

A TASTE OF THINGS TO COME

Oupa Rangaka, a South African school teacher, bought a rundown farm with dying vines and turned his hobby into a thriving business. **Rose Prince** talks to the man whose wine is making such an impact on his country. Photographs by **Jason Lowe**

Oupa Rangaka says that before farming wine, you need to study drinking it. He remembers very well the time in South Africa when wine was not a black man's drink. The shebeens (taverns) of the townships sold beer, sweet drinks and an evil liquor called papsak. Papsak, now banned by the government, was cheap, sweet-tasting, low-grade 'wine'; the dregs of the wine barrels that had often been mixed with unknown liquors. Packed in foil-lined plastic bags, not bottles, it was one of the culprits that led to alcohol abuse and social disintegration in the townships. Rangaka was not a papsak drinker. The former English literature teacher drank beer 'and tons of whisky' before finding a taste for good South African wine. His new hobby, however, led to something more than sipping reds and whites. He now not only sells wine but is also showing how wine can merge the cultures of black and white South Africans.

Today Rangaka owns a small farm in Stellenbosch that incorporates a vineyard growing mainly bush vines unsupported by posts and wires. To run a wine business would have been impossible for a black South African before the end of Apartheid in 1994 – winemaking was a career for white men only. But a combination of a bank loan and the Black Empowerment Enterprise (BEE) initiative gave Rangaka the financial oomph he needed. His grapes are made into various wines under the M'Hudi label, and he is one of the most successful of South Africa's euphemistically named 'emerging winemakers' – there are 25 out of 4,600 winemakers in total.

'In 2005 our sauvignon blanc was mentioned in a list of top 10 South African wines,' he says. Last year Rangaka's neighbouring winemakers and mentors, the Grier family (who make Villiera wines), introduced Rangaka to Gerd Stepp, Marks & Spencer's globe-trotting winemaker, adviser and expert. Stepp encouraged M&S

by mixing it with grape juice.

Then I began on the "painful" white'

buyers to take two of the wines, the merlot and the sauvignon blanc. 'We heard that M&S were coming by, keen to support a project like this,' says Rangaka, whose previous experience of the London chain had been entirely typical. 'On a visit to London many years ago, I bought some underwear from Marks & Spencer. We finally chopped it up for dusters the other day,' he adds, firmly contradicting the Paxman view on matters of M&S elastic. The store's investment in his wines has made an astonishing difference. 'It has added 70 per cent to our business, and a lot of prestige.'

Oupa Rangaka's story begins in the north, near Sun City. 'My people are the Bafokeng, and I was born in the platinum mining area,' he says. 'From 1977 I was on contract to the education department, teaching English literature mainly at the North West Limpopo University' (conversations with Rangaka are peppered with Shakespearean and other quotations). By 2000, approaching retirement and ready for a new life, he and his wife, Malmsey, decided to buy a farm. They did not look for a vineyard; Rangaka had only just begun to 'study' wine.

'I had heard about the health benefits of red wine [in comparison to beer and whisky], and began drinking it by mixing it with grape juice,' he says. Weaning himself away from a liking for sweet drinks, he reduced the grape juice content little by little. 'I then began to drink the "painful" wine, the white wine,' he adds. Meanwhile Malmsey had found a farm with a 20-year-old

'I had heard about the health benefits of red wine, and drank it



vineyard. Finding the cash was hard. Securing a loan from the Land Redistribution and Development Programme failed when the scheme ran out of money. 'In the end my bank lent me the money, secured against my home in Mafikeng. I also qualify and receive financial support from BEE. The purchase of the farm took seven months, but we finally moved in, sleeping on the floor – yet we were so happy.' The couple called their land the M'Hudi farm after the eponymous hero of the first novel to be published in English by a black South African writer, Solomon Plaatje.

The reality of running M'Hudi was less joyful than those early days. 'The farm was rundown; the vines over-cropped and unfed; the tractors and farm machinery not working, and I had to find my way round two languages before I could talk to the workers.' Rangaka had no experience at all to go on. 'I couldn't understand why the vines were small bushes, or why they were growing in sand – they looked nothing like the ones I had seen. I needed to learn all about the plants, the pruning, the risk of phylloxera.'

A guardian angel did appear, though, in the form of Rangaka's next-door neighbour, Simon Grier. The Griers have been making award-winning wine at the Villiera farm since 1983. Their wines are also stocked at M&S; their sparkling Villiera Brut Natural is made traditionally with 100 per cent chardonnay grapes, is fermented with wild yeast and is sulphate (preservative) free. It is an exceptionally genuine champagne replacement – and a steal.

Simon Grier's visit to Rangaka came just in time. 'I was still working for the education department, and Malmsey was managing the farm. Simon came to say hello and welcome. We showed him round, and he said that if I didn't get on and care for the vines, they would no longer produce grapes. Shortly after, I resigned my job – I couldn't own this place and not look after it.'

