

Stirring the Lees with James Molesworth

A Sit Down with South Africa's Emil den Dulk of De Toren

Another winery starts to take a close look at its dirt

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Emil den Dulk, owner of South Africa's De Toren winery stopped by for a sit down the other day. Like most quality-conscious vintners, den Dulk isn't standing pat, despite the very solid track record his Cabernet Sauvignon-based Fusion V blend has established.

And as you might expect, most of den Dulk's focus is on aspects that won't affect what the consumer sees until a few years down the road. And, as you might expect, that focus is on dirt.

It began about three years ago, when he was looking at the balance sheets. Den Dulk was scratching his head at the high costs for fertilizers and pesticides. He asked his winemaking team—winemaker Albie Koch and viticulturist Ernest Manuel—what they could do about it. Pretty soon, they were taking a more organic approach.

"It's organic principles," said den Dulk. "Though we're not looking for certification per se."

To that end, a thorough soil analysis of the property yielded some surprising results, particularly an out-of-balance pH.

"It was pretty bad," said den Dulk. "If the soil's mineral balance is out of sync, then the pH goes out of sync. And if that goes out of sync, then everything goes out of sync."

Den Dulk connects the poor soil condition to the lack of attention paid to the soil preparation before the property was planted with vines, which occurred before he bought the farm in 1991. The farm now totals 39.5 acres of vines after den Dulk and his team pulled out 12 acres of leaf roll virus-infected Cabernet Sauvignon that was dying. It's giving a chance for den Dulk to start over, sort of.

"It will lie fallow for a year, then we'll start to prepare it, liming it (sowing in magnesium-rich materials to neutralize acidity) to get the pH back and working in the cover crop that's growing on it now to get the microbial activity back up."

"South Africa is moving in the direction of looking for *terroir* first, then planting," said den Dulk. "If I could do it all over again, I would've bought a farm twice as big but only planted in specific spots and let the natural environment grow in places that weren't really suited for vines," he added.

When he does replace the pulled-out vines, den Dulk will employ new technologies and techniques, including higher vine density as well as aligning vineyard rows to maximize airflow through the vines from the prevailing breeze. He'll also expand the diversity of plantings as well, adding more Petit Verdot in particular, along with a mix of Cabernet Franc and Malbec.

As for tangible results from all these efforts, they can be tough to quantify. "I can't say it's from all this, but I have seen the complexity in the wines go up in recent vintages," said den Dulk in regard to the shift to a more organic approach.

Consumers will have to wait to see how those recent vintages turn out—De Toren's 2007s are set to be released here in the coming months. As always, formal reviews based on blind tastings will appear shortly thereafter.

