

Real grappa distilled locally

German couple who set up home on a farm in McGregor are producing 'lemon geist' and 'eau de vie' with the help of a master distiller

MYRNA
ROBINS

tabletop

ATE LAST year I stepped into the little distillery at Tanagra where the exquisite fragrance of crushed lemons nearly overwhelmed me. The harvest of a small orchard had been roughly sliced and tossed into a huge crate. Master distiller Hubertus Valendar, happy with the temperature on the gauge and the water bubbling behind the porthole glass, gave the thumbs-up, and workers started shovelling the aromatic fruit into the pot of the still.

Tanagra's new owner Robert Rosenbach scribbled figures on a pad between taking photographs for a visual record of his enterprise in action: his well-travelled still was starting work in his new home in Africa, while the lemons were probably the first in the Cape to contribute flavour and aroma to an *eau de vie*.

Tanagra farm sprawls over 27 hectares across both sides of the road from Robertson to McGregor. It's just over a year since Robert and Anette Rosenbach moved into the neglected buildings and wrought a rapid transformation that started with the farmstead, followed by workers' cottages after which they turned their attention to the cellar and the little Karoo building that now houses the still. The Rosenbachs, who both hail from the Mosel region of Germany



CHEERS: Tanagra's Robert and Anette Rosenbach with Jupp.

first came to South Africa on holiday some 17 years ago, repeating this annual excursion for more than a decade as their love affair with the Cape blossomed into a decision to live and farm here. As their hunt for a small, manageable farm intensified, they focussed on the McGregor region.

Robert was nurturing another ambition – to make *grappa* and *eau de vie*, so popular in his home country and with the help of his friend and master distiller Valendar a still, all gleaming copper and

pipes, was found for sale in Germany. Once bought, it was taken apart, the parts numbered and packed into a container for its long sea voyage to South Africa. Robert is proud that he reassembled the puzzle-by-numbers on his own, ahead of his friend's visit to Tanagra to oversee the first distillation.

For Anette Rosenbach the lifestyle shift was as dramatic, as she exchanged the post of professor of linguistics in Dusseldorf for that of manager, salesperson, decorator, guesthouse host, caterer and

farmer's wife in the McGregor valley. She has also organised the renovation of five farm cottages to self-catering accommodation.

A fortnight ago I returned to Tanagra in time to see charred skins from Springfield estate being shovelled in batches to the pot to produce the first single variety *grappa*. About 400kg of lightly pressed skins yielded around 88 litres after first distillation. This will be distilled again, then rest for about six weeks before the alcohol levels are reduced from 70 percent

to the legal 43 percent.

I was offered a taste of the lemon *geist* (literally ghost or spirit) which I had watched being made in December – and was delighted to find that both aroma and flavour of that citrus orchard have been well captured in the crystal clear spirit. There are also peach and apricot *eau de vies*, and the maiden *grappa* made from Tanagra's 2010 shiraz, merlot and cabernet franc harvest.

The Rosenbachs know that these potent fruity spirits are foreign to most local palates, but through word-of-mouth northern European travellers are finding their way to this little distillery. For those who prefer their sundowners fermented rather than distilled, there is a trio of good Tanagra 2007 reds to try: cabernet, shiraz and a merlot/cab franc blend made by village garage John Hargreaves. The 2010 harvest will produce a cab franc rose as well as shiraz and merlot, as the Rosenbachs fulfil their goal of making wine that offers the best of both Old and New World styles.

To Stellenbosch, where the word *grappa* brings to mind the Dalla Cia family who introduced locals to the joys of this Italian classic some 14 years ago at the historic Bosman's Crossing, Dalla Cia's first single vintage *grappa*, the 2009 Limited Edition Pinot Noir is a cornoiseur's delight snipped up by restaurant and wine boutiques, where they sell for R420. The Dalla Cia export just 5 percent of their production – they have convinced South Africans that a chilled aperitif or after-dinner digestif of good *grappa* is the only way to start and finish Italian meals.