VIN DE CONSTANCE

When Duggie Jooste bought Klein Constantia in June 1980, he and Professor Chris Orffer, world-renowned authority on wine varieties, stood on the stoep of the homestead after dinner. "Do you realise," said Orffer, "that in the 18th and 19th centuries only one truly great wine was ever made in the Southern Hemisphere, and do you know where it was made?"
"Where?" asked Duggie. "Right here," said Orffer excitedly, "right here in this valley and this farm of yours is part of those vineyards."

"When wine tastings are held at overseas research centers people 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 a century ago."

"It was remarkable for a young country to produce a famous wine like Constantia in such a short space of time - from the wine making point of view that is - which goes back for thousands of years. And it WAS famous you know. Napoleon, Frederick the Great, the King of England, the King of France - they all drank Constantia."

From that moment onwards Duggie Jooste and everyone at Klein Constantia nursed a secret dream - to bring back "the sweet, luscious and excellent wine of Constantia", which had disappeared without a trace a hundred years earlier.

He, Ernst le Roux, and winemaker Ross Gower delved into the history of Constantia. They studied old wine books, they read accounts by early travelers who had visited the Cape and actually tasted the famous wine, and they also looked at modern research. Discussions went on far into the night as to the best way to set about their task.

Most experts seemed to agree that the original Constantia was a natural sweet wine. Professor Diko van Zyl, who had written a lengthy, well-researched thesis on the history of Cape wine, was unequivocal on this point. "Constantia wine varieties consisted of red and white Muskadel, red Pontac, white Frontignac and Steen", he said, "they were all natural sweet wines, which means they were not fortified."

Professor Abraham Perold, who carried out experiments to try to resuscitate the famous old Constantia wine during the 1936 vintage, had also felt that it was natural and unfortified, without the addition of brandy, sugar or moskofyt. He used over-ripe grapes which were exposed to the sun for 4-8 days and found that some of the resulting wines had practically the identical composition which had been calculated for Constantia.

Professor Orffer agreed whole-heartedly with these opinions, underlining the fact that Constantia was an original South African wine which made no effort to shelter behind the safety of a European name like Hock or Cape Madeira. Neither did it need the support of a well-known variety. It became famous as Constantia, plain and simple.

Once the Klein Constantia team had definitely decided to make a natural sweet wine, the next step - choosing a grape variety - was crucial. It was imperative to find planting material which came as closely as possible to a variety used for the old Constantia.

They were extremely fortunate when Ernst le Roux, one of the country's most eminent viticulturists, was able to propagate a special clone of Muscat de Frontignan at Ernita Nursery in Wellington. As no records can be found of Muscat de Frontignan being imported to South Africa since Simon van der Stel's time, it is likely that the original stock came from his vineyards.

In July 1982 the new vines were planted on the lower slopes in Klein Constantia's vineyards which had once been part of Simon van der Stel's original farm, Constantia, granted to him in 1685.

It is fitting that Governor Simon van der Stel should be known as the Father of Constantia wine, for it was he who launched the winemaking tradition which later became internationally famous. And it was he who chose the Valley for its beauty and special soil, backing his decision with a thoroughness which characterised everything he did. He set labourers to work digging up basketfuls of soil at regular intervals all the way from Table Bay to Muizenberg. Each sample was sent back to the Castle and carefully tested until he found that the decomposed granite soil from the valley facing False Bay, was exactly what he was looking for.
"The principal praise and honour is without doubt due to the Old Heer van der Stel and then to his son," wrote French traveler Francois Valentijn who visited the Cape several times in the early 18th century, "since, although before their times there were already vines here, and wine had already been pressed, it is certain that the old Heer van der Stel, brought to his outstanding country Estate, Constantia, many sorts of vine stocks from Germany and elsewhere, previously unknown here." He mentions the steen-druif, the blue Muskadel or Catalanian, the white Muskadel, the small blue grape and the kristal-druif.

Valentijn left a detailed description of the whole Constantia estate, but unfortunately he decided against visiting "the large and lovely pressing-House". He was not inclined to risk drinking from the communal wine-tasters cup and walked hurriedly past in case he was invited in!

