



*‘Domaine Grier is lovely, we love it there;
it’s a very basic, simple lifestyle.’*

Jeff Grier

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When Jeff Grier applied to Stellenbosch University for a degree in agricultural management with a view to joining the family chicken business, this Diocesan College (Bishops) old boy found himself in the heart of the Cape winelands.

It wasn’t long before he had changed his specialisation from poultry farming to wine production. ‘A chicken tasting could never quite match up to a wine tasting,’ he says dryly.

His decision was to set the entire Grier family on a delightfully different course: from a poultry business in Constantia to a wine farm in Stellenbosch to a vineyard in the south of France.

Jeff’s life has been imbued with the culture of food and wine. His late father Robin studied at the Ecole Hôtelière de Lausanne, Switzerland, and worked in hotels all over the world before returning to South Africa, where he eventually became involved in developing County Fair Chickens before selling his shares and investing in a wine farm called Villiera in 1983.

Sister Cathy is a graduate of the Prue Leith cookery school in London. Cousin David is a South African hotel-school graduate, chef and restaurateur, now a professional adventure racer.

Jeff, on the other hand, reckons he’s no cook. ‘Although I have a favourite aubergine dish and a beautiful paella, I’m more frequently involved in braaiing than in the kitchen. That’s Lynne’s domain: I’m outside doing the meat, she’s inside making wonderful salad and vegetable accompaniments. You see, we make a really great team,’ he deadpans.

*‘Just us enjoying good food
and wine with friends:
that’s happiness.’*

Leaving the cheffing to others, Jeff’s been devoted to making the wines on Villiera for close on three decades. His work has been at the core of one of the Cape’s most popular wine farms; sought after locally and internationally for a rare combination of quality, variety and pocket appeal. ‘Friendly’ and ‘down to earth’ most aptly describe Villiera.

When *pater* Grier bought the farm in 1983, along with his brother Alexander, it was an unprepossessing property. But in just a few short years, the Grier third generation (son Jeff as winemaker, nephew Simon as viticulturist and daughter Cathy as marketer) turned it around. It became a favourite among wine-route visitors: nothing fancy, just fine wines and fun times.

Before his first Villiera vintage, Jeff had spent three years at Delheim with a young cellar master who was fast gaining a reputation as a red wine supremo: Kevin Arnold (whom he was to join as one of the earlier Guild members). Previously, Jeff had worked in the cellars of wine and spirits producing wholesaler Distillers and done a northern hemisphere harvest on a small estate on the Rhine near Nierstein in the Rheinhessen.

DOWN TO EARTH
From the start, investment on Villiera was vineyard and wine driven. Plantings of more classic varieties were guided by the farm’s



soils: the Kroonstad structure of sand over clay over gravel. Extensive underground drainage was required, but once the roots went below the clay the vines needed either no irrigation or carefully applied drip irrigation, conducive to naturally low-yielding vines for quality wine.

The existing barn turned cellar was ‘modernised’ and expanded over time. Situated close to the cellar and tasting room is Jeff and Lynne’s home. A nostalgic black-and-white photograph shows Villiera’s original farmhouse built in 1928 by the De Villiers family (who gave the farm its name). Then standing exposed, it’s now a secluded haven surrounded by trees and garden.

Jeff, after working with Arnold and travelling to Burgundy, was one of that era’s young winemakers quick to follow up on new insights into the importance of small barriques in the development of fine reds (and later whites) as spearheaded locally by veteran vintners of the time. Similarly, he was a youngster in the vanguard of *méthode champenoise* sparkling wine production in the Cape.

The Griers had met the Denois family from Champagne: son Jean Louis visited the Cape with a dream to become involved in a bottle-fermented bubbly business as a consultant. It was the beginning of a close and enduring working relationship and friendship between Jeff and the Frenchman.

The first Villiera Tradition was released in 1984. The early vintages were made from the farm's existing chenin blanc with some pinotage while the Griers' newly planted chardonnay and pinot noir vines came on-stream. Though initially comprising non-traditional varieties, they were not the mass-produced carbonated bubbles, but followed the time-honoured Champagne practices of early picked grapes, carefully prepared base wines (including some barrel fermented) and second fermentation in the bottle with time on the lees.

Jeff subsequently played a leading role in the formation of the Cap Classique Producers Association in 1992. Far-sighted founder members drove the adoption of the unique South African term 'Cap Classique' for local wines made *à la méthode champenoise*. This was due to the prohibition by

the French and adoption by the EU of the labelling as 'Champagne' of any wine other than that made in the French region.

It ensured that top-quality Cape exponents of the wine style could take advantage of the export market as soon-to-be democratic South Africa emerged from world economic and political isolation. Now with a broad-based membership representing the strength of this category here and globally, it advises, encourages and acts as a touchstone of style authenticity and quality without stifling creativity for the Cape's legion of Cap Classique producers, small and large alike.

Jeff is now known as a Cap Classique specialist; Villiera's range of bubbles accounts for more than a third of their wine production. There is the Monro Brut, together with the Monro merlot-based red blend, standing as the farm's flagship brand. Monro is a family name: each son of the Grier clan carries it as a second name. There are also the Villiera Tradition Brut NV and Rosé Brut NV (non-vintage traditionally indicating adherence to a house style that remains largely unchanged year after year).

Then there are those special little parcels for Cap Classique connoisseurs (or, as Jeff would quietly point out, why not anyone who just loves good sparkling wine). A Villiera Reserve Brut Rosé was released as a one-off in magnum and after as long as nine years on its lees before being disgorged. The Villiera Shooting Star is a reserve cuvée made only in the best vintages and available solely on the Guild auction.

