

Wines & Spirits

Wining and Shining

An Interview with Alastair Rimmer

As Kleine Zalze celebrates its 20th anniversary, Alastair Rimmer talks about his role as cellar master of the award-winning South African wine estate.

FWT: *How did you first get involved in wine?*

Rimmer: I don't come from a wine background at all. I grew up on the East Rand (Benoni) in Gauteng and went to school in Johannesburg. I got into wine by falling in love with it. My folks were visiting the Cape when I was quite young. I tasted a few wines and was just fascinated.

FWT: *What made you choose wine as your career?*

Rimmer: When I was looking at Stellenbosch universities, I had a chance meeting with Eben Archer, a viticultural professor. He talked about growing wine. And I said, "What do you mean? You don't GROW wine; you MAKE wine." And he said, "That's where you've got it wrong. You GROW wine." This was a great influence on me deciding to study Viticulture and Oenology. It determined my career path and where I am now.

FWT: *What experiences have you had with your work around the world?*

Rimmer: My travels in and around the wine industry have seen me visit many places. I have travelled through many of the wine regions of Europe as an assistant to a journalist. And as a winemaker, I have worked in the USA, New Zealand, Australia, Spain, and South Africa. All in all, I was living abroad for seven years and "out" of the South African wine industry for almost nine years, although I did keep close contact with many of my South African colleagues over the years.

FWT: *Could you tell us more about Kleine Zalze?*

Rimmer: Kleine Zalze is 20 years old; it's a young winery in the greater scheme of things. But my predecessor Johan Joubert produced some extraordinary stuff and Kleine Zalze is now sitting on a nice position. Some of the classic notes that come through our wines are true to the terroir of Stellenbosch. We are confident that we can stand with the best in South Africa and say that we are as good.

FWT: *What is your approach at Kleine Zalze?*

Rimmer: The winemaking is fairly simple. Vineyards that give us that lighter and more accessible fruit go into the Cellar Selection. The ones that give us that 'medium' intensity and depth will be Vineyard Selection wines. And what we think will be the most intense wines of the year go into the Family Reserve. The Vineyard Selection and Family Reserve are sourced off our own

property. The Cellar Selection we augment from other vineyards in Stellenbosch and, in certain years, we augment from other vineyards in the Western Cape.

Winemakers must be careful. The biggest job of a winemaker is not to make wine; it's to let the wine evolve to what it wants to be. It's a natural progression; it takes time. Certain things will work well in certain vintages. And a better understanding of winemaking, your terroir, and your vineyards will allow you to nurture them to where they need to be. A lot of that happens in the vineyard.

FWT: *Could you tell us more about your winemaker?*

Rimmer: RJ Botha is the current winemaker and he has been at Kleine Zalze since the end of 2012. He has, in a relatively short space of time, had a significant role in helping to evolve the style of the wines at Kleine Zalze. He's passionate, vibrant, and has a fine, focused palate. He understands wine beautifully and we work extremely well together. He is one of the rock stars of South African wine and one of those talents we've got to nurture.

RJ doesn't try to manipulate the wines; he lets the wines be. So if you told RJ to make a "Kleine Zalze cabernet" and an "RJ cabernet", they would be alarmingly similar because he's not going to put a specific identity on the wine. He loves wine and expressing the terroir too much. There might be a little bit of a thumbprint but I don't think there'd ever be a big conflict because we're not trying to make fake, adulterated wines. We're trying to express Kleine Zalze so Kleine Zalze is always going to shine through.

FWT: *What is your approach as cellar master?*

Rimmer: The most important thing I look for is balance. You can have big, bold wines that are balanced and you can have delicate, elegant wines that are balanced. Ultimately, wine is such a vibrant, beautiful thing. It brings so much pleasure to all of us around the table. The most rewarding part of my job is seeing people happy. Food, wine, and the pleasure those flavours bring to people is like an adrenaline rush. Whether you like a specific wine style or not is sort of a grey area and a bit immaterial. It's about bringing pleasure and flavour to people.

The Kleine Zalze Cellar Door, situated right next to the winery, welcomes you for a relaxed yet informative wine tasting. Call +27 (21) 880 0717, email sales@kleinezalze.co.za, or visit www.kleinezalze.co.za.

Eugene Yiga

Eugene Yiga graduated from the University of Cape Town with distinctions in financial accounting and classical piano. His career then took an interesting turn when he spent over 2½ years working in branding and communications at two of South Africa's top market research companies. Eugene also spent over 3½ years at an eLearning start-up, all while building his business as an award-winning writer.

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