

A person is holding a potted plant with dense, green, deeply lobed leaves. The person is wearing a light-colored shirt and blue jeans. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a doorway or window.

Green Gold

IN THE FACE OF DROUGHT AND A PANDEMIC, IT'S ADAPT-OR-DIE FOR MANY FARMERS IN A SMALL TOWN IN THE KLEIN KAROO. BUT THE WINDS OF CHANGE ARE COMING – AND THAT WIND IS REDOLENT WITH A FRAGRANCE UNLIKE ANY OTHER.

BY LES AUPIAIS

The extracts from South Africa's resilient indigenous plants may soon be the new 'green gold' for a growing enterprise in Calitzdorp, in the middle of Route 62 in the Western Cape. The patchwork of small-holdings could collectively become an important hub for producing essentials oils.

SYDNEY: OPERA HOUSE Rio: Carnival. New York: Well, New York. They are places that have marketed themselves cannily and hitched their city to an experience or iconic landmark. In the small-town category in South Africa, Calitzdorp in the Klein Karoo has always been about port, a label we can bandy about as consumers but strictly speaking, it's Portugal's territory and, as legislation demands, we must back off, as we have had to do with sherry and Champagne. Boplaas Tawny it is then. Ja, well, things change.

South Africans adapt, especially when we're battered by things beyond our control. Like when you're a stone fruit producer in the Klein Karoo in the grip of a protracted drought that slowly ravages your crops and almost half your vineyards. This followed by a decision by the major fruit houses to source cheaper stone fruit elsewhere and a KO punch in the form of a global pandemic that cripples trade. Climate change is a dark macro threat. It's madness to write off your half-dead orchards, then replant and wait over four years for liquidity. You change, maak 'n plan. Maybe you switch to tougher cash crops, like lucerne.

But not everyone.

The town that's pretty much bang in the middle of Route 62 may soon get a new claim to fame... Calitzdorp: Botanicals.

One couple who settled here relatively recently are in the vanguard of an industry that may not only revive the area but taps into a booming global market.

Steve and Mo Lewis farm in Calitzdorp on a 10-ha block of land in the north of town, sharing boundaries with several other smallholdings, a patchwork quilt of agriculture that came about as large families subdivided land over the decades. To the south of the town, in the Gamka area, lie the big commercial farms owned by fourth- and fifth-generation families or contracted out to farmers who take the risk and then relinquish 50 percent of their profit. It's a tough life.

How the couple found their new home and business direction is a story that began seven years ago with an epic road trip, spiced with impulse and a dash of serendipity.

Steve is a born-and-bred New Yorker, an architect and urban planner by profession. On graduating, he felt he needed to explore Eu-

rope and see first-hand some of the architecture he'd studied over the years. He never returned to the States.

As an entrepreneur at heart, he worked on groundbreaking projects in London, ultimately heading up his own architectural studio in the Netherlands, and later specialising in rural economic development in Africa with a Dutch consortium. It was this experience in economic and spatial planning, including the drafting of viable business plans, that would be tested in the unforgiving Karoo.

After the tragic loss of his first wife in 2007, Steve met Mo, a fashion designer. Restless from the neat, orderly and 'slightly claustrophobic' life they were leading in the Netherlands, they needed a change. 'Our first idea was to travel in Africa, perhaps settling in Kenya,' says Steve. They bought and kitted out an old Nissan Patrol and became mobile and nomadic with no great life plan other than to avoid settling in Cape Town. 'Lovely, but too European,' they say.

The grand road trip took them thousands of kilometres, from Kenya to the Cape, until they came over the Swartberg in 2016. Yes, that famous port experience was the lure. They arrived in Calitzdorp, and that, essentially, was that. There was something about the Klein Karoo ('Perhaps the people or the magical light here,' Steve muses), but whatever it was, it was deeply felt by both of them. Within days, they'd put in an offer on an organic farm with olive and apricots trees and a vineyard.

'We had no real idea what we wanted to do with it,' Steve says, grinning. Like all madly, deeply irrational impulses, it was love first and practicalities second. Steve did eventually put together a business plan accepted by the DTI to utilise four hectares of the farm for hydroponic and tunnel-based vegetable production.

