

In 1990, Edmund Oettle bought a farm just outside Wellington in the Western Cape. Describing the land as an “unsustainable, ecological desert”, Edmund decided to move away from traditional farming methods in 1992, and adopted an organic farming approach.

“I was looking for a farming method that I believed would be sustainable, and I wanted to leave the farm in a better state than when I arrived,” he says. At the time, organic farming was a little-known concept.

“People said we’d go bankrupt,” Edmund explains. “But we didn’t. Now there isn’t a square inch of soil without something growing on it. [Since adopting organic farming methods], 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 fertiliser because we grow fertiliser 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 our overall input costs are greatly reduced.”

Certified organic in 2000, Upland Organic Estate produces red wine, port, grappa and brandy, as well as organic nuts, olives, fruit and buchu. It also has a pine and eucalyptus woodlot.

DIVERSITY

Upland covers 46ha, and is divided as follows: 10ha is planted to fynbos and buchu; 10ha is the woodlot, 10ha is planted to olives; 6ha is planted to grapes, and 1ha is planted to apples and nuts. The remaining 9ha consist of dams, buildings, roads and fallow lands.

Edmund says that diversity is the essence of an organic farm, and that his operation is not just about making money.

“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. When you look at everything



The essence of organic brandy production

Edmund Oettle, South Africa’s only organic brandy producer, explains that his farming approach is a life choice. He speaks to **Jay Ferreira** about his business operation near Wellington in the Western Cape.

together – the big picture – it’s doing well. The farm is not just about making money, as there are definitely easier ways to make money. It’s also about my life.”

Wine, along with a small volume of spirits, is exported to the European Union (EU). Edmund says that most of his brandy is sold locally, as internationally he would have to compete with the well-established and marketed Cognac. He adds that he does not actively market his brandy.

Annually, Upland produces between 3,5t and 5t of olives, about 30t of grapes, a few

ABOVE: Upland Organic Estate, owned by Edmund Oettle, is the only supplier of organic brandy in South Africa. Edmund also produces grappa, port and wine. PHOTOS: JAY FERREIRA

hundred kilograms of almonds, pecans and macadamias, a few hundred kilograms of fruit for sundried fruit, and 1t of buchu, which is sold to be used for medicinal purposes. The fringe crops are sold at organic markets, and the timber lot supplies poles for the trellised vines. Upland employs just two permanent staff members, and additional temporary staff during the harvesting season.

GETTING STARTED

Edmund started growing grapes for red wine in 1996, as it was relatively easy and did not



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require much equipment, and he now produces Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir. He undertakes all production, and only one staff member assists in cleaning up. He also makes port, a fortified wine originally produced in Portugal, from a blend of red and white grapes. Grappa, a grape-based brandy of Italian origin, is made from red grape skins and residue, and is produced only when Edmund anticipates local demand. He says that producing white wine requires sophisticated equipment and is much more expensive to make than red wine. However, it typically sells for a lower price, and must be sold 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 becomes more valuable every year. It wasn't easy though, and we went through a difficult time for about five years when there were many inputs and not much income. To supplement our income, we built guest cottages on our farm and offered visitors cottage craft workshops. 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.”

DISTILLERY

The Upland distillery was designed by Edmund to be operated by only one person.

ABOVE:

Up to 5t of organic olives are produced annually.

ABOVE RIGHT:

The tanks used in the distilling process. Here, the heads, hearts and tails are separated.

RIGHT:

Some of the products produced by Edmund.



FAST FACTS

Edmund designed and made his own distillery.

He exports wine to the EU.

Edmund says that diversity is the essence of organic farming.

He did most of the welding himself, and also made the copper kettle.

“If you make it yourself, you also know how to fix it, and the set-up cost is about a tenth of what it would be otherwise. I believe in being innovative and making the most of your resources, and not worrying about what you don't have.”

• Brandy distilling process

Edmund's first brandy was distilled in 1998, and he still has the bottles from the original batch. He says that when distilling brandy, one must plan up to 15 years in advance, as this is when the brandy will be at its best.

