

how we live

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Portrait of a Lady

How a Johannesburg housewife showed the men of Muldersvlei her mettle.

Photographs: Pippa Hetherington | **Words:** Kim Chaloner



'I have a good reason to get up in the mornings,' says Agnes de Vos, self-taught pig farmer, winemaker and entrepreneur

For a woman who'd spent the 'most important part' of her life in Jo'burg — where she was married to a lawyer and raised four children — moving to family farm Damarakloof in Muldersvlei (which has one foot in Stellenbosch and the other in Paarl) to take up the reins of a pig farm left her feeling 'shell-shocked'. Her days in Dunkeld were 'very complete — there were dinner parties and bridge games, the people were open and forthcoming,' reminisces Agnes over tea and home-baked tarts in the sitting room of her elegant farmhouse on a crisp and clear September morning. 'A pig farm is not an easy place to be'.

Her mother had endured harsh conditions in her early married life when she and her husband started farming here with nothing after WW2 ('there was no money or water, but weeds aplenty'). Agnes's grandfather's farm had been divided into four. In those days it was unheard of for a daughter to inherit anything of value, let alone land. 'She fought hard to get her piece of ground, even though it was considered worthless,' says Agnes. This flat, infertile tract had been used by him to train racehorses, greyhounds and pigeons.

In the early 90's, Agnes's mother died, and nobody but Agnes would take over the reigns of the pig farm she had established on stony ground. 'All my children had left home and I was free,' says the handsome woman with a fine, classic style and soft voice. What was required was a shift in mindset and a practical approach. Agnes rolled up her sleeves and set about learning the ropes. 'I knew nothing about pigs. There was a pig vet, a Dr Zumpt, who was part of the government service at the time, and I learnt from his staff,' she says. 'You get a lot of help if you ask for it. I've thrown myself at it for the last 20 years. Every year I'd say to myself, "Oh, by next year it'll all be done"! If I'd known how hard it was going to be...'

Her biggest challenge was trying to convince banks to lend her money. 'They didn't think I knew what I was doing.' Last year, two decades of successful pig farming later, and ever the courageous pioneer, she decided on a change of direction. She started by 'tidying things up'. The farm's aging infrastructure, she conceded, were no longer adequate for large-scale pig farming production, these days so high-tech and costly. Pig farrows ('this time last year a mud bath!'), sheds and workshops were converted into function halls and



'Most pieces I acquired by chance rather than design,' she says, 'they're unmatched, from different times, most inherited from my mother and grandmother.'



In Agnes de Vos's soulful Cape winelands farmhouse, family photos, artworks and portraits liven each and every wall.

long-term guest houses for students, artists and writers; the process overseen by Agnes and her trusted advisor and friend, Mr Jones the builder. Inside these spaces, tables crafted out of scaffold planks, handpicked antique light fittings and reclaimed floor- and ceiling boards give a historical air and a warm, lived-in feel. 'I like real things,' says Agnes, 'I don't like to wear or have anything that's not of the earth... Demolition yards are where I go shopping!'

Agnes's mother had also planted vineyards of chenin blanc which, she's now come to realise, are increasingly renowned for their specific flavour, and a depth which new vineyards don't have. In 2006 she decided to start making wine, earning 4.5 stars in the John Platter Guide for the aptly named Racetrack chenin blanc 2006. The operation, assisted by winemaker Carla Paux, is small, producing just 4 000 bottles, with Agnes selling every bottle herself. 'I don't like marketing...' she shrugs.

In summertime this grandmother of 12 likes to be in her garden (flecked with early spring blossoms on the morning of our visit), takes her dogs for 'runs' (she drives, they follow the farm bakkie), and is interested in food and spending time with friends, when time allows: 'I look forward to being more socially active into the future, right now I haven't the time.' There's no doubt Agnes's indomitable spirit and Brave Heart will inspire a generation of women. 'I'm proud of the fact that the farm is now able to stand on its own, that it's a viable, attractive prospect,' she says, as she rounds her grounds, eliciting warm smiles wherever she goes.

To order Demarakloof wines (Bordeaux blend of cabernet sauvignon, merlot and cabernet franc; and Racecourse chenin blanc) and for more information about venue hire, contact Agnes de Vos on 082-337-9107