of the *Terroir*



SIMPLE BUT INGENIOUS: THE LABEL IS A MASTERPIECE OF DESIGN.

After more than two decades spent advising the South African wine community, GERARD DE VILLIERS has started *Kleinood*, his own wine farm at last. As all true perfectionists do, he is now pondering how he can make things even better.

TEXT LUDGER POOTH  
PHOTOS SHANE POWELL

Wine tasting at *Kleinood* is by appointment only. Even so, and despite its remote setting, the farm gets a lot of spontaneous visitors because its irresistible appeal ensures that those who do pass its gates simply cannot resist stopping in.

The first impressions of *Kleinood* are stunning, but don't believe it's thanks to dutiful care and maintenance that the wine cellars and manor house have survived the last hundred years in such fine shape. In truth, the whitewashed buildings, wrought iron window frames and wooden shutters are only about six years old.

"My wife Libby did the design," says Gerard. "She favours the simple but pretty Cape shed style instead of the genuine Cape Dutch style." *Kleinood*, is an Afrikaans word and it means the same as the German 'Kleinod.' In English it translates into 'something small and precious,' like a little treasure.

*Kleinood* was originally intended to be nothing more than a home for the de Villiers family: Gerard, Libby, their son Spicer and their daughter Katharien. It was meant to be a country hideaway after years of living the city life. "We dreamed of a property with a river and some woodland, surrounded by mountains," he said, explaining the family vision.

In the year 2000 the family found just

what they were looking for. It was 22 sweeping hectares of paradise nestling between the Stellenbosch and Helderberg mountains, at the confluence of the Blaauwklippen and Moordenaarskloof Rivers.

"Although I am a wine lover, I had not given the slightest thought to my own wine production when I bought the place," continues de Villiers. As an engineer, he had spent 27 years as a wine industry consultant in South Africa, Europe and the USA. He had done it all and was responsible for conceptualising state-of-the-art wineries for some of the biggest names in the business.

And yet, you just knew it was going to happen. A man like him was not going to be able to resist the temptation of this idle land with so much potential for viticulture.

So the engineer got down to work as only he knew how: with trademark precision governed by his perfectionist streak. *Kleinood* is as small as the name suggests. Of its 22 hectares, only 12 are arable. Ten hectares are used for wine purposes; the rest is given over to thriving olive trees. Currently he is producing two wines, under the Tamboerskloof label: Shiraz and Viognier.

Extensive research of the *terroir* revealed Shiraz as the best choice. He was more than pleased with that, given that Shiraz is his favourite wine and he has a weakness for tra-

ditional French viticulture: "When I'm asked to taste wines from the Rhone to the Cote Rotie, I'm the happiest man on earth!"

With this in mind he also wanted a Rhone-style Shiraz. So de Villiers procured a Syrah clone from France, and the *Kleinood* team put in time, hard work and patience in the vineyard until finally the first crop was brought in. Not only did these vines prove to be virus-free, but it was also the first time Rhone Syrah grapes had been commercially cloned in South Africa.

The Tamboerskloof Syrah and Viognier vintage was roundly lauded by wine lovers and critics the world over, and received numerous awards. Both received 4 1/2 stars from Platter the past 2 years as well as accolades, for instance from Syrah du Monde. The Syrah 2006 appears in a graceful ruby colour. The wine has an inviting, complex nose with red berries, white pepper and spicy flavours. The palate is well balanced and confirms the nose with firm tannin and a lingering spicy aftertaste.

The Viognier 2009 shows a light straw colour. Powerful apricot and peach flavours which mingle with hints of jasmine and lime blossom on the nose. The palate supports the nose by following on the intense fruit flavours. This vintage was sold out within a few weeks.