Mo, meanwhile, longed for the healthy, homemade bread with which she'd grown up, and after baking for the two of them with a growing demand from friends and locals, she started The Accidental Baker. It's an essential Route 62 stop now, and cars leave the bakery trailing the delicious aroma of fresh ciabatta, baguette, focaccia, 'Very Berry' bread, and a jalapeño and chilli savoury loaf, all made from Bio-Wheat organic flour.

But the vegetable growing concept soon hit a snag. Delivery of fresh produce to their key market over four hours away in the greater Cape



Town area began to look logistically impossible. What now, they asked? 'We had to consider non-edible crops and something endemic to the area. I was also committed to organic farming, but realised that it was going to be tricky in the face of the wide usage of pesticides here.'

In the meantime, Steve had met Werner Bester, a 15-year veteran in the essential oil sector and the founder of Riebeek Kasteel's farm Pure Green, Essential Distillation Equipment and Still Pure, the latter the marketing arm and 'face' of the botanical oils Werner and his farmers' cooperative produce. His advice to Steve was to 'know your market first'. Steve and Mo became shareholders, but also took their first steps in replicating the model in Calitzdorp as CROP Botanicals.

The big idea, with a gloriously South African angle, is that beyond rose geranium (a French hybrid with partly local DNA) is a rich, biodiverse floral kingdom: plants that yield fragrant essences for wellness and beauty products, plants suitable for teas and foods, and plants that are power houses of natural medicines. What southern Africa's earliest inhabitants used to heal and nourish are only beginning to be explored seriously.

'Rosemary, thyme and lavender will be in the CROP Botanicals line-up but there are about 45 endemic plants that are purely South African, such as Cape snowbush, and my personal favourite – my "soul plant" – African chamomile,' says Steve.

A little research on the medicinals is an eye-opener. Most of us know that the common sour fig relieves the pain of a bluebottle sting but the juice is allegedly good for burns and eczema. Kooigoed everlastings were used for centuries to stuff mattresses and repel bedbugs but in fused as a tea, it's said to reduce blood pressure and soothe pain. 'These are powerful plants,' says Steve. As for fragrances, we are spoilt too, with African sandalwood, immortelle, lemon verbena and khaki bush.

Fynbos is resilient and cultivated, and its growing cycle amounts to roughly a third of the commercial crops historically planted in the area. It's enough to prick up the ears of any farmer looking for opportunity.

Not long ago, Steve was in the local agriculture co-op extolling the potential of the essential oils industry. There was a farmer within ear shot of his conversation and when Steve had finished, he came over. 'I am totally flabbergasted at what you're talking about,' said the burly third-generation seed farmer. 'I've got to know more.' His next visit, on the Lewis's Lenies Hof stoep, was a long one.

The farmer subsequently switched to organic practices (as have several smaller farmers on the south side) and has chosen to stop using harmful pesticides. He's recording bumper crops on the north side of the Calitzdorp divide and is eyeing a new crop, which has the potential for a 'seed-to-scent' operation.

Steve is animated about the future. 'It's really about three pillars,' he says, 'people, planet, profit. Because the crops require intensive farming practices, there is potential for serious job creation.' In a worldwide wellness industry that tips the financial scales at \$4,5 trillion, tapping into the behemoth is a smart move. 'Clean beauty' is a new catch phrase as people become increasingly concerned about what they are putting on their permeable skins.

Steve believes more farms in the area will become part of an expanding cooperative and key to a new green economy with CROP Botanicals as a catalyst.

It's not just the propagation, nurturing and harvesting of a crop; the distilling needs a stillmaster. There'll be need for a 'nose', much like the alchemist perfumers used by major fragrance brands. There are beauty products that'll need package design, researchers and scientists to focus on pharmaceutical products, and marketing campaigns to entice consumers. It's a fragrant botanical chain with value added at every stage.

Best of all, while Portugal and France may guard the provenance of their alcohol products and wave legislation at us, our wild botanicals will occupy a niche so small, so unique, that no other country can claim ownership. We can wave back. The fynbos is ours.†



PHOTOGRAPHS: SUPPLIED

ABOVE, FROM LEFT Steve Lewis has begun to propagate the water-wise seedlings needed for the essential oil production; The dry Karoo climate is perfect for the crop and it should fare a lot better than the region's traditional stone-fruit farming.