



Bonnievale News

HOW BONNIEVALE WINES WAS BORN...

A Tale of Passion, Commitment and Collaboration

The story of our wines is the story of our region; not only in the valley's agricultural legacy, but even further back – to the formation of its very geology and climate.

Our terroir is our treasure chest and our roots run deep.

But they're interconnected too – to partner farms and the community past and future. In accepting our custodianship, we believe in recognising, empowering and nurturing talented potential for the good of Bonnievale's future generations.



A New Arrival

Our tale begins when momentum for agricultural settlement took hold in the early 1900s. At the time, one Christopher Forrest Rigg (1861 – 1926) grew excited with what he saw with his first visit to this valley between the Langeberg and Riviersonderend

Mountains.

Here was a region with a Mediterranean climate of mild wet winters and warm dry summers, and a wealth of micro-climates within its rolling hills. Its soils of sandstone, shale, alluvium and siltstone were diverse and ideal for farming.

It would be the treasure of escape to miners who'd seen the gold rush fade as the 19th century came to a close. It would be the new dawn for many in the wake of a collapsed ostrich trade in nearby Oudtshoorn.

Never one to go with the flow, Rigg knuckled down, shaping his dream through sheer hard work and dedication. He set about obtaining land in the Breede River and dividing it into irrigation plots for private purchase.

Then he turned his attention to irrigation and what would become a historic turning point. With irrigation, Rigg realised, the valley's potential could be unlocked.

Until then, apart from the Breede River, only a few streams provided the area with water. Farming was limited to cattle and goats. A small attempt had been made in 1898 at channelling water, but it was short-lived due to the steep Olifantskrans not far from town.

An Explosive Episode

Rigg, who had moved to the area in 1900 with his wife Lillian, constructed large wooden channels, supported by pillars, and secured to the cliffside at the impenetrable Olifantskrans. The first water reached Bonnievale that same year.

That early canal wasn't ideal – it leaked and regularly failed during deluges of winter rains. A new plan was hatched and on New Year's Day 1906, Rigg used explosives to take the canal through the obstacle (his father had been a dynamite blaster in Barberton). Back then, newspapers described the undertaking as “the greatest engineering project of its time in South Africa by one man”.

His pursuit to attract farmers began by laying out five-acre plots. An elaborate recruitment brochure highlighted soil conditions, climatology and geographical features, agricultural possibilities, transport facilities and even shipping fares.

He also lobbied the New Cape Railway company for trains to make regular stops in the area.

Soon, a town was born. Bonnievale's first town council was established in 1922 and the first municipality was declared in 1953. As the inhabitants of the valley prospered, the town grew. Streets were tarred, electricity was supplied in 1951 and municipal water was made available in 1953.





Finding Happiness

Rigg laid the foundations for the village as it is today and gave it the Bonnievale name. This Scottish colloquialism for a “happy valley”, was inspired by Rigg’s birthplace in Scotland.

Among the traces of Rigg’s legacy is a magnificent church. The cornerstone of the Norman style building was laid in 1921, while the building itself was the deathbed wish of the Rigg couple’s seven-year-old daughter, Mary Myrtle, who’d contracted meningitis.

Christopher Rigg died in November 1926, while on a sea-journey. He was buried at sea. But not many years later, the fruits of his agricultural schemes gave rise to a contemporary development.

The coming of Bonnievale Wines lay in the establishment of three wine co-operatives. These organisations were the engines of South Africa’s fledgling wine industry that allowed farmers to pool resources.



The Rise of a Giant

Prior to their arrival, farmers had their own small cellars and most wine was supplied to the KWV. With sudden rising demand for still wines in the 1960s, the pressure was on. By creating co-operatives, producers could improve efficiency and attract talented expertise in pursuit of quality.

Nordale Wine Co-operative was established on June 30, 1950; Merwespont, on May 5, 1955; and, the Bonnievale Wine Co-operative, in 1964.

After many successful years, the trio merged in November 2006 to create the Bonnievale Wine Cellar Co-operative Ltd. Another merger happened in 2018 – with Wandsbeck, a winery established in 1965 as the Agterkliphoogte Co-operative Cellar.

The result was the formation of one of the Cape's biggest wine producers. The former co-operatives merged into a single company receiving grapes from 100 member farms and which now flies the flag of the Bonnievale brand.

Today, Bonnievale Wines is far more than just a business. It is part of the very fibre of the community and deeply committed to regional stability. Here, it ensures a sustainable life for all involved – across social strata, now and for generations to come.



Investing in the Future

One of the roots of which it is especially proud, is an initiative that launches a new generation of farmers. Following its seventh harvest, the Bonnievale Workers Empowerment Trust took over full control of its own farm and operations at the end of May 2020.

Back in the early days, Rigg called the Bonnievale valley “the chance of a lifetime”. At Bonnievale Wines, we would go as far as describing our wines as something more. It is the sum of natural beauty and a deep-rooted community; long-honed experience leading to impeccable matching of varieties to terroir; knowledgeable selection of fruit in its prime; a spirit of collaboration; and, custodial approach to the land.

Here, the land gives us rich and concentrated grapes of premier quality to select for ushering to great and memorable wine. By harnessing generational expertise and cutting-edge innovation, in both viticulture and winemaking, we shape the Bonnievale legacy.

We think you'll agree that our wines are in fact "the find of a lifetime".



