

ALL ABOUT RADFORD DALE INDIVIDUALITY

David Swingler

It's an exquisite autumn day in the winelands and, as I write, soft sunlight pads through the windows onto my keyboard as those-in-the-know are streaming into the Elgin Cool Wine Festival. It's an underplayed, classy weekend without the teetering crowds when the wine growers of this super cool vineyard basin – better known for apples, of course – open their doors for food and wine exploration.

Apart from individual cellar visits and the *Elgin Railway Market*, my highlights this year are the single vineyard wine tastings at *Oak Valley* (see my justifiably effusive review in the 2022 edition of *Platter's South Africa Wine Guide*) and a Quail Day at Iona up the Highlands Road. What's not there, for the moment, is the valley's next big thing: *Radford Dale Organic* (RDO).



The sun rises over RDO

Fast-rewind some 28 years, almost to the day, when I was cutting-&-pasting – literally! – articles and pictures from newspapers onto A4 bond for facsimile transmission to Beaune, France. 'Facsimile?' I hear you gasp. Home fax machines were quite trendy on 27 April 1994, and the WWW was only of interest to Rhodes University academics of the day...

The recipient of these 'Pritt-y' efforts was Alex Dale, a young Englishman already steeped in the Burgundy trade whom I had met in calamitous circumstances three years prior (another story, another day). He wanted to know everything about the New Democracy being ushered in here, for the opportunity it provided as well as a chance to be

part of it. This, while everybody was rushing to leave...

Dale resigned his prestigious position on the spot on the basis of his intuition and my 'electoral feed', and decamped to Stellenbosch, first working for Longridge and then, having seen the lie of the land, establishing *Radford Dale* in 1998 with partner Ben Radford, an Australian winemaker living in South Africa who was Head Winemaker at Longridge.



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WITH A SUITABLE LEASE OF VINEYARD AND CELLAR SITES ON THE HISTORIC PAUL ROOS FARM, DALE AND PARTNERS ADOPTED THE NEW MODEL OF FORGING RELATIONSHIPS WITH GRAPE GROWERS RATHER THAN THE HEAVY CAPITAL-COST PROCUREMENT OF LAND.



Capital and labour intensive

Dale – 'Founder & Locomotive' in his own words – is nothing if not a maverick, and the very flat structure (three other managing partners look after wine, operations and finance respectively) with indulgent stakeholder directors, meant that 'stuff' often happened off the hip and, as the business got older so, well, did its drivers... An opportunity to clean it up was required.

The deep grey of the clouds masked the silver lining at the time, but Covid-19, State of Disaster restrictions and bans on alcohol sales threatened death knells not just for producers, but also resellers like restaurants. Dale and colleagues leaped to business by means remote, the first priority being to save Radford Dale. They kept on producing wine as they had to, but couldn't sell any.

WITH A GROWING INVENTORY, RD LAUNCHED PROJECTS TO MOVE WINE WITH OODLES OF GOODWILL.

One such was a substantial discount on offer to health care workers for shipping the moment regulations allowed. Another was a Dale masterstroke: The Restaurant Rescue Project. Customers could buy a voucher for a meal to be enjoyed when restrictions eventually allowed, and were rewarded with a substantial parcel of high quality wine from the winery supporting the particular eatery. It started with Radford Dale and Grub and Vine, but spread like wildfire as other wineries wanted to help. Numerous hospitality outlets and livelihoods were saved by the resultant cash flow.



Simple Cellar

RD also took the opportunity to strategize. The future is organic, and they wanted to control their own vineyards entirely. This meant a seismic shift in model, and the purchase of vineyards and land. Having been in the Cape business for a quarter of a century by now, Dale and his partners knew what was out there and it wasn't long before they secured the only fully certified organic and biodynamic farm in Elgin, the 20ha former Elgin Ridge. It will be renamed RDO when regulators allow, and a further 6ha will be planted to add to the extant 6ha in the short term. It will be home, not just for RDO, but with a tasting room to boot.



Hand-sorting grapes



Chenin Blanc

The RD range gets clarified. Bearing the flag will be the Organic wines, a once-off 2020 Chenin Blanc out of Stellenbosch followed by the maiden 2021 Elgin Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, with more to follow (think Dale-fave gamay) from this organic-only cellar. The RD Terroir range houses the bulk of the fine wines made from diverse vineyards in the Stellenbosch cellar allowing – most exciting – resuscitation of the Vinum tier. Originally home to only Chenin Blanc and Pinotage, it has taken on the waifs and strays and is now neatly and tightly focussed as a sextet of two whites – Chenin Blanc and Chardonnay – and four reds including a lip-smackingly delicious Pinot Noir, a wonderfully clean-fruited Grenache and true-to-type Gamay and Pinotage.



Chardonnay



New wave grenache

Mixing metaphors with Dale, they are at the confluence of quality, individuality and value. The whites are R179 each, the reds R198. You will fail to get more bang for your buck anywhere.



The red quartet

Dale is known for pounding pavements to meet customers around the world. After being grounded for two years, he's off soon for three months of living out of a suitcase. But, armed with a RD brand bristling with clarity, the future promise of organicity, and the joyous drinkability of Vinum, it'll be worth it.

<https://elgingrabouw.co.za/elgin-event/elgin-cool-wine-festival-2/>

<https://www.elginrailwaymarket.co.za/>

<https://www.radforddale.com/>

David Swingler is a writer and taster for Platter's South African Wine Guide for over 21 years to date. Dave Swingler has over the years consulted to restaurants, game lodges and convention centres, taught wine courses and contributed to radio, print and other media. A psychiatrist by day, he's intrigued by language in general, and its application to wine in particular.

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