And for sparkling wine lovers who prefer something less dry than the traditional Brut, there is the Villiera Brut Special Dosage, just a touch sweeter than the two Traditions.

Though adhering to traditional Champagne winemaking methods, Jeff is also not averse to still adding a bit of Cape pride in the form of pinotage to some of his Cap Classiques, despite it not being recognised as a classic sparkling wine grape. It's a sign of the typical Grier sense of fun; a sign that while being a traditionalist and perfectionist, he's no conformist.

He's also so much more than a Cap Classique producer. Besides the Monro Brut, his Monro red blend is his most awarded wine. And an award-winning streak in the late 1990s saw him win the Diners Club Winemaker of the Year in 1997 with his Bush Vine Sauvignon Blanc and in 1999 the Chenin Blanc Challenge with his Bush Vine Chenin Blanc.

The latter showcased the potential of old chenin vines as well as the variety's ability to age with just a little oak treatment to enhance its natural fruitiness. His win came at a time when the beginnings of the Cape's renewed love affair with this formerly ubiquitous variety saw some seriously heavy-weight, wooded wines.

A trip to the Loire as part of his Challenge prize further 'inspired' him to explore this versatile variety's reputation for natural sweet dessert wines: the source of the Villiera Inspiration, an unusual combination with riesling, also a variety known for its development of the *Botrytis cinerea* 'noble rot'.

MOTHER EARTH

But more than any accolades – other than perhaps the Villiera Chenin Blanc 2009 voted the *Platter's South African Wines* guide 2010 Superquaffer of the Year for its quality:drinkability:price ratio – it's probably recognition as top UK retail chain Marks & Spencer International Plan A Supplier of the Year in 2010 that gives Jeff and the Griers the most deep-felt pleasure.

It was the first time a producer outside the UK had been thus acknowledged: for 'empowering, ethical and environmental' ways of running a business. Says Jeff: 'Like them, we simply subscribe to the philosophy of "doing the right thing".'

Villiera has always been about the long-term sustainability, both economically and environmentally, of wine growing for future generations of Griers and the farm's worker community. Jeff and viticulturist cousin Simon (a conservationist) were thinking and doing 'eco-friendly' and 'social responsibility' long before they became buzzwords.

'Sustainable farming is just the sensible thing to do if you want

to have a decent crop every year,

whatever you farm.'

There's minimal tillage in the vineyards. The land has been insecticide free since around 2000. Natural predation is encouraged to eliminate bugs and a flock of 1 000 Pekin ducks keeps snails to a minimum. Some 35 owl boxes planted among the vines attract barn owls and other nesting birds for rodent control.

Balancing the just over 200 hectares of vines is a 220-hectare wildlife sanctuary, providing a thriving eco-system naturally populated by everything from the endangered blue crane, guinea fowl and owls to porcupines, bat-eared and Cape foxes and water and grey mongoose. Antelope such as springbok, bontebok, red hartebees, gemsbok, eland and zebra have been introduced.

Over a period of three years, some 50 000 indigenous trees, primarily the carbon-converting *spekboom*, have been established. Water and waste is recycled for re-use, including for vegetable gardens as self-sustaining and income-generating projects for Villiera's people. The winery, with the country's single largest solar roof panel system, intends becoming largely independent of the national power grid.

This is the story that this thoughtful vintner likes to tell: the economics of sustainable wine farming.

DOMAINE GRIER

It's led to an exciting family vineyard venture in the south of France, now also home to Jean Louis Denois. In 2006 he helped the Griers find a small vineyard in Roussillon.

'It's a beautiful area near Perpignan not far off the Mediterranean coastline: rugged, unspoilt, very promising for reds. We got it with 22 hectares of syrah (shiraz), grenache, carignan and macabeu between

40 and 80 years old, and we've added a few hectares of chardonnay.'

The Griers also bought a small cellar in the nearby village of Saint-Paul de Fenouillet. Jeff shuttles to and fro for blending and harvesting of the two Domaine Grier ranges: the traditional, classic terroir-driven Côtes du Roussillon Villages and the more modern Franco-Cape take for the Vin de Pays. Young Frenchman Raphael Graugnard is employed as a marketing winemaker.

The couple are regularly reminded of Domaine Grier by a *trompe l'oeil* rendition on their veranda wall of the third-century Roman aqueduct that is a landmark of the Fenouillet area. And Lynne enjoys conversational French classes with 'a delightful but very diverse' group of women. 'It's like a book club-come supper club, all in French!'

But as her pragmatic husband points out: 'Domaine Grier is not all romance. It's economies of scale: Villiera can only provide for so many people and Domaine Grier, by extending our Villiera operation, will hopefully accommodate and open doors for the next generation.'

This includes son Matthew, a Stellenbosch University commerce graduate studying international business in Holland. 'He's also done a vintage at Domaine Grier,' says his dad proudly. This despite a head injury sustained as a pedestrian in a car accident as a student that left him with no sense of smell, thus affecting his taste and his career choice. 'He has adapted by identifying and evaluating wine on texture and weight on the palate; it's amazing.'

Daughter Kim has recently graduated as a chartered accountant. Then there's Xander Grier (son of Jeff's cousin David) who studied food science but has been mentored by his uncle in the Villiera cellar and subsequently picked up more practical experience in California and Australia.

'Hopefully, there will be room for all of them in some or other capacity, if they want it,' muses Jeff. Villiera is a rare model of sustainable farming on every level, built up by a remarkable family.