Grier says, 'The farm had been on the market for 10 years and was in a terrible state. We had always looked at it and wondered about its future. I saw that the Rangakas were struggling and wanted to help. Not because they are a black

family but because local knowledge is useful, and also I want my neighbours to be successful.' Grier asked Rangaka back to Villiera to taste some wine. 'Five or six hours later we stood on wobbly legs,' Rangaka says. Villiera's winemaker and Simon's brother, Jeff Grier, offered help in making the wine. 'Jeff made a wine so wonderful I did not want to sell it,' Rangaka says.

'They are a brilliant family and get on with us well – but it is a mentorship. I cannot interfere,' Jeff says. 'They pay for the use of the facilities at Villiera, and we help with marketing and introduce them to our customers. Where Villiera wines are sold, so are M'Hudi.' Jeff and Simon are helping to train Rangaka's son, Senyane, and daughter, Lebohan, to make wine.

The whole Grier family exemplify modern South African values. Beside the house at the winery there is a nursery-primary school and an after-school centre. Mid-afternoon, young babies lie snoozing in the school while others play

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around them. 'Some children are from families with permanent jobs here, others belong to temporary workers,' Simon Grier says. 'But it is not a place where kids get dumped, it is where they can learn.' All ages attend the after-school centre, a safe place for children while their parents are still out working. About 30 children attend. One teacher, Kirsten Dansie, says, 'This is a place where we can recognise individual talent, as well as support those with special educational needs.'

Both the school and after-school centre are part run by the Pebbles Education Project, which helps provide similar facilities all over the Western Cape. A high percentage of the children in the region show some degree of special educational needs, possibly as a result of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), and the project supplies much needed training for crèche



workers on the farms.

The unexpected link between the Cape wine industry and the gradual healing of sociological troubles continues in the townships close to Cape Town. The views of Oupa Rangaka and the Griens are shared by three women whose wines are changing the profile of the drink in the taverns where the dreaded papsak was once served.

We meet Nondumiso Pikashe, Nomvuyo (Vuvu) Xaliphi and Jacky Mayo of Ses'Fikile wines at Lefa's Place, a tavern in the huge Khayelitsha township, where more than a million people live in conditions varying from squalor to clean, solid housing with all facilities. Tavern owner Lefa Mabailo sells Ses'Fikile reds and whites, made with the women by Bruce Jack at Flagstone wineries. Like the M'Hudi wines, Ses'Fikile has won critical acclaim and also a place in the M&S wine department. The business was the idea of a single mother, Nondumiso Pikashe, who, like Rangaka, was curious about the drink intrinsic to the South African economy that played no positive part in her own culture.

'In our area wine was obviously not being enjoyed in the ideal way,' she says. 'I chose to start a wine business not only because I had discovered and enjoyed drinking good wine but because I saw that there was a discrepancy between the wines available in our community and the wines I was reading about.' The company received starter funding from the BEE and has now broken even. 'We are going into profit,' she says. 'Ses'Fikile means "we have arrived".'

So wine, once a clearly divisive liquid that millions helped to make but never enjoyed, has a role in the rehabilitation of South Africa and its people. No one offers better encouragement than Rangaka. After an excellent supper of springbok fillet, boerewors and chicken cooked on the braai (outdoor fire) at Villiera, he sits back among his children and now extended family of mentors with glass in hand. 'We must democratise wine as well as other cultures here,' he says. 'It is still an elite drink – we want to say, "Wine is food."'

M'Hudi merlot and sauvignon blanc, £7.19 each, Ses'Fikile wines, from £6.29, and Villiera Brut Natural, £8.99, are available from Marks & Spencer. To donate to the Pebbles Education Project, see pebblesproject.co.za

Tomato and onion smoor, to eat with grilled meat serves 4

The braai is the favourite way to cook meat in South Africa. An outdoor wood fire is lit and once the embers are turning white, on goes the boerewors, the sausage made by the farmers on the Cape. This is followed by chicken wings marinated in apricot chutney. Lastly, a fillet of springbok venison, marinated in wine, Cape olive oil and garlic, is browned on all sides, rested, then sliced. Roasted butternut squash, herb-baked potatoes and a tomato salad are also on the table, and smoor, a braise of tomato and onion.

100ml olive oil

2 white onions, chopped

2 cloves of garlic, chopped

6-8 large ripe plum tomatoes, skinned (to skin, put in boiling water for 1 minute); de-seeded and chopped

1 sprig thyme

1 bay leaf

Heat the oil, add the onions and garlic and cook until soft but not browned. Add the tomatoes, thyme and bay leaf and cook until you have a sweet, thick paste. Season to taste with salt and pepper.







Above Oupa Rangaka and his family gather for a barbecue at their neighbours' Villiera farm, run by the Griers, who have been making award-winning wine since 1983. **Left** while the women harvest the grapes at M'Hudi farm, their children are looked after at the nearby nursery-primary school and after-school centre





Top right winemaker Simon Grier oversees the cooking of the boerewors (sausages), chicken and venison, which are served with tomato salad (**above**).
Right a worker brings in sauvignon blanc grapes





Top from left, Nomvuyo Xaliphi, Nondumiso Pikashe and Jacky Mayo, whose Ses'Fikile reds and whites are winning critical acclaim and, like the wines of Oapu Rangaka (**below**), are being sold at Marks & Spencer