By 1709 van der Stel had planted 70,000 vines and when he died three years later his farm and his vineyards were divided into three - Bergvliet, the original homestead and de Hoop op Constantia. Although his standards of perfection could not be maintained, the reputation of Constantia wine was preserved by an ambitious young newcomer named Johannes Colyn.

Colyn had married the young widow Kotze, who seemed perfectly happy to hand over her estate, de Hoop op Constantia, to her young husband, as required by Roman Dutch Law. When his daughter married Carl Georg Wieser and they bought van der Stel's old Manor house in 1734, it appears that Colyn ran the two farms simultaneously.

His industry was not in vain, for Constantia began to fetch high prices at well-attended auctions in cities like Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Delft. And now the Dutch East India Company began to show more than a passing interest in the surprising success of this product from their little colony at the futhermost tip of Africa.

Anders Sparman, the Swedish botanist who sailed around the world with Captain Cook, spent a few months at Alphen as tutor to the Kirsten children in 1772. He visited Constantia several times and enjoyed "the racy, very delicate dessert wine which has something peculiarly agreeable in the aroma of it." He was astounded at the quantity of Constantia wine consumed in Europe. "The genuine wine can only be found in certain vineyards," he noted in his journal, indicating that its unique quality came from the particular locality of the farm and its special soil.

In 1778 the history of Constantia wine took a dramatic turn when Hendrik Cloete arrived from Stellenbosch with enough money from his mother's estate to buy the Manor House. Though not the direct successor to Simon van der Stel, either in time or through family ties, this was his true heir - a dynamic, energetic man with an intense love of the soil and a determination to make the best wine in the country.

He was delighted to be in Constantia, for his sister lived at Bergvliet nearby and his cousin, Johannes Nicolaas Colyn owned de Hoop op Constantia next door. Wieser was no longer at Groot Constantia and Cloete found that subsequent owners had left his new farm in a state of ruin and neglect, with "nearly exhausted vineyards" and a lackadaisical cellarer who ruined his first vintage. "I had to let him have his way," he says regretfully, "because I understood that Constantia needed to be handled in a special way, but he was very ignorant and knew nothing about winemaking!"

"I am now personally in charge," he continues in a letter to his old friend Swellengrebel in Holland. "The weather is better, and I am convinced that the Constantia wine this year will be the best ever." So excited was he at the prospect that he had even given up his customary afternoon naps, "I am all day beside the wine-press without a jacket and in thin trousers," he says as he sits entering sales in his leather-covered register, keeping accounts meticulously up to date and writing to numerous friends and wine-traders in Europe.

Because of neglect and ruin of the farm, Cloete got to work immediately, beginning with the land itself before starting on the homestead and later, a magnificent new cellar. He built a 600 foot wall on the right side of the house, planting, "every kind of grape known in Africa", along its length. In the vineyards however, where 10,000 new vines were planted, he kept to Red and White Muskadel, Pontac, Frontignac and a little Steen. And these were the varieties which were to make Constantia famous for the next hundred years. "From these Elysian fields used to come one one of the very greatest wines in the world - the legendary Constantia. Constantia was bought by European courts in the early 19th century in preference to Yquem, Tokay, Madeira...", writes Hugh Johnson. (As botrytis cinerea was first recorded in the Cape in 1910, the early 19th century Constantia wine would not have had the "noble rot" character.)

Memorials in the archives from Cloete and Colyn addressed to their "High Mightinesses", the Here XVII in 1789 shed interesting light on the effort and expense required to maintain high standards, even in the preparation of barrels alone. Cloete describes the scrubbing, steaming, washing and sulphuring which was repeated over and over again to ensure that worms and impurities were eliminated from the empty barrels. These were then filled with doppenbier and then cleaned again before, "pure and unadulterated Constantia wine", was poured into them.
The annual delivery of their best wines to the Company was a tremendous burden on the two farmers and they often threatened to cease production altogether. This they knew would affect the finances of their lords and masters, whose fortunes had now become closely linked to that of the Constantia wine, "so highly esteemed throughout the whole of Europe".

The Here XVII were well aware of the time and effort involved and that every drop of the wine made by Cloete and Colyn was precious, for it was a high-risk, low-yield enterprise and, unlike other farmers at the Cape, their aim was quality, not quantity. "For preparing Constantia a greater ripeness of the grape is required than is usual for other wines. A diminution of liquid accordingly results, causing a great difference in the quantity of the wine.