The *Kleinood* team applies meticulous



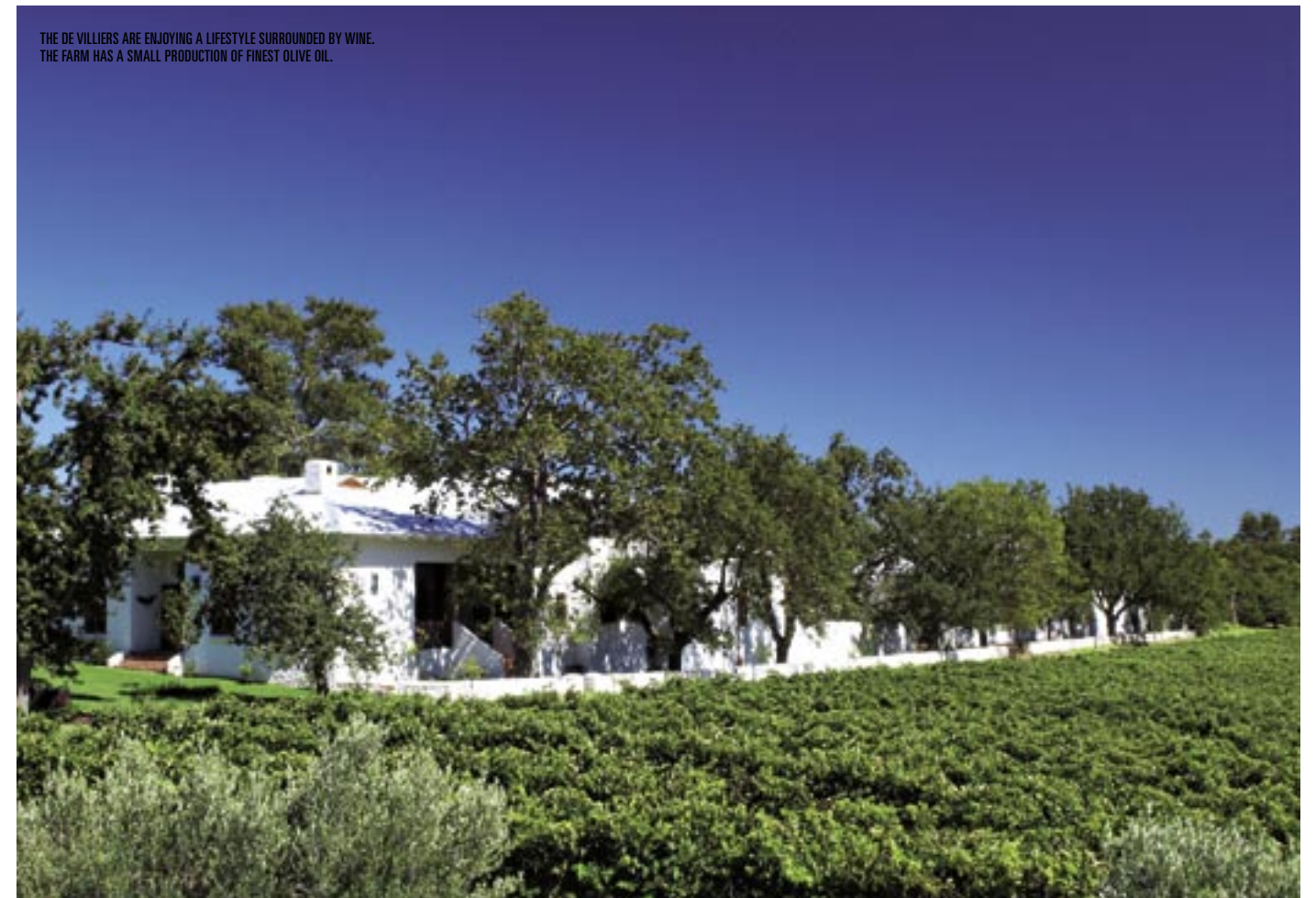
RELAXED POSITION ON THE STAIRS TO HIS PATIO: GERARD DE VILLIERS





THE PATIO OF THE FAMILY HOME IS FONDLY FURNISHED.

THE DE VILLIERS ARE ENJOYING A LIFESTYLE SURROUNDED BY WINE. THE FARM HAS A SMALL PRODUCTION OF FINEST OLIVE OIL.



THE WINE CELLAR SEEMS ANCIENT BUT IS NEWLY BUILT



‘It’s not the owner, the winemaker, the winery or the technicalities ... it’s all about the wine!’

GERARD DE VILLIERS

attention to every detail of its work. Each section of vines is just a half hectare in size and they are effectively treated as individual wine farms. Likewise, the harvest, pressing, fermentation and also the subsequent vat maturing process are kept separate, according to the sections. “Only at blending time do we decide which wine is good enough, with the final blend comprising all the essential components that make up a Tamboerskloof wine,” he explains.

The vines and grapes are closely monitored all year round – even from the sky – and all the data is recorded in a detailed report. “This way we can achieve a fine balance between vines, grapes and the terroir.”

It is a story of hard labour and plenty of red tape. “There’s no romantic tale in all of this,” smiles the winery owner, gazing thoughtfully at the rose garden outside the cellars. Ducks splash in the pond, which feeds a canal in the garden of the facing residential house. Everything – the buildings, the gardens, the trees - are aligned in flawless

symmetry, and it’s all surrounded by a simple, low wall.

“What is *terroir*, really?” Gerard asks abruptly. The seasoned expert and estate owner knows the word’s meaning, of course. *Terroir* translates as ‘land’ or ‘area’ from French. It also describes the natural factors unique to a specific piece of land, which influence the character of the agricultural produce cultivated there. It also includes the interactions of the micro-climate, geology, topography and soil conditions. The term encompasses the character and value of a particular area and its output.

“It is such a difficult concept to define”, reckons de Villiers, who follows up with an example how difficult it is to define *terroir*: The Kleinood team followed separate and painstaking methods for each of two Shiraz blocks, unique from the monitoring right up to the hand-sorting of the harvest. The wine from one of the blocks was pressed at Kleinood, but the Shiraz from the second block was given away to be pressed at a neighbouring

wine farm. de Villiers throws up his hands in mock surprise: “It’s amazing! We had two different Shiraz!” Obviously the *terroir* extends into the winery building and the process of winemaking

So then, what is *terroir*? Does it just mean the natural characteristics of the land, or more than that? “The cellar itself is *terroir* in microcosm,” the engineer reflects; then he laughs: “It’s not the owner, the winemaker, the winery or the technicalities...it’s all about the wine!”

He’s right. Wine is a product of nature, and nature is happy to keep some secrets for herself!

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