

Imagine two men standing back to back and then walking forward in a circle: at some stage, they're going to encounter each other face to face. Edmund Oettlé of Upland and Jonathan Grieve of Avondale Wine followed very different paths in life until they finally converged. They're now highly respected for producing quality organic wines.

Oettlé, from Wellington, is a distiller of bespoke brandies, while Paarl-based Grieve produces elegant, hand-crafted "slow" wines.

Their common point of departure – when they were youngsters – was a love of the land, but it would be years before either of them turned to farming.

"I always wanted to be a farmer," muses Oettlé. "My grandfather bought a farm near Vredendal when he retired and we often visited him. The problem with farming, however, is that it's very difficult to get started if you have no capital or experience – and I had neither. So, after school, I studied veterinary science at the University of Pretoria."

After graduating, he did his compulsory military service, during which he was assigned to Onderstepoort to do research in the veterinary science department's "gynae" section –

Clockwise, from this image: Avondale wine estate. • Edmund Oettlé, owner of Upland. • Jonathan Grieve, Avondale proprietor.



The call of nature

The trend towards sustainable and organic farming is gaining increasing traction in the world of South African wine and "touch-the-earth-lightly" initiatives are in place at a growing number of estates. **Words and pictures by Jim Freeman**

and enjoyed the work so much that he stayed on for the next six years. He was then seconded to the Groote Schuur Hospital sperm bank in Cape Town.

"Sperm are sperm, whether they're animal or human – they swim and obey the same rules," he laughs.

Oettlé quit the business to establish a veterinary practice, which thrived to the extent that he could sell it and buy the farm Fisantekuil, on which he'd later build the Upland brand.

What makes him unique in the South African brandy-making industry is that all the award-winning products comprising his Upland range are organic, as are his base wines (it takes five litres of wine to make one litre of brandy).

"I had to learn to farm when I bought these 46ha in 1990. There were already grapes here, though I didn't particularly want to farm with them," he says. "I started enjoying working in the vineyards."

He began the switch from conventional to organic farming in 1992, a move that took nearly



six years to complete.

While replanting his vineyards with different cultivars, he had a load of Chenin Blanc on his hands. A brandy-making friend said it would be perfect for distillation, as brandy's traditionally made from a combination of Colombar and Chenin Blanc "base" wines.

"I hand-built my kettle in 1997 because I couldn't afford to buy one. My first distillation year was 1998," he recalls.

Within seven years, Upland brandy had collected its first

award, a gold medal at an international competition in Stockholm, Sweden.

"This year I decided to make the best brandy I could. I've been distilling brandy for roughly 17 years and have picked up certain skills... especially in the art of blending.

"I asked myself whether the appreciation of a foodstuff or a drink should be purely gustatory – relating to taste – or aesthetic as well."

Putting gold leaf into spirits isn't uncommon in Europe, but

hadn't been done in SA. Oettlé added a full 80mm x 80mm sheet of 24ct leaf to each of the bottles (they're crystal decanters) and named his 15-year-old blend for the purity of the liquid and gold: the Upland XO 24K. Each decanter is priced at R8 000 and you're unlikely to find any, even at the fanciest liquor outlet. Only 21 bottles were made.

Oettlé aimed to create the feeling of autumn leaves falling when the bottle was upended. "For me, brandy is a drink for when summer's ended, the vines

"We don't feed the vineyard, but rather the micro-life in the soil and, in return, the micro-life feeds the vineyard."



are sleeping and the hard work's over. There's the warmth of the fire and a spirit of contentment."

If Oettlé discovered organic farming via science, Grieve found it through art.

"My parents bought Avondale Wine in 1996, the same year I started studying at the Michaelis School of Fine Art in Cape Town. I majored in sculpture and oils. Before that, we lived on a smallholding in Durbanville. I was passionate about gardening and people still remember how I began growing vegetables when I was seven."

Grieve admits that he nearly gave up his fine arts studies after the first year to enrol at Elsenburg – the agricultural campus of the University of Stellenbosch – but persisted at Michaelis until graduation.



Clockwise, from this image: Chef Eric Bulpitt and Alex Kaunda at Faber. • Faber recently opened on Avondale Wine estate. • The Upland XO 24K.

He immediately began work at Avondale Wine, introducing a farming system called BioLOGIC to this 300-year-old farm in the Klein Drakenstein mountains. "Our byline is 'soil is life' and what we're about is creating a living soil.

"BioLOGIC comprises three formative pillars: organics, bio-dynamics and modern science. We have 13 types of soil on the farm and vineyards are planted to a maximum block size of 1ha, according to the type of soil. We farm everything from the soil upwards. We don't feed the vineyard, but rather the micro-life in the soil and, in return, the micro-life feeds the vineyard.

"You'll never find the soil in the vineyards exposed to the elements. Using a mix of indigenous cover crops between the vines – fynbos, herbs, grasses, cereals, vegetables and legumes – helps break down the vineyard's monoculture, making it more robust and disease-resistant."

Legumes such as peas, lupins and fava beans are regarded as "green manure", binding nitrogen into the soil and obviating the need for other organic or chemical fertilisers.

No pesticides are used. Instead, a flock of snail-loving ducks happily boards Avondale's "duckmobile" each morning to

clear any infestations. Other pests and vermin are left to raptors and predators such as genet, caracal and leopards that come down from the nearby mountains.

The same mountains provide good run-off water and, despite

the ongoing drought, Avondale's dams are all full. Eschewing the use of fertilisers and pesticides means the groundwater's extremely pure.

Recently, Avondale Wine took its commitment to organic and sustainable produce a step further by opening a restaurant, Faber, on the property. Run by acclaimed chef Eric Bulpitt, the food's relatively simple, with few ingredients on the plate.

"Seasonality forms the foundation of the menu: what's in season, what's available in the field, what's on the farm and what's good right now," explains Bulpitt, adding that a reflection of that approach is found in a dish which may be the simplest on the menu.

"It's a salad of seasonal herbs and vegetables, everything we can harvest from the fields or pick from the vegetable garden. Whatever's in season on the day we'll put onto the plate and tell the story of where it comes from." 🐼

