

THE VINE LIFE: DE GRENDEL

For over a decade, cellar master Charles Hopkins has been creating top wines at one of the Cape's most historic wine estates. **Eugene Yiga** caught up with him at De Grendel.

The Western Cape has hundreds of wine farms, but few are as picturesque as De Grendel. From the tasting room of the estate (that dates back almost 300 years), one can spend an entire afternoon staring at Table Mountain, slowly sipping a refreshing glass of wine. Indeed, the setting is one of the many things cellar master Charles Hopkins loves about working on the farm, located on the fynbos-covered slopes of Tygerberg Hill.

Hopkins completed his studies at Elsenburg in 1986 and, after three years of working as assistant winemaker at Bellingham Wines, took on the role of winemaker for nine years. He then spent eight years at Graham Beck in Franschoek before Sir David Graaff gave him the chance to build his own cellar, and be in charge of winemaking at De Grendel. "They are good people with old values," he says of the historic family. "I never get the impression that titles play a huge role on this farm."

COOL, CALM AND COLLECTED

What does play a role is the location. Being situated in the Durbanville Wine Valley, just 7km away from the ocean and nestled at between 180m and 280m above sea level, De Grendel is ideal for producing unique cool-climate wines. And of the 14 different types of wine it makes, the biggest emphasis is on Sauvignon Blanc and Merlot.

"To produce Sauvignon Blanc in a cool region like this is fantastic because it provides you with a challenge each year," Hopkins says. "It's versatile because you can vinify it in different styles and, by blending these styles, you can create something unique."

When Hopkins joined De Grendel, his goal was to change the varietal makeup on the farm and to be successful in the marketplace by establishing a recognised brand. He's done that, and much more, by sticking to the basics, aspiring to express the varieties in their purest form, and focusing

on quality, true-blooded South African wines that make financial sense. "Our Merlot is doing extremely well because we put a lot of hard work into producing the right sought-after style of Merlot," Hopkins says. "We are selling 800 cases per year."

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Now in his eleventh year at De Grendel, Hopkins is working hard to achieve the goal of selling to the right markets at the right price. For him, the trick is to increase volumes without neglecting quality and making sure the quality improves each year. It's also important to work with a passionate team. "To play a mentorship role for young winemakers is a big achievement," he says. "In my 31 years of making wine, 55 young winemakers have harvested with me and some are very successful today, which gives me a huge kick."

Indeed, as much as he appreciates accolades, Hopkins is more interested in having a love for the craft. He also considers it a privilege that he's spent harvest seasons in California (Sonoma Valley) and France (Bordeaux). "I learned a lot, but my personal philosophy is that winemaking is a journey," he says. "And even after 31 years, I'm still learning." ■



Where did you get the passion to become a winemaker?

Being close to nature and wanting to create a commodity out of an agricultural product.

What is your favourite non-De Grendel wine?

2000 Château Cheval Blanc.

What is the biggest obstacle you've experienced in winemaking?

The fluctuation in vintage qualities.

What is your favourite De Grendel vintage?

2007 is my favourite vintage in 31 years. The weather conditions were just perfect and the wines are a fantastic expression of that.

What would others be surprised to know about you?

I'm a huge fan of Leonard Cohen, enjoy Irish whisky now and again, and am a 100% devoted family man.

What one thing do you hope to accomplish in your life?

To be successful in making wine, but also play a role in improving the South African wine industry.