

# KLEIN CONSTANTIA

— 1685 —



*“One of the most mythical vineyards in  
the world...”*

- French Institute des Paysages et Architectures Viticoles



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In May 2011, historic wine estate Klein Constantia was purchased by Czech-American investor and philanthropist Zdeněk Bakala, who resides in Switzerland, and UK-based businessman, Charles Harman.

Having both visited South Africa regularly for the past 20 years, with homes in Cape Town, they had always particularly loved the wines produced in the Constantia Valley. Not only did they appreciate the cool-climate quality potential of vineyards planted in decomposed granite soils on the undulating foothills of Table Mountain's backbone, caressed by breezes off the cold Atlantic Ocean a few kilometres away; they also soon found themselves under the spell of Constantia's remarkable history.

For it's a fact that the lusciously sweet wine of Constantia, also known as Vin de Constance, was world famous before Champagne or even the Médoc rose to prominence. Following the merger of Klein Constantia and Anwilka Vineyards in June 2012, Klein Constantia (Pty) Ltd gained two new shareholders, Bruno Prats (former owner of Chateau Cos d'Estournel in Saint-Estèphe) and Hubert de Boüard (co-owner of Chateau Angélus in Saint-Émilion). These two gentlemen bring with them a wealth of knowledge and experience beneficial to both Klein Constantia and Anwilka.



## Early Fame

From vineyards planted in 1685 by Simon van der Stel, the first governor of the Cape, Constantia was savoured in the 18th and 19th centuries by those who would drink only the best, from Napoleon Bonaparte and Prussian emperor Frederick the Great to British monarchs King George IV and Queen Victoria.

In 1802, United States president and fine wine collector Thomas Jefferson planted “10 plants of wines from Cape of Good Hope” at Monticello, his home in Virginia. And perhaps even more remarkable is the fact that Constantia was enjoyed by Indonesia's foremost national hero, Prince Dipanagara, who led the great Java War of resistance against the Dutch (1825-1830) under the banner of Islam! According to Oxford historian Peter Carey, Dipanagara held that “it was not an offence against the Qu'ran to drink sweet wine in view of the fact that Europeans drank it as a form of ‘medicine’ whenever they were intoxicated with Madeira or red wine”.<sup>1</sup>

From the start, Constantia made no effort to shelter behind the safety of a European name like Hock, Tokay or Cape Madeira. It very quickly became such a universally well-known and (in today's parlance) “aspirational” brand that it found its way into the writing of many great 18th and 19th century authors.

<sup>1</sup> *The Power of Prophecy: Prince Dipanagara and the End of an Old Order in Java, 1785-1855*, Peter Carey, Verhandelingen Van Het Koninklijk Instituut Voor Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde



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In 1795, German poet Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock wrote an ode entitled *Der Kapwein und der Johannisberger* (The Cape Wine and the Johannisberger), beseeching “old father Johann” (referring to the world-famous Riesling of Rheingau estate Schloss Johannisberg) not to be angry with him, as a German, for preferring to drink the “daughter Konstanzia”.

In 1811, English novelist Jane Austen wrote about “the finest old Constantia wine” as the perfect remedy for a “disappointed heart” in *Sense in Sensibility*, while Charles Dickens told of “the support embodied in a glass of Constantia and a home-made biscuit” in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, the novel he was still writing when he died in 1870.

Alas, it seems there was no such comfort for French poet Charles Baudelaire. So unslakable was his lust while compiling the in 1857 volume of poetry entitled *Les Fleurs du Mal* (The Flowers of Evil) that in his poem *Sed non satiata* he claimed to prefer the “elixir” of his lover’s lips to Constantia, even opium...

Ever since then, old bottles discovered in the cellars of Europe’s great wine collectors have commanded high auction prices and delighted connoisseurs fortunate enough to taste them: by all accounts still “alive” with fresh acidity and nutty, dried fig or marmalade-like flavours despite being between 150 and 210 years old.

The legend has also lived on, so much so that whenever world-renowned South African ampelographer Chris Orffer (1926-2008) travelled to Europe, he reported that wine connoisseurs only wanted to know about one thing about the Cape.

“They always ask me to tell them about the old Constantia wine. They’re longing to know what it tasted like, how it was made and why it suddenly disappeared like that.”



## The End of the Beginning

The fungal disease *oidium* infected Constantia’s vineyards in the mid 19th century, only to be followed by the arrival of *phylloxera*, the pest which devastated almost all of the world’s vineyards. Production of wines that had brought pleasure all over the world ceased completely – and might have done so forever, had it not been for a chance airport encounter in 1980 between Duggie Jooste, who had recently sold his family’s third-generation liquor business and was looking to buy a wine farm, and an old acquaintance named Ian Austin.

Austin was the latest in a series of owners of Klein Constantia, a particularly lovely part of Van der Stel’s original Amsterdam-sized property that had been allocated to Hendrick Cloete Jnr’s favourite younger son, Johan Gerhard, in 1823. Once a thriving vineyard with over 33 000 vines planted on the lower slopes, the 146-hectare estate had become virtually derelict in recent years, and Austin was desperate to sell it.

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While about 35 hectares were still under vine, the higher altitude slopes had never been properly utilised for winegrowing. Jooste couldn't believe his luck:

“There was no virgin land of equivalent quality in Stellenbosch, Paarl or Worcester yet, miraculously, here it was in the heart of the original top-quality wine-growing area of the Cape. Large areas of potentially magnificent vineyard had never been tilled on the higher slopes. This was our opportunity to develop Klein Constantia as a great estate, fulfilling its wine growing destiny.”

