

Ryk Neethling

My job has a few perks now and then and dining out with Olympic swimming champion Ryk Neethling is definitely right up there

Carly Ritz

DESPITE moving house the next day, a flat tyre and locking himself out of his old place, Ryk arrived for dinner at a restaurant in Johannesburg composed and calm. Let's get the obvious out of the way: yes he is gorgeous and yes I did swoon slightly.

Having an affinity for wine, I wanted to try Val de Vie's Ryk Neethling red blend and how appropriate to have the man himself for a chat at the same time.

After a visit to the polo grounds, Ryk says, he fell in love with the Val de Vie estate in Paarl. "It's a magical place and I wanted to be a part of it." So first things first - he turned the available pool into a venue for a swim school.

After nearly drowning at age five, Ryk understands the value of being able to swim from a young age. It's close to his heart. His learn-to-swim programme endeavours to teach children from six months, those with disabilities and those in need of physical rehabilitation - about water safety. He also runs a swimming academy for competitive swimmers where he works with swimmers like gold medalist Cameron van den Berg.

The more time Ryk spent at the polo estate, the more he fell in love with it, and soon he was being educated in the ways of grapes and wine.

While you may not have known about his wine ventures, most of us remember Ryk for his stunning achievement in the pool, namely, winning an Olympic gold medal in the 4x100m freestyle relay at the 2004 Summer Olympics - and all his South African records. He is also the first South African to compete in four successive Olympic Games.

But for Ryk it is more important to be remembered for the type of athlete he was; the way in which he conducted himself while competing and his treatment of fellow competitors.

"People might not remember all of Naas Botha's sporting achievement but they will always remember him as a gentleman," he says. For an Olympic athlete to value his conduct more than his medal, believe me when I tell you he is truly a modest man.

Ryk has also given much of his time to charity involvement. He is a patron for the Jacaranda Children's Home,

Choc, Reach for a Dream as well as the Walter Sisulu Paediatric and Cardiac Centre. He is also often approached to help disabled and abused children learn to swim as part of a more holistic healing approach.

Dream Big is a powerful philanthropic initiative driven by Ryk and South African jeweller Jenna Clifford that donates a percentage of the proceeds of the sale of certain items to the Walter Sisulu Centre.

"Don't think I'm a jock but in my spare time I enjoy working out," he says.

I guess it's only natural that after years of intense discipline, Ryk still enjoys training. "I get to clear my head when I'm alone in the water," he says.

Life as an athlete is hectic but it becomes second nature and he has been doing it since he was 10 years old.

His advice to up and coming athletes is to realise early on that being a sports professional is hard but do the best that you can. And have a backup plan - get educated, get a degree because the sporting life is often short-lived.

And who are his sporting icons? It may sound controversial he says, but Hansie Cronje is still a hero to Ryk.

"He grew up in Bloemfontein as well, and he proved that you could be from Bloem and be great. I'm still in touch with his family."

Ryk says he was just as disappointed as the rest of the country when Hansie confessed to his role in the cricket scandal but to Ryk he is still special.

Ryk believes that people can change their ways and provides athlete Marion Jones as an example. Yes, he says, she used steroids and she lied about it but now she talks to schoolchildren about it and warns about the dangers.

He says he meets people all the time who have pre-determined perceptions about him but he's no stuck-up pretty boy and he can change his own tyre "and I'll always be a boy from Bloem".

The verdict on the wine

I don't use words like nose, lingering and austere when it comes to writing about wine, so bear with me. This wine is like chicken soup for the soul, warm and comforting. It's fruity too, bounces

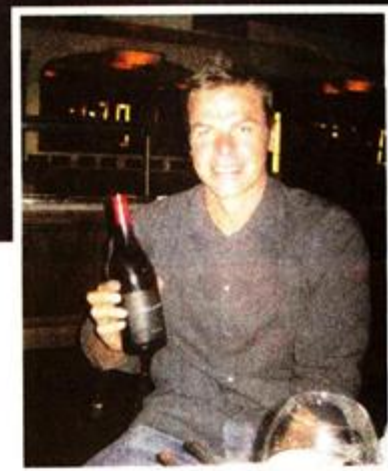
on your tongue and it's sexy - it is named after Ryk, after all. It should definitely be paired with meat; be it kudu medallions, duck or a good steak. It comes highly recommended.



LOOKING GOOD: Ryk Neethling



THE CHAMP: Ryk is a gold medallist.



CHILLING: With one of Ryk's superb wines.

Picture: AFI