

Brilliance in brandy/ Head, heart and tails

South Africa's only organic brandy producer was in business long before organic products were popular. For Edmund Oettle, who farms near Wellington, organic farming is also a lifestyle choice.

By Jay Ferreira

Organic red wine, port, grappa and brandy are produced on Upland Organic Estate just outside Wellington in the Western Cape. The farm also produces organic nuts, olives, fruit and buchu – and has a woodlot too.

### **Long time organic**

When Edmund Oettle bought his farm in 1990, he says it was “an ecological desert and not sustainable. So we moved away from conventional farming methods in 1992, when organic farming wasn't well known. But I was looking for a way of farming that I believed would be sustainable and I wanted the farm to be in a better state when I leave it than when I arrived. Still it has to be economically viable and have ecological stability, while providing a livelihood for us and the staff living on the farm.

“People said we'd go bankrupt,” he continues, “but we didn't. Now there isn't a square inch of soil without something growing on it, and that's what we were wanting. Nature never has a monoculture, but a whole range of plants growing with animals and microbes. The change in the soil has been dramatic, it's soft and alive and you can dig in it with your hands. We don't need to add fertilizer because we grow fertilizers in the form of **legumes grown as cover crops in the winter when the grapes are dormant**. That gives us the nitrogen we need in the soil, so your overall input costs are greatly reduced.”

Upland has been certified organic since 2000. “I didn't see registering organic as being a marketing tool,” says Edmund, “it actually had a bad reputation in the beginning because people thought organic products would taste bad. The reality now is that you have much more bargaining power if you are certified organic.”

### **Economic viability**

Upland Organic Estate is 46 ha. Of this, 10 ha is set aside for fynbos and buchu, 10 ha is pine and eucalyptus woodlots, 10ha is olives, 6ha is grapes, 1 ha is apples and nuts, the balance being dams, buildings, roads and fallow lands. **(missing 9ha)**.

Edmund says this is the essence of an organic farm: it's not supposed to be one product. “People wonder if each product is economical to produce, but that's not how to look at it. You look at the economics of the farm, not one aspect or product. The farm is not just about making money as there are definitely easier ways to just make money, it's also about my life – but still has to remain economically viable. When you look at everything together – the big picture – it's doing well.”

Wine is exported to the EU along with a small amount of spirits. Edmund says most of the brandy is sold locally, because overseas it is competing with cognac which already has well established marketing. He does no active marketing of his brandy.

### **Getting established**

Edmund started producing grapes for red wine in 1996, as he said it was relatively easy and doesn't require much equipment. He makes cabernet sauvignon and pinot noir, along with port from a blend of red and white grapes – he does it all himself with one helper to clean up. Grappa is made from red grape skins and residue – and only when Edmund anticipates there will be a market. He says that producing white wine requires sophisticated equipment and is much more expensive to make, yet yields a lower price and needs to sell in the year of production.

“For me white wine was a non-starter, so I took the grapes and decided to add value by making brandy, which gets more valuable every year.

“It wasn't all easy though and we went through a difficult time for about 5 years when there were lots of inputs and not much output, but staff still had to get paid. To supplement our income and cash flow we built guest cottages on the farm – which is extremely scenic - and offered cottage craft workshops

to visitors. We did this for 20 years and it kept us going when we needed it most. We no longer do this as we don't need to anymore. However, my recipe won't necessarily work for the next person."

### **DIY distillery**

The Upland distillery was designed by Edmund in order to keep it compact and efficient for him to manage alone. He did most of the welding himself and made the copper kettle too. "If you make it yourself, you also know how to fix it, and the setup cost is about a tenth of what it would otherwise be. I believe in being innovative and making the most of your resources – and not worrying about what you don't have."

### **Brandy distilling process**

The first Upland brandy was distilled in 1998 and Edmund still has bottles from the original batch. He says that when distilling brandy, you need to project up to 15 years into the future as that is when it will be at its best.

"I do all the distilling myself," explains Edmund. "Nobody helps me and the reason is simple: it's very easy to make a mistake and if I mess up it's ok and I only have myself to blame. Plus, you may only figure out the mistake 15 years down the line." He says the distillery is especially arranged to involve minimal physical effort. "I don't need to be strong to distil, I can actually be a frail old man. It just takes a lot of time and attention to detail. The only help I need in the distillery is to carry the 50kg barrels, as they are an awkward shape."

