

Upland: well-rounded, grounded and in good hands

Maggie Follett

Nestling in Upland's tiny, rustic tasting-room-cum-distillery, touching one's lips to rich, dark, delectable Port; fruity, full-bodied Cabernet; well-rounded, multi-layered Brandy; or an explosively aromatic Grappa, makes for a memorable experience.

Savouring this sensual panoply of tastes in the company of their convivial creator is a special privilege – for Edmund Oettle is that rarest of beings – a true Renaissance man!

Farmer, wine-maker, distiller, doctor and vet (with a degree from Onderstepoort in Pretoria and a PhD from UCT), this fiercely intelligent, deeply philosophical person (who enjoys falconry and beer-brewing as a hobby, and is both a dab hand with the written word, as well as an amusing raconteur) augments his extraordinary repertoire with fervent spiritual convictions and a love of the land.

Upland, and all it has come to stand for today, holds a treasured place in his affections.

Accessible via rambling, uphill country lanes in Wellington's Blouville district, the lovely 46 ha estate snuggles up against the Hawequa Mountains.

For this place and Edmund, it has been a marriage made in heaven.

Hailing originally from Johannesburg, Edmund had spent some years in full-time private practice as a specialist in assisted reproductive techniques in Cape Town, before a period of soul-searching (and a progenitor who was a former mayor of the town), led him to Wellington.

The year was 1990. As he recalls, "I figured it was time for a change – or a

stroke, heart attack, breakdown; pick an ailment ... something had to give – so after about six months of searching (having visited about 40 farms, none of which was just right), when the agent drove me down the lane into the welf, I just knew it was the place for me. I signed the purchase offer without even having set foot into the house. That was immaterial. If the place does not have character, no matter how fancy the house, you can't make character."

A little over a decade ago, Edmund converted Upland entirely to organic practices, and today the certified farm has red and white wine grapes, almonds, nectarines, Proteas and various medicinal herbs, as well as short-term crops such as lucerne. Pine trees are a recent addition. "It's a bit of a mixed bag. With the exception of olives for oil, we generally subscribe to the theory of planting whatever other people chop out. Lots of trial and error, but never a dull moment!"

Upland was the first organic grape-growing farm in the country (although not the first to be officially certified, as Edmund initially found the requisite paperwork too arduous a task). Despite yielding smaller crops, the decision to "go organic" has since paid dividends in terms of improved soil, vigorous, healthy, disease-resistant plants, and top-quality produce.

Most years result in excellent Cabernet Sauvignon, with Port made from the same grapes, and Grappa from the skins. A limited amount of pure, uncoloured, barrel-matured pot still brandy is also produced from white grapes, making Upland the only producer of 100% organic Port, Grappa and brandy in South Africa.

A portion of this is exported to the



■ A pensive Edmund Oettle, a visionary farmer and father, on his Upland farm.

PICTURE: DUDLEY BAKER

USA, Canada, Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands, with the remainder being sold locally, or directly from the farm.

Running a hands-on boutique operation keeps Edmund on his toes 12 hours a day every day, but he firmly believes in the biblical principle; "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might," which he applies with diligence to every activity, however menial.

Although he started experimenting with making wine from fruits and flowers in his garden as a 15-year-old in Johannesburg, Edmund wryly admits that the more than 25 batches produced over 10 years were largely undrinkable! His original intention was not to make wine, but to farm with fruit and nuts – however, as there were wine grapes at Upland, and supplying co-ops was "a quick road to bankruptcy" – the decision to make his own red wine, and to distill the white, was a logical way to add value.

His philosophy has certainly paid off: Upland's maiden release – the '98 Cabernet Sauvignon – was placed second out of 40 wines in the Wine Magazine review of June 2000, receiving 3½ stars, as well as a Silver Michelangelo award. It was also sold at the Nedburg Auction.

This was just the first of a long list of accolades. Subsequent vintages have gleaned both gold and silver medals at various prestigious competitions, and to date Upland's products have received 18 awards, including being rated the World's Best Grappa at the Guldorken International Competition in Stockholm. (Upland Brandy received a Silver award in the same competition.)

For Edmund, who takes nothing for granted, these rewards are simply extrinsic manifestations of a deeply-rooted, holistic belief system which permeates his life, and that of his multi-talented and refreshingly unorthodox family.

A deeply-rooted, holistic belief system permeates his life

Wife Elsie (the more retiring of the two) boasts an Honours Degree in Physics and a Masters in Electrical Engineering (heavy current), but now supplements the family income creating greeting cards, for sale at the V & A Waterfront and other tourist destinations. She provides employment for previously disadvantaged women and higher-functioning young adults from Wellington's Sunfield Home.

They have two teenage children, aged 15 and 17 (now in Grade 11 and 12). Like their parents, both Jonathan and Melissa are highly intelligent and unusually gifted, excelling in a vast spectrum of interests and skills, curricular and extramural, which range from the sciences to sport, computers, art and music.

The Oettles believe that "a house on a solid foundation can take a lot of blows", and in line with this, chose to homeschool their children for as long as possible.

"We decided to let our children learn our values, (not Hollywood's), our work ethics (not the State's), and our lifestyle, before exposing them to what the world can offer. When they're old enough they can choose for themselves. We both lectured at varsity, so figured we could probably teach toddlers how to read and write, and the rest followed automatically."

At Upland, the time-honoured and worthy adage "you reap what you sow" is applied not just to farming, but to existence in general, and Edmund hopes that the many abilities with which he has been blessed will continue to be used in a manner that will protect and preserve both the planet, and his family.

Here, in this loving, characterful and unpretentious enclave, God is at the centre of industry and home – but there's no wishy-washy fake piety, or prescriptive proselytising about their way of life. The Oettles are grounded, both literally and figuratively. They talk the talk, and they're prepared to walk the walk – on their own turf and in the wider world.

"We will all have to give account to God one day, and I try to live by the realisation that to whom much is given, much will be required. Don't compare yourself with others. There will always be those richer/poorer/more talented/more deprived. Of course I make mistakes. Mostly I have to pay for them, but that's OK. The real mistakes that I can't pay for, the Good Lord paid for on the cross. This means I can get on with life, not moping about my flops but striving onward to the goal, one of godliness with contentment. As Paul says, this is great gain ..."

Upland has just produced South Africa's first Cask Strength (65%) brandy, which Edmund claims, without a shadow of false modesty, is "exceptional!"

In terms of personal long-term goals and ambitions? "Plant some more trees. Luther said if he knew the world was to end tomorrow, he'd plant a tree today. Work a bit less; 12 hours a day tires one out in the long run. Perhaps travel when the kids leave home, because travel broadens the mind. Slow down. Death is nature's way of telling you to slow down. Each sunset is one less till eternity ..."

Wise words from Edmund Oettle – worker, thinker, drinker and, with a little help from Above – maker of divine dops!

Visits and tastings by appointment only: Contact Upland Estate at 082 731 4774.