

a wine & olive journey in the black land



View of Kasteelberg from the slopes of the Paardeberg



Table Mountain can be glimpsed from the Swartland

I awake and decide that today is the day to delve into the black land, which of course it isn't. Named for the indigenous *Renosterbos* which gleams black when wet, it is now a vista of greens at different times of the year: fruit in summer, wheat in winter.

As this region that has given rise to the spectacular growth of viti- and olive culture depends largely on the geographic variances that exist here, it is time to sample its sights. Firstly I plan to take in the landscape, then at a later junction work through the wines and olives. Sparingly, of course.

As diverse as the landscape and climate is, there can be no escaping the contrasting skills and attitudes of the growers, makers and curers. From small, private wine estates, boutique wine makers, an organic grower, to large volume production facilities for export, and olive growers and producers, the **Swartland** hosts a kaleidoscope of variety.

From the granite hills of the **Paardeberg**, through the sweeping vistas of the **Berg River** plain encompassing **Kasteelberg**, north to the slopes of the **Piketberg** and **Groot Winterhoek** mountains, the soils, winds and various aspects of the scorching summer sun and drenching winter rains create a vast palette that sustains vines and olives. Bordered on one side by the *Mountains of Africa* and benefiting from cool sea breezes on the other, a multitude of micro climates exist.

Nature's own bounty is additionally worked by the skills and flair of the local producers to create memorable wine styles and olive ranges including olive soaps, body care products, and of course oils.

So, let us venture onto the Paardeberg (a name derived from the zebra that once were found roaming here), a granite outcrop telling

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us of volcanic activity aeons ago. Erosion has led to the creation of a multitude of deep, incised valleys into the core of this deposit. Lurking amongst some of them and slightly out of the way are some fine innovative wine farms. And with some of the highest planted vineyards regionally and deep soils, complex wines may be produced.

Travelling the back roads one is led up into numerous valleys. Steep slopes are often covered by vineyards and the vistas take the eye towards Kasteelberg and the surrounds of our 'capital'. Even Table Mountain lurks on the horizon. Around the side of Paardeberg from where I began are yet more isolated vales hosting vines – I become aware of how important this is to the local economy.

Off the mountain I pass down the slopes and arrive in the vicinity of **Malmesbury**, and at one of the largest producers, **Swartland Cellars**, in the region, with nearly three-quarters by volume exported. Geographically this section of the black land is widely spread, leading us, with some interesting detours, up the main highway to **Namibia**, by way of the Berg River and beyond, cellars vary from boutique, to organic, via a multitude of climatic influences and soil types – one even hosts a collection of classic vehicles!

Turning back I return to the slopes of Kasteelberg and spread along the Porseleinberg may be found the highest concentration and therefore greatest variety of wine and olive producers in the region. The **Riebeek Valley**, as it is known, was first settled by Europeans over 300 years ago, but there is much evidence of human habitation over a very extended period.

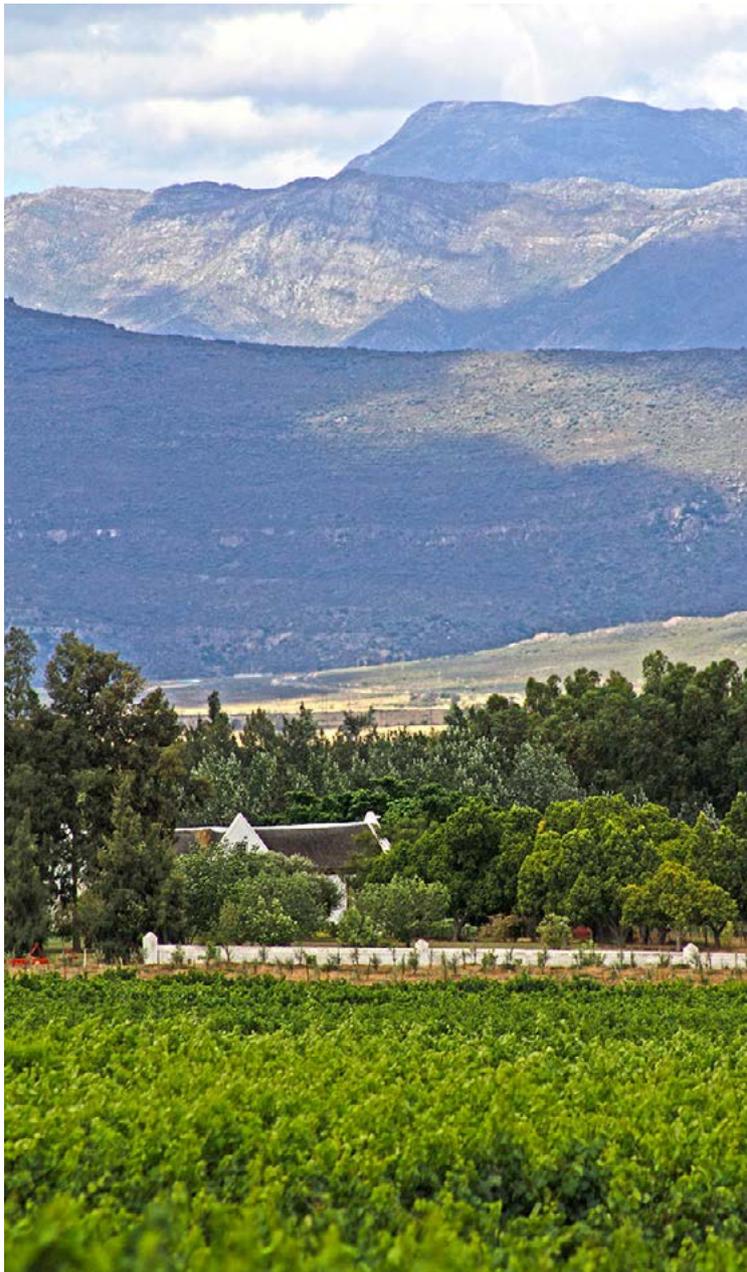


A vineyard clutched a slope



Org de Rac dominates a hill above the Berg River with the majestic Piketberg towering above

Vines being pruned against a mountain backdrop



Vine stock was originally planted on Allesverloren as early as the 19th century, so the history of wine making is deeply rooted as part of the culture of the area. Although olive groves were only established in the past 40 years, they have steadily become part of the landscape, cuisine and business of **The Valley**.

My whistle-stop tour demonstrated that there was nothing really black about the region; in fact, it was startlingly opposite, an inspiringly diverse landscape. Now to plan a return to sample the wares!



A glimpse of Kloovenburg with Riebeeek Kasteel in the background

Cape Dutch vernacular at Sonquadrift