

# HOT because it's cool



JONATHAN STRUG PHOTOS

South Africa's Elgin Valley is hugged by towering mountains, giving it a cool climate that's turning out award-winning Sauvignon Blancs and Pinot Noirs.

## The fabulous wine region you've never heard of

BY SANDRA MACGREGOR

**W**e discovered it by accident. We were on our way home to Cape Town and pulled in off the highway for gas,' explains a fellow wine enthusiast as we discuss our respective tasting adventures while sampling vintages at Oak Valley Wines. "Next thing we know, we've discovered a great wine region we didn't even know existed."

He's in good company; few locals and even fewer people outside of South Africa (unless they are serious wine aficionados) have ever heard of the Elgin Valley wine region.

Less than an hour outside of Cape Town, on an inland plateau hidden by towering moun-

tains, a sleepy farming community that's home to some of the country's largest apple and pear plantations, is rapidly, if quietly, being transformed into one of South Africa's newest and most exciting wine appellations. And though it's a baby in wine-region terms (vineyards began replacing fruit farms as recently as 20 years ago), national and international awards are beginning to pile up.

While I welcome the chance to taste award-winning Sauvignon Blancs and Pinot Noirs (two of the varietals the region is best known for), I'm willing to concede that for me, Elgin Valley's charm as a destination has as much to do with what it lacks — people and pretension — as with the quality of its wines.

"We've never had such amazing winery experiences," said



DENNIS LEUNG, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Adrienne Attwood of Johannesburg, who was visiting the Elgin Valley with her husband and another couple. "They treated us like we were really important."

Wine region regulars, the foursome had decided to forgo their annual vacation to more established wine regions and give Elgin a try.



**Winemaker Paul Cluver describes Pinot Noir as 'not a quickie; not a one-night stand.'**

"The wine makers are often the ones doing the tastings," she adds, as her husband interrupts to happily point out that all the tastings are free, "... so you have

more to spend on the important stuff," he says, smiling and pointing to some of their recent wine purchases. "We'll definitely be back."

Whether or not you're a wine lover, the region is worth visiting if only for the view. Home to the UNESCO-recognized Kogelberg Biosphere Reserve, Elgin Valley forms a kind of pastoral patchwork quilt with vineyards criss-crossed by rolling hills and flowered valleys inscribed with wandering brooks and pristine rivers. All of which is hugged by towering mountains; silent sentinels guarding the valley's fruitful treasures.

As lovely as the landscape is, Elgin's vintners are equally as inviting. Conversations with these passionate wine lovers are as illuminating as they are unique and highlight that Elgin Valley is as welcoming to wine rookies as it is to oenophiles.

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## TRAVEL

## Elgin Valley: Cool and uncomplicated



NATALIE WEST PHOTO

The Green Mountain eco-route offers imbibers a chance to work off some of those calories while enjoying breathtaking hiking and biking trails through mountains and vineyards.

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Under the tutelage of managing director Paul Cluver (of Paul Cluver Wines, named after his father) Pinot Noir — often an intimidating varietal for newbies — becomes intriguingly approachable: “Pinot Noir is not a quickie; it’s not a one-night stand. Pinot is the kind of girl you want to take on a second date; you have to get to know her to appreciate her.”

At other wineries, one has the impression that vineyards are seen as masterpieces in the making. Paul Wallace explains that at Elgin Vintners they do not merely “make” wines but rather edit them.

“In every bottle there is a story, and in every glass there is a conversation.”

I was more than happy to engage in several delicious tomes.

Others hear (and taste) music.

“I want to create a symphony of fruit, a harmonious orchestration of flavour,” says Catherine Marshall of her creative approach to producing vintages. “My wines are not a one-dimensional concert.

“Depending on the blend, there may be 60-per-cent violin, 20-per-cent cello, five-per-cent piano, and the rest is bass.”

No matter how unique their approach to wine and wine production, Elgin’s vintners all seem to agree on what makes their region such a singular success: they have that rarest of South African qualities — they’re cool. Literally.

“The big thing about Elgin is that we have what wine makers in our country are always on the lookout for: a cool climate,” explains John Secombe, wine maker at Iona Vineyards. “Because if you want to produce more delicate wines, you need

The Elgin Valley’s charm has as much to do with what it lacks — people and pretension — as with the high quality of its wines.



JONATHAN STRUG PHOTO

Being an under-the-radar wine region means visitors can enjoy uncrowded and intimate wine tutelages.

a cool area.”

James Downes from Shannon Vineyards agrees.

“It’s all about hang time. Thanks to the mountains and nearby ocean breezes, we have cooler nights, so grapes can mature and hang on the vines longer. That’s what gives our grapes a wider, more complex flavour spectrum.”

