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Radford Dale viticulturist and winemaker Jacques de Klerk.



New brand home

RADFORD DALE, ONE OF SOUTH AFRICA'S ORIGINAL VIRTUAL WINERIES, HAS BEEN PUTTING DOWN NEW ROOTS. BY ACQUIRING ITS OWN ORGANIC VINEYARDS AND CELLAR IN ELGIN, THE BRAND IS SENDING A STRONG MESSAGE TO THE WINE INDUSTRY.

BY JOHANNES RICHTER

BEN RADFORD AND ALEX DALE began Radford Dale in 1998 as a sideline while they were still working at Longridge. Their concept was to create single-vineyard wines from selected terroirs throughout the Western Cape, including the

Swartland, Stellenbosch and Elgin. The sideline quickly grew into a full-time job; Ben has since returned to his native Barossa Valley while Alex has spent the past 23 years establishing a formidable team and sizeable wine range.

Jacques de Klerk joined the team as viticulturist and winemaker in 2008 and

has seen the business grow into the well-respected Stellenbosch brand it is today. "The idea has always been to follow the Burgundy model, with a small cellar identifying exceptional vineyards in the right areas to make the type of wines you'd like to produce as single-vineyard wines that are good expressions of the terroir, vintage and cultivar," he says.

THE LONG EXPERIMENT

Radford Dale had been experimenting with organic farming since 2011, harvesting certified organic Shiraz grapes from a vineyard in the Voor Paardeberg for its Nudity Syrah. Jacques relies on a minimal-intervention approach of no filtration and no additions such as sulphur.

In 2019, the brand certified a small organic cellar as a pilot on their Stellenbosch site to go through the entire process from start to finish. The following year Radford Dale released its first

fully EcoCert-certified organic Chenin. This EU certification is internationally recognised and provides a gateway into its mainly European market.

It was soon clear Jacques and the team would need a dependable source of organic grapes and they began talks with the owners of Elgin Ridge, who were considering various offers. Radford Dale was the only buyer who would honour the farm's heritage as a premium organic producer.

Radford Dale took over the viticulture in June 2021 and transfer of the property was finalised in October that year. "It's hard to convert a traditional vineyard to organic, so it's a big advantage to get vineyards that have been farmed organically from the start," Jacques says.

A NEW HOME

The Elgin property will now become Radford Dale's public face and brand home, featuring a renovated tasting



The small Elgin cellar is now Radford Dale's new brand home.



Alex Dale.



The new sorting table.



The new Clemens Rollhacken mechanical hoe makes tilling the berms easier.

room at the cellar. The first vintage of organic wines from Radford Dale Organic Estate, as the farm is now known, will be released this year. The range comprises a Pinot Noir, to be followed by a Chardonnay, Sémillon and Cabernet Franc. New plantings are already on the cards, with 2.5 ha being added this year, another four hectares next year and 2.5 ha the following year, bringing the total to 15 ha under vine by the end of 2024.

“We’ll be planting Gamay in Elgin, which has never been done before,” Jacques says. Radford Dale is one of only two Gamay producers in the country and Jacques is convinced this variety has great potential in South Africa. “A large part of the Cape is too hot for great Pinot Noir, but we have lots of granite soils,” he says. “That compares well with Beaujolais, which also has these pristine granite soils and is in line with Radford Dale’s style of lighter red wines. Then Gamay makes a lot of sense.” With South Africa’s long, hot summers there’s

a dearth of refreshing red wines and Gamay helps to fill that need. “The style of Gamay, Pinot, and even Syrah and Cinsault which we make benefits from being served a little chilled.”

DIGGING IN

The cellar provided sufficient space for their needs and was already well equipped for cooling and fermentation. Jacques added a table for sorting the grapes as they come in and they brought in a basket press to create Radford Dale’s signature boutique style. “It forces you to focus on the extraction you wish to achieve rather than leaving it to an automatic process,” he says. More fermentation tanks may be needed as production scales up and Jacques says he’d also like to experiment with concrete tanks and larger oak formats in the future.

Although the vineyards have never seen any chemical inputs or glyphosates, Jacques wanted to improve the soil health and biodiversity. To encourage

greater diversity of microflora, he decided to sow a mix of six carefully selected cover crops which each plays a role in the nitrogen and carbon cycles. “The goal this year is to grow sufficient crops to bind the nitrogen in the soil and produce enough biomass that can be worked into the soil next winter.”

An exciting addition is a state-of-the-art Clemens Rollhacken mechanical hoe which reduces the effort required to maintain berms. “Just imagine hoeing 15 ha of vineyard by hand three times a year in these soils!” Jacques says. “I think more producers have to start considering a mechanical approach to weed control. South Africa still lags the rest of the world when it comes to the production and consumption of organic products. Every time I visit supermarkets in Europe, I see how their shelves of organic products just keep growing. Any producer focusing on exports will have to take the organic segment seriously if they intend to tap into the European market.” ♦