

ABUNDANT HARVEST

Women at Work



Western Cape
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Agriculture

BETTER TOGETHER.

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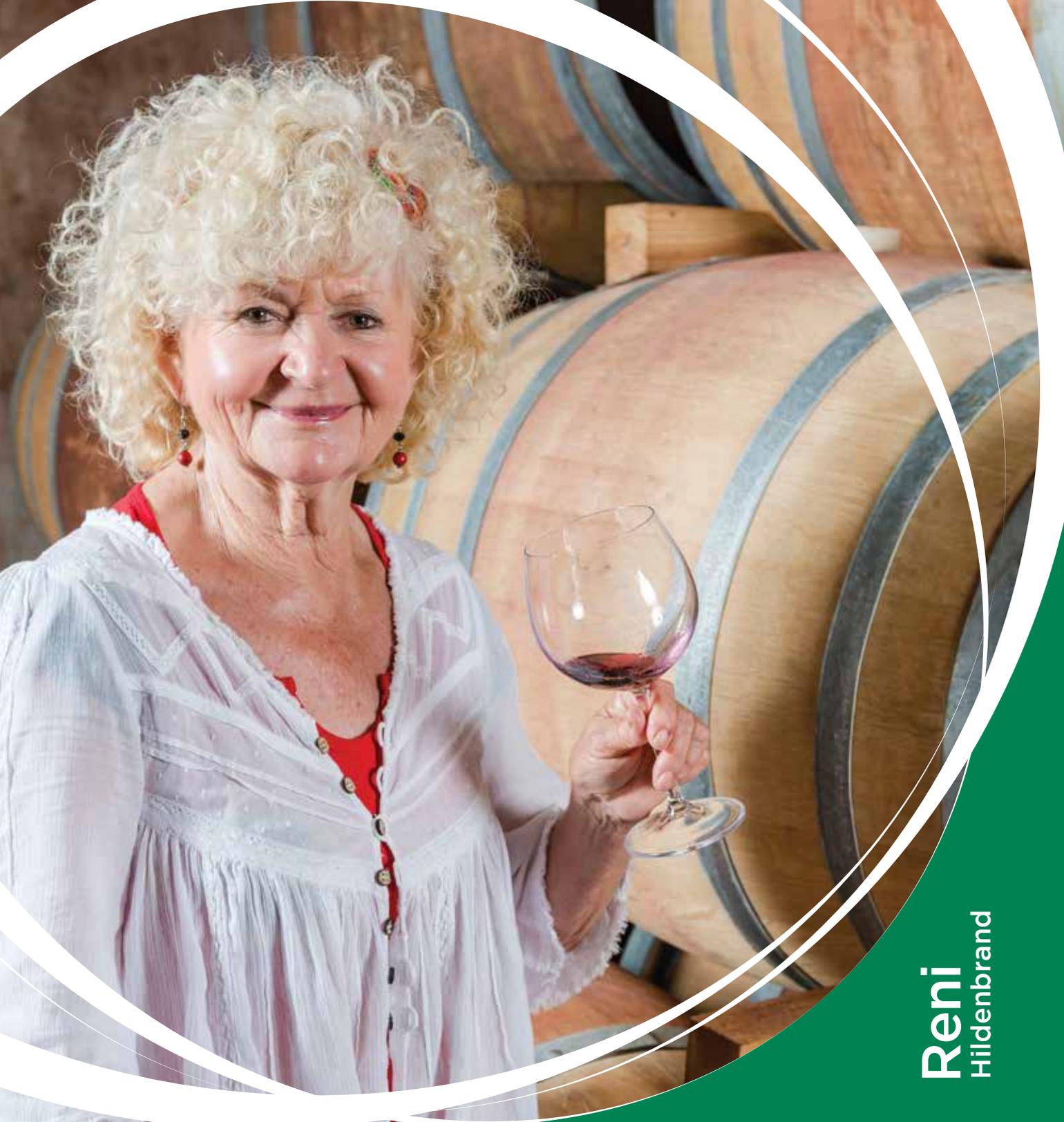
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Reni
Hildenbrand



LUXURIOUS LIQUIDS

“I’m a South African,” says Reni Hildenbrand with that distinct German hilt to her accent.

