

Harvesting Kalk Bay's early risers

JANINE STEPHEN finds harvest time in a tiny vineyard salvaged from an overgrown plot a social occasion

JUST six years ago, the small plot behind Olympia Café and Deli in Kalk Bay, Cape Town, was a bit of an assault on the senses. Olfactory connoisseurs wouldn't have had to breathe in too deeply to find some awkward odours on the sea air: rotting mattress, for one. A dogged base note of human waste, blended with smoke and detritus; perhaps a lingering hint of mouldy laundry, most unpleasant on the palate.

But this morning the aromas on the dawn air are all exquisite: coffee and pastries (fresh from Olympia's ovens), overlaid with damp soil, clean straw and the heady tang of ripe fruit.

It's the tail end of summer and time for the annual grape harvest in "the South African vineyard closest to the sea".

The Kalk Bay Vineyard, all 0,2ha or 600-odd vines of it, is now five years old and this is its third harvest. Thanks to couple Karena du Plessis and Alex Bassios (whose father and aunt own the plot), plus Olympia Café and Deli chef Kenneth McClarty, the much neglected stand was cleaned up, some rough sleepers persuaded to move on, the soil lovingly composted and levelled, and, finally, young vines planted.

The maiden crop yielded 634 bottles of deep red nectar, pressed from Cabernet Franc grapes (a little thinner-skinned and more eager to ripen than their genetic offspring, Cabernet Sauvignon). While most Cabernet Franc grapes are incorporated in blends, the Kalk Bay fruit is used to make a single-varietal wine. The 2006 vintage was approvingly given three-and-a-half stars by the 2008 John Platter Wine guide.

The annual harvest is a social event. Thanks to an e-mailed call for help, a steady stream of volunteers appeared in the dawn sun, wearing sensible shoes and clutching secateurs. There were architects and artists, writers and local shop-owners, a retired couple or two and the local Anglican bishop. "It's initiatives such as the



vineyard that make Kalk Bay different to any other little bit of suburbia," said Kate Davies, the bishop's wife. "There's a sense of community here."

The volunteers were all too keen to fall upon the grapes. Fortified with quality caffeine and sugar, they whipped up and down the rows, first carefully removing a protective plastic net designed to keep voracious starlings off the fruit, then snipping off heavy bunches and placing them reverently in crates.

"Have you ever picked before?" someone asked a friend.

"Just potatoes," the woman replied.

The entire harvest took no longer than 30 minutes to complete. Someone snipped into their own thumb and there was at least one complaint of backache, but otherwise no casualties. Still full of energy, the restless volunteers set to work pruning the vines which, thanks to an application of chicken manure, had put considerable energy into growing taller and leafier — to the possible detri-

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GREAT PICK: Above, picky volunteers hard at work in the Cape's smallest vineyard at Kalk Bay; left, Olympia Café and Deli, which supplied caffeine and other essential support. Pictures: CONNOR CULLINAN

ment of the grapes. But the growers weren't fazed: it was all part of the learning curve.

It was a tricky year for viticulture in other respects too: unseasonable weather had seen Kalk Bay get as damp and humid as a Durban summer's day; harvest had already been postponed by a week to give the grapes a few more days of sunshine. Frustratingly, more rain and peculiarly cloudy weather followed, upping the threat of grape diseases. There was no time to waste — despite cries for a few more days from French winemaker Jean-Vincent Ridon, of Signal Hill Wines fame, picking had to proceed.

By the end of the harvest, 33 crates sat stacked up on the ground, attracting thirsty bees and admiring glances. This was down on last year's 44, but would still provide Ridon with plenty to work with (the agreement with the growers is that each receives half the bottled wine to sell).

A few energetic volunteers travelled with the grapes to the winery at Mandela Rhodes Place, in the heart of the city, in case the crusher was having mechanical problems and the grapes would need to be trodden by foot. But all went smoothly.

The rest of the volunteers — after the best breakfast Olympia

could deliver — slowly took themselves home. Harvest was over for another year and Kenneth returned to the deli's hungry clientele.

On the shelves of the bakery we found precious bottles of the 2006 vintage for sale at R180 apiece. (The wine is also sold at Lisa's Little Wine Shop on Kalk Bay Main Road, or at Mandela Rhodes Place.) Each bottle was numbered individually; Kenneth evidently claimed bottle number one.

With proud locals and discerning drinkers all keen to taste the fruits of the harvest, Kalk Bay Vineyard vintages will be lucky to be laid down to age for long.