



GRAPE EXPECTATIONS

A custom-built wine cellar in the Elgin Valley combines a contemporary aesthetic with smart functionality.



The new wine cellar building at Habibi is genteel yet practical - a voluminous barn-like structure that settles unobtrusively in the orchards of Elgin in the Western Cape, while still packing a serious design punch. A successful blend of cathedral and workshop, this is a space whose beauty is underpinned by honest, hard-wearing materials and optimal design decisions.

A decade ago, when Canadian businessman and oenophile David Curl married South African-born Genevieve Hamilton-Brown, they invested in an Elgin apple farm. The estate included small parcels of Pinot Noir, and the resulting wines were named after Genevieve's late mother Moya Meaker, a former Miss South Africa. Fast-forward to today, and the farm - Habibi - boasts this state-of-the-art cellar, which allows for efficient and elegant wine production.

THIS PAGE Winemaker Jean Smit and Weimaraner Aikis ensure that things run smoothly in the maturation cellar.
OPPOSITE Sunlight streams in through the skylight in the concrete ceiling to illuminate an Icarus sculpture.
 De Hoop bricks by Corobrik offer a subtle background.

PHOTOS PARIS BRUMMER WORDS BIDDI RORKE



VISI / REASONS

The estate's other premium label, Damascene, is a partnership between David and celebrated winemaker Jean Smit, with its debut 2018 release having been described by critics as "one of the most exciting South African releases in a decade". The duo are passionate about their art - and their 120-tonne custom-made "studio".

"We focused on optimising the space and the flow of production," Jean says. "With this building, every design element was scrutinised to allow for optimal processing."

A strategic and thoughtful use of materials - such as untreated Nordic pine for the decking, low-maintenance Saflok cladding, and a seamless polyurethane floor, none of which competes or interferes with the alchemy of wine-making - was also key to the success of the build. Approaching the winery, the first view is of two ancient oak trees whose canopies float over the tasting room and office space. These areas are wrapped in timber cladding, which will weather in time and blend in with the landscape.



The striking elongated skylight, with its scissoring truss of untreated spruce, forms the architectural spine of the cellar, maximising natural light and creating that elusive "aha" moment that stops you in your tracks. Below, tulip-shaped concrete tanks imported from Italy stand on precast concrete plinths, an artful testament to the real work that happens in the space. Jean explains that the grapes don't have to be crushed and pumped into these vessels - instead, they are tipped intact from satellite tanks directly into the fermenters, resulting in a particular profile and elegance.

As lead architect Michelle Heidemann of Onyx Architects explains, wine cellars are usually inward-facing to minimise the light that falls on the barrels. However, she says, "Here, ancient oak trees shade the building from the eastern light, so wherever we could, we were able to add windows - from the feature skylight to the narrow slots and the huge sliding doors that frame the view and connect the structure to the landscape."

"As you move closer, the striking black box of the cellar is revealed," Michelle says. "Eighty-five percent of the space is about production, so we worked with a team of structural and production engineers and quantity surveyors to ensure all of David and Jean's exacting requirements were met."

The northern side houses the covered outside crusher pad area, where grapes arrive before being stored in the adjacent pre-cool room. Leading off the main fermentation facility, the middle block houses eight conical oak foudres from Austria, while the maturation room lies at the back of the building.

Sharing the generous deck with the main production area, the tasting room was designed around three key pieces that David and Genevieve brought with them from France. Warm tones of earthy brown form an unobtrusive backdrop to the artworks, and create an inviting space for vinophiles to savour the true centrepieces of the estate - the elegant Moya Meaker and Damascene wines.

■ f Moya Meaker Wines | f Damascene Vineyards



THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT Landscaping by DDS Projects softens the building's hard edges; the tulip-shaped concrete tanks were imported from Italy. **OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Thermo-ash joinery in Jean's office lends a sleek profile to the space; a portrait of Moya Meaker overlooks the Houtlander table and Andrew Dominic chairs in the tasting room; the maturation cellar, located at the back of the building, features Saflok cladding and a seamless polyurethane floor; the generous Nordic-pine deck by Inhouse Finishing is shaded by two ancient oak trees; aluminium cladding provides contrast to the warmer wooden aspects of the exterior; in time, the fixed timber screening will fade and weather, blending into the surrounding landscape; the bar counter in the tasting room was custom-made by Boland Shopfitters.

