





A SENSE OF PLACE

Charles Hopkins Shares His Love and Respect for Shiraz

Just as no parent will admit to having a favourite child, De Grendel cellarmaster, Charles Hopkins, is reluctant to name a favourite grape. Get him talking about Shiraz, however, and his body language tells its own tale...

“You could say it is *one* of my favourite cultivars,” is all that Charles Hopkins is willing to concede when asked about his feelings towards Shiraz as a cultivar. Yet, there’s a gleam in the eye, warmth in the voice, and a contagious enthusiasm as he talks about the intrigue and mystique of this grape that, for him, expresses the strongest sense of place of any wine. “The stylistic diversity of Shiraz, which shows, in its style, so clearly where it comes from, is what really fascinates me,” relates Hopkins.

And he should know, since De Grendel produces two very different Shiraz styles, from very different regions,

and in June – South Africa’s Shiraz Month – a third, with its own deeply distinctive sense of place.

A SOUTH AFRICAN FAVOURITE

Shiraz is the fourth most planted grape varietal in South Africa. It is an attractive prospect in the vineyard because of its vigorous growth, and is one of the few cultivars that can be harvested from as early as its second year. Also, its adaptability to different climates, with marked differences in flavour profile, depending on the region.

Although they somewhat flow into one another, the styles produced at De Grendel can be broadly grouped into wines with earthy, herbal, fynbos character, those with a distinct

blackcurrant profile, some heady with violet florals, and Hopkins’ personal favourite – the peppery rotundone style.

The rotundone flavour compound is more prevalent in cooler growing areas, and while it makes for some of the most sought-after Shiraz, it is not easy to determine what, precisely, is responsible for its distinctive black pepperiness. What’s more, there are only a handful of areas that consistently produce it.

TENURE IN TERROIR

The Graaff family lured Hopkins to De Grendel in 2005 with an irresistible offer to become the estate’s founding winemaker, in a cellar built to his design. The farm on the Tygerberg hills with its sweeping views over Table Bay to

Table Mountain, celebrated its 300th anniversary in 2020, and while records show winemaking there in the early 1800s, the vineyards were wiped out by the phylloxera plague of the 1890s. Sir David Graaff, the third Baronet of Cape Town, re-established vineyards on De Grendel in 2000. His son, Sir De Villiers, has continued this legacy by working hand-in-hand with Hopkins and his team to bolster production, garnering an impressive track record of awards for a relatively young winery.

Hopkins only recently planted Shiraz on the Durbanville farm, opting instead to source his Shiraz from mature vineyards in Paarl and the Firgrove area of Somerset West. Then, more recently, also from the young maritime winegrowing region of Elim, and for the newest addition to the range, from the Ceres mountain plateau at Op die Berg.

The white-label De Grendel Shiraz, the winery's most consistently-awarded wine, is blended from selected parcels of Paarl and Firgrove grapes. Matured for 12 months in mostly older barrels, the wine displays velvety texture, fragrant violets and blackcurrants, touches of fynbos and pepperiness. It derives its sense of place from clay soils and moderate climate more inland than Elim, lower altitude, and warmer and drier than Op die Berg.

Where the coastal region Shiraz is dark, full-bodied, and weighty, the rotundone-style Elim and Ceres wines are lighter in colour, more delicate in structure, and slightly lower in alcohol content.

De Grendel Elim Shiraz was responsible for De Grendel's first Platter's five-star rating in 2020 – a project some 20 years in the making since Hopkins first spotted the potential



of the cool maritime climate and sea breezes close to Africa's southernmost point, and pioneered the planting of vineyards there. "Stylistically this is a completely different wine: spicy, with distinctive fynbos. It's like when you walk in the veld and pick those leaves, rub them in your fingers and then smell, you get that spicy-herb characteristic that is so amazing in this wine. It is strongly rotundone with lots of black pepper, and the herbal character that the French call *garrigue*, from the Mediterranean scrubland with notes of kitchen herbs like sage and coriander, lavender and earthiness. It is a bit like fynbos, but different."

While 15% of the barrels used for the coastal region white-label Shiraz are new, adding to its big blockbuster style, Hopkins says only older barrels are





Cellarmaster Charles Hopkins

used for the Elim Shiraz, an “opening up” exercise rather than adding too much of an oak dimension.

Where Elim is almost at sea-level and the soils gravelly, Op die Berg on the Ceres Mountain plateau sees the vineyards planted in Bokkeveld shale (at around 1,000 m above sea-level). This is one of South Africa’s few truly continental climates where there’s no moderating ocean influence. Here the days are warm and the nights often below freezing, with snow on the vineyards.

Hopkins has chosen to label the Op die Berg wine as Syrah, indicating its lighter, more Old-World style in contrast to the boldness of the other two Shiraz’.

“This one is very interesting! A totally different flavour profile again – where the Elim Shiraz is a clear expression of black pepper, Op die Berg Syrah is definitely more white pepper, a bit more coriander seed, lighter and fruitier.

“The difference is fascinating, and that’s what I love about making Shiraz,” concludes Hopkins.

For information on De Grendel wines, visit www.degrendel.co.za. 



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