Under Prof Orffer's guidance, the Joostes immediately set about clearing the alien bush and preparing the soil for planting top-quality vineyards. After conducting extensive soil analyses and identifying two distinct meso-climates, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay and Riesling were planted on the cooler, south-facing slopes stretching high up the Constantiaberg, while Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Shiraz vineyards were established on the warmer north-facing slopes lower down.

However, as the Joostes and Prof Orffer sat in the estate's beautiful Cape Dutch homestead, dating back to 1823, they discussed their ultimate goal: to bring back the one truly great wine ever made in the Southern Hemisphere, grown right here in the valley where they now occupied prime position.

## The Resurrection

Consulting South Africa's top viticulturist, Ernst le Roux, they delved into the history of Constantia, reading old ledgers, letters and diaries to find out how the wine was made. They also looked at more modern research, from Professor Abraham Izak Perold (of Pinotage fame), who had carried out experiments to try and resuscitate the famous old Constantia wine during the 1936 vintage, to Professor Diko van Zyl, who had written a lengthy, well-researched thesis on the history of Cape wine in 1974.<sup>2</sup>

Prof Orffer agreed with his predecessors that the original Constantia was a natural sweet wine made from (mostly) Muscat de Frontignan, along with some white Steen (Chenin Blanc). Amazingly, Le Roux was able to propagate a special clone of Muscat de Frontignan that almost certainly came from the original Constantia vineyards, given that no records can be found of Muscat de Frontignan having been imported to South Africa since Jan van Riebeeck's time. In July 1982, he planted the vines on the lower slopes at Klein Constantia.

They thrived – a fact which would not have surprised Anders Sparrman, the Swedish botanist who visited Constantia several times in 1772 and insisted that “the racy, very delicate dessert wine” could only be achieved in “certain vineyards”.<sup>3</sup>

As Prof Orffer observed two centuries later, Constantia's peninsular climate is unique:

“The mountainous air which blows from Constantiaberg over Table Mountain is perfumed with a fragrance of ocean drifts emitted at the rendezvous of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean currents – a situation not to be found anywhere else in the world.”

<sup>2</sup> *Kaapse Wyn en Brandewyn, 1795-1860: Die Geskiedenis van Wynbou en Wynhandel in die Kaapkolonie*, Diko van Zyl, Hollandsch Afrikaansche Uitg Mij, 1975

<sup>3</sup> *A Voyage to the Cape of Good Hope Towards the Arctic Polar Circle Round the World & to the Country of the Hottentots & the Caffres From the Year 1772 – 1776*, Anders Sparrman. Van Riebeeck Society, Cape Town.

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The first Vin de Constance of the modern era was harvested in 1986, with Le Roux and winemaker Ross Gower reducing the crop by almost 50% and then allowing the remaining grapes to ripen and then shrivel on the vines. “This is how it was done centuries ago, allowing the grapes to reach very high sugar contents in a natural way without resorting to sun drying or drying indoors,” said Prof Orffer.



He also pointed out that the grapes would have been trodden on by human feet – hastening to reassure squeamish consumers that “Vin de Constance is produced using the same principles but using modern vinification equipment”.

After four years in oak barrels, the first Vin de Constance of the modern era was released in distinctive (and trademarked) “old-fashioned” bottles to almost instant acclaim – and the wine has enjoyed top accolades both locally and internationally ever since, from consistent five-star ratings in the Platter’s South African Wine Guide to 90-plus scores in authoritative US magazines *Wine Spectator* and *The Wine Advocate*.

In fact, so convincing has Klein Constantia’s “honest and genuine attempt to produce wines reminiscent of the once world-famous natural sweet wines of Constantia” (as Prof Orffer endorsed it) that the estate has been named “one of the most mythical vineyards in the world” alongside Châteaux d’Yquem, Domaine de La Romanée Conti, Pétrus and just five other properties.<sup>4</sup>

As former winemaker Adam Mason observed after taking over from Ross Gower,

“Vin de Constance is about a sense of place. It’s the vineyards that make the wine.”

It’s an opinion with which Klein Constantia’s current winemaker Matthew Day and viticulturist Craig Harris agree completely, and it’s the estate’s unique combination of location and heritage that convinced Bakala and Harman to purchase it from the Jooste family in May 2011.

“We are privileged to be custodians of one of the most historic properties in the Cape, and regard the preservation of this heritage as a serious responsibility.”

<sup>4</sup>By France’s Institut International des Paysages et Architectures Viticoles.





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## Klein Constantia Today



In January 2012, Swedish-born Hans Astrom was appointed as managing director at Klein Constantia, having previously been vice president of Peter Lehmann Wines in Australia before joining US-based Hess Family Estates as general manager. In 2015, he joined the ownership as a partner.

Determined to see Vin de Constance live up to – and even surpass – its mythical reputation, Astrom, together with the new owners and his team has set the goals high; the aim to produce one of the greatest sweet wines in the world! The replanting of vineyards and the upgrading of the winery combined with a quality-centric approach to winemaking will ensure Vin de Constance and the other estate wines achieve unsurpassed excellence.

Trends come and go, people move on, but the maritime and mountain influences remain unchanging, as do the Constantiaberg's 600 million-year-old granite soils – predominantly deep, fertile, yellow-brown and reddish-brown Oakleaf on the lower slopes, with dry, gravelly, less fertile Glenrosa with a saprolite subsoil higher up. Klein Constantia receives about 1000mm of rain annually, and the mean February temperature is 20.6C.

For over 320 years Vin de Constance has expressed its own unique and very special terroir and specific micro-climate, producing some of the greatest and most intriguing sweet wines in the world. This distinctive terroir also lends itself to the production of other exceptional cool climate wines, especially, Sauvignon Blanc.





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*“...the support embodied in a glass of Constantia and  
a home-made biscuit...”*

- Charles Dickens



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