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Wine: The world's driest vineyard

Jonny Beardsall

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Allan Walkden-Davis makes wine on the edge of the Namib desert. Jonny Beardsall learns the story of this 'place of abandoned water'

Dolly, a world-weary one-eyed ostrich, squints over Allan Walkden-Davis's shoulder as he fondles a vine at Neuras Winery on his farm in southern Namibia. Man and bird may have had too much sun but what the 64-year-old naturalised Namibian, who was born in Britain, is achieving in the driest vineyard on Earth is amazing.



Ripe for growth: Allan Walkden-Davis produces appealingly rustic wines on his farm in southern Namibia

He works on the edge of the Namib Desert where it only rains between February and April, and the average

fall can be less than an inch. Yet he produces annually 3,000 to 3,500 bottles of shiraz, as well as a shiraz-merlot blend, wine which the actor-turned-wine writer Oz Clark tasted on a wine tour last year.

Clark had booked under a pseudonym so Walkden-Davis was not expecting him. "I didn't recognise him and only began to wonder when he kept asking very informed questions," says the former managing director of Shell Namibia who bought the 35,000 acres in 1996.

"I was so embarrassed - I have all his books." "When he wasn't looking I kept signing his wine lists," says Clark who tried the 2005, 2006 and 2007 shiraz. "Because this place has a unique microclimate his grapes ripen very slowly so he can produce nice wines with cool climate flavours. They're slightly rustic but this is a rustic place."

In the local Koikoi language, Neuras means the "place of abandoned water", which is why it's so verdant. Under a grove of palm trees five springs rise along a geological fault line where an impervious rocky mass has shifted, forcing underground water to the surface. Water is captured in circular reservoirs, once lined with clay and now with concrete, and two acres of vines are flood-irrigated via a network of rills and sluices built more than a century ago.

- [Wine homepage](#)

In 1894, a decade after the country became a German protectorate, a gardener, Ernst Hermann, grew vegetables and cereals here to feed the Schutztruppe - the imperial force - trying to put the lid on a native uprising in the region. When the battles were over, the gardener bought the land, built a house and also planted table grapes.

When Walkden-Davis and his wife, Sylvia, moved in, these old vines were still producing enormous bunches in a fruit cage that had been derelict for 12 years. "This puzzled me so I phoned a farmer friend in South Africa and told him about the quantity," he says.

"He'd always told me older vines produce fewer and smaller bunches so he was also intrigued." When his friend came they dug a hole six feet deep between the vines and hit a bed of rock sloping to the bed of a little river which flows through the farm when it rains. This layer retains the water from the springs and results in Neuras's perfect drainage. This, along with the alkaline soil which, with a pH value of 7.2, would make a Stellenbosch grower envious, is why, in Walkden-Davis's opinion, the vines performed so well.

Eager to try, he planted some shiraz and merlot vines in 1997. "I'd loved wine as a student when I had a weekend job at wine shows in Cape Town," he says.

Friends were sceptical: "One fellow could not understand why I couldn't go bankrupt farming sheep or cattle the same as everyone else." Walkden-Davis was told not to expect anything much because as this is a warm climate, the grapes would ripen too quickly.

They were wrong. A west wind brings cool air off the Atlantic at night in the hottest months and a hot east wind causes the evaporation of moisture in leaves of the vegetation shielding the vines, further cooling them down. This means grapes ripen very slowly.

After a first attempt at wine-making in 2001, South African oenologist Abrie Bruwer was called in. "Abrie said it was conspicuous that I knew nothing," sighs Walkden-Davis. Bruwer invited him to his Springfield Estate on the Cape and taught him how to monitor the ripening and the fermentation. Results improved and during his visit, Oz Clark was especially taken by the "wonderful chocolatey-blackberry flavours" of the 2005 shiraz selling for N\$245 (£16) a bottle.

A further 20 acres are to be planted next year with 6,000 young vines. "It's an investment of N\$4.5million (£300,000), but we're feeling confident as we expect to break even this year," says Walkden-Davis. "We're also growing a small quantity of cabernet sauvignon." More wine tourists from Britain are beginning to visit this far-flung place, where some choose to stay in one of the farm's chalets. From here you can not only appreciate the wine - and meet Dolly - but also hike across the farm and try to see the local wildlife.

"We're just an hour from the giant red dunes at Sossusvlei, which is one of Namibia's top tourist attractions, so more people are breaking the journey here," says Walkden-Davis. When they do they buy wine to take home because, at the moment, there are insufficient quantities to allow shipping to Britain.

- **Neuras Winery**, PO Box 155, Maltahohe, Namibia, 00 264 63293417; neuras@mweb.com.na
- **The Ultimate Travel Company** (020 7386 4646 www.theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk) can arrange a long weekend at the winery

TOP DEALS THIS WEEK

2006 McGuigan Gold Shiraz, Australia

13.5% vol, (£3.99 if you buy two as part of a mixed case, reduced from £6.49; Majestic, until Oct 27). This Australian take on shiraz (aka syrah) is certainly no shrinking violet. It is chock full of the rich, ripe flavours of damsons, plums and blackberries with a long juicy smooth finish. Although hardly sophisticated it is joyously drinkable and ideal for casual lunches of autumn stews or meaty pasta dishes.

2006 La Chasse du Pape Côtes-du-Rhône Réserve, France

13.5% vol, (£4.49 reduced from £5.99 until Oct 26; Co-op). A traditional Côtes-du-Rhône blend of syrah (part of which is oak-fermented and oak-aged), grenache, mourvèdre and cinsault, this is full-flavoured, smooth, spicy and peppery. It's surprisingly well textured, too, and makes a great everyday red. Drink it with game pie or steak and kidney pudding.

WHAT I'VE ENJOYED MOST THIS WEEK

Cono Sur Sparkling Brut, Chile

12%vol, (£9.99; Morrisons). I was much taken with this sparkler from the Bio Bio Valley when I tried it in Chile and am delighted that it's arrived here. A blend of 90 per cent chardonnay, seven per cent riesling and three per cent pinot noir, produced by the Charmat process (as with prosecco), it's clean and refreshing with a delicate sweetness in the mouth, backed by a crisp, dry finish.

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