This petite lady doesn’t seem to fit the bill of a farmer, but upon hearing the scale on which she produces wine and olive oil, one is thoroughly convinced of her prowess as commercial farmer. From her Wellington farm some 60,000 bottles of wine are exported mainly to Thailand and Germany, and 2,000 of olive oil find their way to Germany and into the local market.

“Farming was always what I wanted to do,” she says. “From the age of 16 my uncle used to take me to wine tastings and the art of it fascinated me. Sadly I was not allowed to study in that direction so chose architecture instead.”

In 1984 Reni followed her husband to Johannesburg. “When he died in a car accident four years later, it literally changed the direction of my life. I sold my business and my house and bought Rhebokskloof outside Wellington.

“

Now remember I came to this valley with serious labels: woman, “uitlander” (foreigner) and definitely NOT a farmer.

It has everything that I ever dreamed of: a historic homestead (built in 1782), ancient oak trees, I can see the mountains, the sunset and sunrise and it even has a little stream. It just had no vineyards when I first laid eyes on it.” What didn’t feature in her dreams, though, were the 800 olive trees.

In 1993 Reni started planting Cabernet Sauvignon vineyards, followed by Chardonnay, Semillon, Shiraz and Malbec. The cellar, dating back to 1853, had to

be completely restored. During the period of waiting for the vineyards to come into production, the olive trees continued to bear fruit. Reni spent three months in Tuscany to learn about olive oil, imported an olive oil press and in 1996 made her first olive extra virgin olive oil. “I think they gave this German and English speaker three months to pack her bags. Things have changed and I feel I’m accepted all round; I think the Afrikaans “boere” (farmers) are even proud of what I’ve achieved.”





Equal passions: olive oil and wine

When Reni does something, she does it in overdrive. Consequently she attained an olive oil taster certificate in Italy, is now certified as a panel leader, wrote a book on Olives and Oils in South Africa, co-initiated the SA Olive competition, won several awards with her own olive oil and was recently inaugurated as an international judge. "I'm equally passionate about the olive oil and the wine; at the moment I just feel I need to spend more of my time helping to build the olive oil industry in South Africa." Reni currently produces olive oil from 3,500 trees.

Her wine exports to Germany, Thailand, Switzerland and lately Namibia are the mainstay of the farm. "Selling the product in a very competitive world,

among major brands that are very well-known, is extremely difficult. I'm not a famous golf- or rugby player," Reni says with a wink, "and wine from Wellington will always experience a small drawback compared to wine from Stellenbosch or Franschhoek, but you will find success if you have a product which is honest and not interfering with nature."

Reni's soft spot for mistreated animals culminated not only in her farm being home to saved donkeys, horses, cattle, goats, cats, dogs and geese; she also annually produces wine ranges dedicated to them. Coconut and Angel are two feline friends who inspired an unusual white-red blend 2013 Chardonnay Malbec.





“Coconut had only eight lives left when she was rescued from a wine tank and Angel was a wild vineyard discovery and together their personalities are personified in the wine.” The Roikat (her spelling) Shiraz pays tribute to a lynx that used to steal her ducks. “One night I slept out there with them and woke at 02:00 in the morning from the noise and looked into the eyes of a rooikat with a dead duck in her mouth. I took that duck right from its mouth and told her that I would get back at her for killing so many of my animals.” Nature Conservation caught her here on the farm soon after – with the dead duck as lure – and released her elsewhere.

Although Reni has a healthy relationship with her three permanent workers, she acknowledges that the

current labour issues (especially regarding seasonal labour) is the one thing which she would warn would-be farmers about. “Sadly more farmers are employing mechanisation during the harvest season to avoid the possible labour problems, but I will not give up on the people, despite the stress. I’ve always said, if times are tough, rather scale down than give up completely.”

Notwithstanding the normal hardships related to a career in agriculture, Reni loves the daily challenges. “Despite the fact that we’ve received far less rain than usual, the vineyards are looking absolutely beautiful. Maybe a bit of stress is good for the grapes – they’re perhaps like me: stress makes me perform even better.” ●

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