Whether or not you understand geography or the principles of



PHOTO COURTESY OF OLD MAC DADDY

Quirky and comfortable: You can stay in a playfully retrofitted Airstream trailer at the Old Mac Daddy luxury trailer park.

hang time, it’s clear that Elgin Valley has got something special. Wineries from other appellations, such as Stellenbosch (South Africa’s most established and popular wine region) have already begun to plant vineyards in Elgin to capitalize on the area’s coolness.

But for all this talk of a cold climate, a first-time visitor to the area couldn’t be blamed for thinking Elgin is playing things a little too cool when it comes to attracting tourists. Though crowd-free tasting rooms and conversations with wine makers are inarguably attractive, there are some challenges to discovering a wine region still in its infancy.

Arriving in the region after dark on a weeknight, we were hard pressed to find a place to eat. Luckily, the Shuntin’ Shed (a 100-year-old restored train shunting shed) provided a great casual meal, but it was one of only a handful of restaurants

open for dinner. One would expect fine dining options to abound in a wine region, but upscale choices are limited, though two recent additions to the area (Fresh at Paul Cluver and Gordon Manuel at the Venu) are outstanding foodie attractions.

There are also some lovely B&Bs and historic inns in the region (Wildeckrans Country Estate, with its rambling rose gardens and olive groves, is a long-standing favourite), but there are no large-capacity hotels. And while having no large hotels may be seen as a welcome version of crowd-control, it also means booking ahead is essential for overnight stays.

There is one hotelier who does seem to foresee Elgin Valley’s allure as a destination. Opened less than a year, Old Mac Daddy raises the region’s cool quotient significantly with its take on trailer-park chic. The hotel offers luxurious, playfully designed, retrofitted Airstream trail-

## If you go

**Where:** Elgin Wine Region, South Africa

**Getting there:** Air Canada offers flights from Ottawa to Cape Town, with connections in London, England. From Cape Town, the Elgin Valley is less than an hour’s drive east on the national N2 highway.

**When to go:** Because of year-round good weather, anytime of the year is a good time to visit.

## Where to stay:

■ Wildeckrans Country Estate: As famous for its hospitality as for its lovely, massive rose garden that looks out over orchards and the Groenlandberg mountain range. Doubles from \$130 (includes breakfast). 011-27-28-284-9827 or [www.wildeckrans.co.za](http://www.wildeckrans.co.za).

■ South Hill Guesthouse: A winery that offers luxury accommodation. Doubles from \$120 (includes breakfast). 011-27-21-844-0033 or [www.southhill.co.za](http://www.southhill.co.za).

■ Old Mac Daddy Luxury Trailer Park: Elgin’s most unique offering features individually designed Airstream trailers. Doubles from \$100 (includes continental breakfast). 011-27-021-844-0241 or [www.oldmacdaddy.co.za](http://www.oldmacdaddy.co.za)

## Where to eat:

■ South Hill’s The Venu: Enjoy a South Hill wine tasting before your meal. 011-27-21-844-0033 or [www.southhill.co.za](http://www.southhill.co.za).

■ Fresh at Paul Cluver’s: All-local cuisine, only open for breakfast and lunch. 011-27-71-563-6020.

■ The Shuntin’ Shed: A quirky, casual restaurant in the nearby town of Bot River. 011-27-28-284-9443 or [www.theshuntinshed.co.za/restaurant.htm](http://www.theshuntinshed.co.za/restaurant.htm).

**More:** [www.elginwine.co.za](http://www.elginwine.co.za)

ers perched on a hillside with decks overlooking the surrounding valley. I suspect it will prove to be a perfect fit for the region — its unique ethos is likely to pair nicely with that of Elgin’s unconventional vintners.

Another successful tourism initiative is the Green Mountain Eco-route. Described as the world’s first “biodiversity wine and eco-route,” it combines wine, hiking and biking trails, galleries and natural attractions in an effort to appeal to outdoorsy oenophiles. The most popular attraction is the four-day, 60-kilometre hike through vineyards, nature reserves and mountains.

“It’s hard to complain of course,” says a fellow sampler at Paul Cluver, as we discuss the region’s limited culinary options and lack of visitor-friendly signage (many wineries are not signed from the road so a map is a necessity).

“These are the most interesting and friendly wine tastings I’ve had, so I’m willing to put up with some inconvenience.”

So am I. After all, there’s something to be said about a soon-to-be hot destination trying to keep its cool.

**Sandra MacGregor** is a Canadian food, wine and travel writer who is currently living in South Africa.