



# A QUACKING GOOD IDEA

A flock of Indian runner ducks to control snails in the vineyard is just one of the earth-friendly methods employed by Stellar Winery, South Africa's biggest producer of organic wine.



## CARING FOR THE ENVIRONMENT: STELLAR'S ORGANIC POLICY

The vineyards are farmed as naturally as possible, employing earthworms for soil health, natural predators for pest control and Indian runner ducks to control snails.

The duck pest control squad began with 75 ducks. Stellar farming director Gielie Rossouw collected their eggs from the vineyard, hatched them in incubators, and now has a flock of over 200 ducks. As a sideline, he supplies ducks to neighbouring non-organic farmers at no cost, a great way of spreading organic best practice.

Where possible, waste products are recycled or reused. Grape skins are reworked into compost and grapeseed oil is extracted from the pips.

The cellar is chemical-free, except in the filter cleaning process. Ozone technology is used in place of chemicals.

Water usage is audited. Wastewater is cleaned before being used for irrigation on table grapes.

ABOVE: Healthy, naturally composted soil and mulching are essential in organic viticulture.

**T**he Olifants River Valley lends itself splendidly to the production of organic wine. The dry climate and low rainfall during the growing season limit the vine's main enemy, fungal disease. And although the area has a reputation for being warm, there are cool pockets to be found adjacent to the sea and in areas like Lutzville and Koekenaap, with cooling afternoon winds and cold nights. It is also sparsely populated, limiting negative human influences such as air and water pollution.

The growth of the Stellar enterprise has been extraor-

dinary. To liken its trajectory to that of a shooting star is not far off the mark, but that's where the analogy ends. Unlike a shooting star, Stellar has no intention of fizzling out anytime soon. The rock-solid foundation of the cellar's business philosophy is sustainability and the determination to leave a functioning legacy to the next generation.

In the few years since its creation in 2001, it sold an astonishing 1.8 million bottles to markets both locally and abroad in 2008, making it the largest South African organic wine producer. Stellar indeed. It is also the top-selling organic wine brand in the UK, a notoriously tough export market to crack. In addition, the

continuous production since 2004 of a niche range of No-Added-Sulphite wines has proven beyond doubt that these wines are commercially viable.

### PEOPLE CENTRIC

Fairtrade is an international movement aimed at enhancing trading conditions for businesses, improving labour conditions for employees and empowering communities through ethical, sustainable trade. Stellar was the first organic winery in the world to gain Fairtrade accreditation.

The Stellar Employees' Fairtrade Trust came to life as a democratic platform to identify workers' needs. Premiums on Fairtrade wine sales are channelled back to the

Trust, which manages the income and initiates projects to improve the workers' quality of life. Fairtrade projects have included fencing for all the farm workers' houses, laptop computers for employees, and an Adult Basic Education & Training and IT training facility at the cellar.

Focused Fairtrade funding from customers abroad has proven to be a successful strategy: a community organic vegetable garden partly sponsored by German supermarket chain Tegut supplies the community with healthy, nutritious vegetables, and funds for tertiary education are generated by sales of the produce. Another focused funding initiative coordinated by Peter Riegel Weinimport will shortly deliver a sports field >

with change rooms, a canteen and a spectator stand to the Trawal community.

Projects still in the pipeline include a bus to transport seasonal workers and the construction of a new community centre.

INSET: The Trawal Primary computer centre. BOTTOM LEFT: Boet Nell in his section of the community organic vegetable garden. BOTTOM RIGHT: The Stellar United football team.

**A SUCCESSFUL STRATEGY**

All of the above initiatives would be impossible without a wine the market loves. Organic wine has had to climb a long, hard road to respectability, but the combination of sterling raw material, good winemaking practice and a marketing strategy that deals with each market as an individual entity is bearing fruit.

Producing quality wines has been a benchmark of the Stellar enterprise and recognition has not been slow in

coming. A fistful of awards in local and international competitions such as Veritas, the International Wine & Spirit Competition, Biofach and Wine Style Asia over the years have proven that there's more to Stellar wines than just green and social PC. The cool vineyards at the mouth of the Olifants River are beginning to produce white wines to match the best in South Africa.

The jewel in Stellar's crown is undoubtedly Heaven on Earth, a *vin de paille* produced from Muscat d'Alexandrie grapes partially dried on organic straw and rooibos that has garnered wide recognition as a world-class dessert wine and a truly unique regional product. The Veritas judging panel agreed, awarding the wine a gold medal for two years running in 2007 and 2008.

**RESPECTING MOTHER NATURE**

The term "organic" refers to a system of farming where the fertility of the soil is maintained and replenished and no chemical pesticides, herbicides, fungicides or fertiliser are used. Farm director Gielie Rossouw and farm manager Maria Malan, the latter a success story of a focused BEE initiative, stand at the helm in the vineyard, using only organic compost and organic materials to cultivate the grapes. These are delivered at the cellar to winemaker Dudley Wilson and cellarmaster Berty Jones, another BEE success story. Grapes are also bought in from independent, organic Fairtrade producers whose vineyards are overseen by Wilson wearing his viticulturalist hat.



**THE MAKING OF A LOCAL ICON**

Maria Malan was formerly a domestic worker and farm labourer. Through a combination of work ethic, leadership skills and the ability to recognise when opportunity knocks, she is now farm manager at Stellar Farming, chair of the Stellar Employees' Trust Joint Body (executive committee) and a board member of Fairtrade South Africa. A wealth of compassion has made her determined to use whatever tools she can lay her hands on to improve the living conditions of her community, and the Fairtrade programme at Stellar has provided both format and means to achieve this ambition. Testament to her and her co-workers' efforts are two recent awards: the Stellar farm workers won the Rudnet Farm Health Awards Programme for 2008 and Malan has been crowned the Sanlam Regional Farm Manager of the Year and is currently in the running for the national award.



of antioxidant tannins drinkable while still young, but trials with wood- influenced SO<sub>2</sub>-free wines are working well. In fact, these NSA wines have a shelf-life comparable to conventional wines of the same style and still drink well after two years.

As Wilson puts it, "Sulphite-free wine production is not about technology, but attention to detail and an understanding of fundamental winemaking processes."

Stellar now produces three anchor ranges for the local market, these being Stellar Organics, lately relaunched under the new Mandala label; entry-level Live a Little; and Stellar Organics No-Added-Sulphur. The sulphite-free wines were given valuable support in the early days by Woolworths, which took on two of the red wines as part of its own-brand organic range. Look out for a sparkling wine from this stable to hit the market soon. Stellar also specialises in private labels for clients.

Marketing falls under director Lee Griffin who, with CEO Willem Rossouw and financial director Justus Rossouw, completes the team at Stellar. They continually employ innovation, viewing the business as accountable to the immediate and wider community, paying attention to the needs of minority markets such as vegans, and placing enormous emphasis on the Fairtrade programme. ■

ABOVE: Wines of the Stellar Organics Mandala range, launched in mid-2009, have already scooped a number of local and international awards.

The issue of sulphites in organic wine is commonly misunderstood. EU and USDA/NOP regulations permit the addition of sulphites to wine made from organically grown grapes, although at a lower level than conventional wines. Most organic wines fall into this category. A tiny percentage of wines are produced without added sulphites: these wines can be organic or conventional. In Stellar's case, all the wines are made from organically grown grapes and all have sulphur dioxide added at bottling, with the exception of the Stellar Organics No-Added-Sulphur (NSA) range.

After five seasons of producing NSA wines, practical experience is proving the theories. These are wines made to be bottled quickly and consumed relatively young. It is a bit of a balancing act to keep a wine full

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