“I do all the distilling myself,” he explains. “Nobody helps me as it's very easy to make a mistake. If I mess up, it's okay,



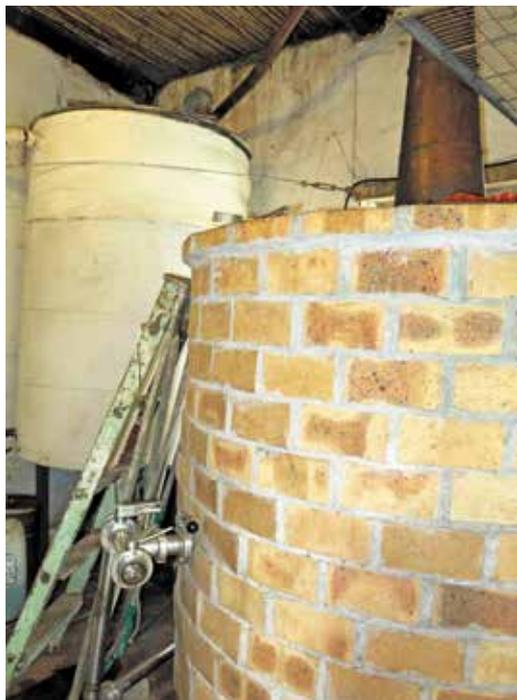
and I only have myself to blame. Plus, you may only figure out the mistake 15 years down the line.”

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 carrying the 50kg barrels.”

Edmund explains that the brandy-making process begins with wine.

“Distilling is really cooking with wine. You boil the wine and keep the bit that boils off. It's a double distillation.”



• **First distillation**

In the first distillation, the wine is boiled. The first part of the distillate produced, the ‘heads’, is the most volatile, and contains aldehydes, a greater alcohol concentration and fusel oil (a mixture of several alcohols). The ‘heads’ is discarded. The second distillate produced, called the ‘hearts’, contains most of the ethanol and the esters (flavour). It has an alcohol content of about 30%, and is referred to as low wine. Next, the ‘tails’ is produced, and, along with the ‘heads’, is mixed into the next batch of wine.

• **Second distillation**

This stage involves boiling the low wine. Once again, the distillate is separated first into heads, and then hearts. The hearts now has an alcoholic content of around 70% and is called rebate spirits. This is then barrelled and matured.

• **Brandy production**

Edmund says that 1kg of grapes produces about one bottle of wine, while 1ℓ of wine makes about 100ml of spirits (with a 70% alcohol content). After maturation, water is added to the spirits to reduce the alcohol content to 40%.

“So, 5ℓ of wine produces about 1ℓ of brandy at 40%.”
Upland produces roughly 1 000ℓ of organic brandy annually.

TAX REQUIREMENTS

All distillates must be registered with SARS Customs & Excise, which controls production, measures volumes and strengths, and taxes the producer accordingly. Rebate spirits barrelled in a bond store are ‘rebated’; this means the producer is only liable to pay the tax when the spirits are removed from bond in subsequent years.

“When I started distilling in 1998, tax was R23/ℓ, but now it’s R160/ℓ,” says Edmund.

While the producer can decide whether to pay the tax up front or when the brandy is matured, taxes increase annually, and thus it may be cheaper to pay up front. However, evaporative losses are not taxable, and evaporation can account for up to 4% per year.

DECIDING WHAT TO MAKE

“Grappa, because it’s an unmaturing spirit, means I must pay the taxes in the year of production. So I don’t make grappa unless I know there’ll

ABOVE LEFT: Edmund made the distilling kettle himself.

TOP: Edmund in front of his brandy distillery.

ABOVE: Upland also produces organic sundried apples and nuts.

be a market for it. With brandy, you must consider your market and cash flow to decide if you’ll make a three-, five- or 10-year [matured] brandy or older.”

This year, for the first time in many, Edmund sold white grapes, as he had enough brandy in stock. His grapes, certified organic, earn him double the price of non-organic grapes, while his production costs are similar, perhaps even less, than those of conventional farmers.

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 come from paying close attention to detail.”

Despite the difficulty in determining what to produce year-on-year, Edmund says that he takes it one day at a time.

“Enjoying the fruits of one’s labours is hugely satisfying. Not only is drinking something I made very enjoyable, I also know it won’t give me a headache.”

• *Email Edmund Oettle at info@organicwine.co.za, or phone him on 082 731 4774. Visit organicwine.co.za. ■ FW*



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Two vertical lines defining a large empty space for writing a letter.