**(this is the critical section I couldn't hear on the tape – please could you kindly describe the process in detail.)**

Edmund explains that to make brandy you start with wine. "Distilling is really cooking with wine. You are boiling the wine and you keep the bit that boils off. It's a double distillation: During the first distillation wine is boiled. The first part of the distillate that comes off is the most volatile and contains the aldehydes, higher alcohols and fusels. This is called the heads, and is cut off. The second part, called the hearts, contains most of the ethanol and the flavours (esters) and is at about 30% alcohol. This is called Low Wine. Then comes the tails, which many people don't use, but I do because they have lovely flavours. I put the tails with the heads into the next batch of wine. The second distillation boils the Low Wine. Once again, the distillate is separated first into heads and then hearts, which now is around 70 % alcohol and is called Rebate Spirits. Thereafter comes the seconds which go back into the Low Wine, and the tails. All distillation must be registered with SARS Customs & Excise. They control all production and measure volumes and strengths, and tax accordingly. Rebate spirits that go into barrels in a bond store are "rebated" in that the taxes become liable for payment only when the brandy is removed from bond years later. "When I started distilling in 1998, tax was R23/liter, now it's R160/litre Absolute Alcohol," explains Edmund. So it's your choice to pay up front, or to wait till the brandy is ready (but the taxes go up every year). Flip side of the coin is that evaporative losses are not taxable, and evaporation can be 4 % per year.

### **Brandy production**

He explains that one kilogram of grapes makes about 1 bottle of wine. 1 litre of wine makes about 100ml of spirits at 70% alcohol but when it goes to maturation there is evaporation. Then water is added to drop the alcohol to 40%. "So what it works out to is about 1:5. Thus if you have five litres of wine you will end up with one litre of brandy at 40 % Upland produces roughly 1000 litres of organic brandy annually.

### **Deciding what to make**

"Grappa, because it's an un-matured spirit, means I must pay the taxes in the year of production. So I don't make grappa unless I know there will be a market for it, so I don't make grappa every year.

"With brandy, you have to consider your market and your cash flow to decide if you will make a 3, 5, 10 year or older brandy.

This year – for the first time in many years - Edmund sold white grapes, because he had enough brandy in stock, though it remains tricky to try to anticipate the market in 15 years time. However, his organic certified grapes earn him double the price of non-organic grapes, and his production costs are similar if not less than those of conventional farmers. While conventional farmers may just be breaking even, at R5 500/ton it's excellent income for Edmund. Deciding what to do each year is "like learning to

dance,” he jokes, “but I believe my brand is distinguishable from the rest for its depth of flavour, complexity and smoothness which all comes from paying close attention to detail.”

### **Staff complement**

Upland employs just two permanent male staff, and additional temporary staff during harvesting season. The staff work across the farm where between 3.5 to 5 tons of olives are produced, about 30 tons of grapes, a few hundred kilograms of almonds, pecans and macadamias, a few hundred kilograms of fruit for sundried fruit, and one ton of buchu which is sold for medicinal purposes. The fringe crops are sold at organic markets and the timber lot supplies poles for the trellised vines.

### **Future plans**

“I’d like to take more holiday,” smiles Edmund, “but really we just take one day at a time. Enjoying the fruits of one’s labours is hugely satisfying. Not only is drinking something I made hugely enjoyable, but I also know it won’t give me a headache.”

### Sidebar

**Biggest challenge** – making sure you have enough money to pay your staff. We borrowed money to buy the farm, paid it back as fast as possible and haven’t taken on debt since. Taking on debt for running costs is a slippery slope into bankruptcy.

**Biggest lesson** – do your sums, don’t be scared and don’t be stupid, (by which I mean take only calculated risks).

**Best advice** – listen to the experts, that is after all why you ask them for advice.

**Biggest success** – 25 years down the line we are still in business, making world-class products, and have no debt.

**Biggest failure** – I left a tap shut on the distilling kettle, it didn’t have an escape valve and the whole kettle blew. The distillery was filled with steam and 400l of wine was vaporised. It was very dramatic, but luckily I wasn’t inside at the time.

**What I know for sure is** ... to pay attention to detail. If you don’t pay attention to detail your product will not be distinguishable from the rest.

Contact: [www.organicwine.co.za](http://www.organicwine.co.za); [info@organicwine.co.za](mailto:info@organicwine.co.za); tel: 082 731 4774