

KLEIN CONSTANTIA

— 1685 —

Vin de Constantia

In the 18th and 19th centuries "the sweet luscious and excellent wine of Constantia" was recognised as one of the great wines of the world.

The story of this legendary wine began in 1685 with Simon van der Stel, Governor of the Cape of Good Hope. A dynamic, energetic man, he was the first to realise that the small colony was not merely a halfway house, but a place of real significance.



Before selecting a farm of his own he set men to work, digging up basketfuls of soil all along the southern slopes of the Cape Peninsula. Samples sent back for testing showed that the valley facing False Bay had by far the best potential.

As it lay between two great oceans - the Indian and the Atlantic - it was cooled by moisture-laden winds, and its granite soils, which had weathered down over millions of years, ensuring the success for planting of vines and the making of fine wine.

Calling his vast estate Constantia, van der Stel soon gained a reputation for excellent wine, but it was not until fifty years after his death that Hendrik Cloete brought the Governor's dream to its real fulfillment.

Great grandson of an early German settler, he was another dynamic, hard-working man with an intense love of the soil, and a determination to make the best wine in the country.



Van der Stel's farm had been divided into three and Cloete came in from Stellenbosch to buy the homestead. He built the finest wine cellar in the land and planted thousands of new vines, mostly Frontignac, Pontac, red and white Muscadel and a little Steen, varieties which were to make Constantia famous for the next hundred years.

The vineyards were prepared with scrupulous care and grapes allowed to ripen on the vines until they were almost like raisins and sweet as honey. Then came the meticulous



preparation of vats and slow maturation before the wine was sent by sailing ship to Europe and England. Taking a brave decision they did not shelter behind accepted names like Sauternes or Madeira, but kept the name Constantia - plain and simple.

Cloete was blessed with nine sons, six of whom were well known wine-makers. He chose Hendrik Junior, a brilliant trader and marketer, to inherit Constantia, followed by his grandson Jacob Pieter, who spoke fluent French and installed an agent in Paris where his wines won several medals. It was during their ownership that Constantia reached the height of its fame.

“From these Elysian fields used to come one of the very greatest wines in the world - the legendary Constantia,” writes Hugh Johnson, “Constantia was bought by European courts in the early 19th century in preference to Yquem, Tokay, Madeira...” Kings vied for possession of this wine. Louis Philippe sent emissaries from France to fetch it, Napoleon drank it on the island of St Helena, finding solace in his lonely exile, Frederick the Great and Bismarck ordered it and in England the Prime Minister - who had sampled it with much delight at Downing Street - made sure that consignments from the Cape were delivered to Buckingham Palace for the King.



"The sweet, luscious and excellent wine called Constantia" soon became part of the literature of the 19th century. In Edwin Drood Charles Dickens tells of "...the support embodied in a glass of Constantia and a home-made biscuit", while Jane Austen recommends that her forsaken heroine try a little Constantia for "...its healing powers on a disappointed heart". While German poet Klopstock devotes an entire ode to the pleasures of this wine, Baudelaire transforms it into a sensuous image for his great brooding poem *Les Fleurs du mal*.

Towards the end of the 19th century the dreaded disease phylloxera arrived at the Cape, causing devastation in the vineyards and bankruptcy amongst winemaking families. Production of the famous sweet wine ceased and the Cloetes moved away. "The old order changeth, yielding place to new", and with it went the famous sweet Constantia wines which had brought delight and pleasure the world over. The legend lived on however, immortalised in poetry and prose, and still vibrantly alive in many old bottles which lay forgotten in the cellars of Europe's great wine collectors.

In 1980 Klein Constantia was redeveloped and everyone involved saw it as a challenge, almost a mission, to bring back the famous wine, for the farm had been part of Simon van der Stel's estate. Early records were studied and careful selection made from vines which in all likelihood came from the original stock used in Constantia 300 years ago.

Now, over a century after its disappearance, comes the renaissance - *Vin de Constance* - made in the style of the old Constantia, from vineyards which once produced this legendary wine.