When Hendrik Cloete died in 1799, he had seen the invasion of the British and been forced to sign an Act of Allegiance to the conquerors whose army had broken into his beautiful cellar and imbibed his priceless wines in the middle of the battle. He had hoped that the annual delivery of Constantia wines would cease with their arrival, but the British discovered his contract in a drawer at the Castle and came hot-foot out to Constantia, insisting that it be re-instated in their favour.

Despite an initial antipathy towards the British, Hendrik was always ready to take Lady Anne Barnard and her distinguished visitors around the Groot Constantia cellar. She did not sketch the interior, but wrote a beautiful description of treading the grapes. "What struck me most was the beautiful antique forms, perpetually changing and perpetually graceful, of the three bronze figures, half-naked, who were dancing in the wine-press and beating the drum (as it were) with their feet to some other instrument in perfect time."

Hendrik Cloete was happy to leave his estates to his sons, six of whom were winemakers, and happiest of all to leave Constantia to Hendrik Junior, who loved the farm and had worked so hard in its vineyards. In gratitude he was given an added "douceur" in his father's will - 5% of all Constantia wine sales, calculated retrospectively for the 20 years of his father's occupation of the farm.

French artist and traveler Milbert had lunch with the Cloetes in 1804 and was privileged to taste the famous Constantia wine, "sweet as honey", which was brought to the table with much ceremony. He had heard that as the British were the only great maritime power in the world without their own wines, and as their vast fleet was always thirsty, they had captured the Cape for its vineyards alone. (Annexure 1) While this was probably a flight of Gallic exaggeration, the British may certainly have seen the Cape wines, particularly those of Constantia, as an added bonus which came with their mastery of the vital sea route to India.

Hendrik Junior was not only an experienced farmer, he was also a brilliant trader and marketer, bartering wine for bottles, corks, hoops and barrels from Denmark and sending samples of his finest vintages to courtiers and high ranking ministers. It was during his ownership and that of his son, Jacob Pieter, that Constantia wine became truly integrated into 19th century Europe, not only as part of its wine-drinking life but also woven into the imagery of its poetry and novels.

German poet Klopstock wrote a romantic ode to Constantia wine. Jane Austen, that shrewd observer of human behaviour, recommended that Elinore Dashwood, the heroine in Sense and Sensibility, should try a glass of Constantia for it had "healing powers on a disappointed heart". In Edwin Drood, Charles Dickens tells, in a similar vein, of "the support embodied in a glass of Constantia and a home-made biscuit", both of which are to be found in the sublimely fragrant depths of Mrs Crisparkle's diningroom cupboard. (Annexure 2).

After the French poet Baudelaire visited Groot Constantia he found that the taste of its wine still lingered in his mind long afterwards. In his great poem Les Fleurs du Mal, published in 1857, he links it with Les Nuits:

"je prefere au constance, a l'opium, aux nuits,
L'elixir de ta bouche ou l'amour se pavane," he wrote,
"Even more than Constantia, than opium, than Nuits,
I prefer the elixir of your mouth, where love performs its slow dance."

In the 19th Century, Constantia was sent all over the world, to Denmark, America, India and Australia, to France, Holland and Germany where Frederick the Great, Bismarck and the King of the Holland all enjoyed it. Hugh Johnson notes that during Napoleon's time, Constantia fetched prices as high as any wine in the world.

During Napoleon's five-year exile on the rocky island of St. Helena he was comforted by the delivery of 30 bottles of Constantia a month which mapmaker and geographer, Comte de Las Cases, had ordered for him. It pleased the Emperor so much that he kept it entirely for himself, and he is said to have asked for "a glass of Las Cases wine" just before he died.
A startling quantity of Constantia was shipped to England "to soften the temper of Ministers and to sweeten the lips of Royalty itself", says William Wilberforce Bird. Governors, admirals, judges, paymasters and whoever else had been nimble enough to get themselves in line received a cask or two - 100 half-aums were sent to the British Prime Minister in 1812, while 50 went to the Colonial Secretary. King George IV, was also eager to receive his share of the spoils, for in April 1827 letters were sent to and from Downing Street organising the delivery of 60 casks of Constantia which arrived in March and April "for the use of His Majesty".

After Jacob Pieter took over at Groot Constantia, (which is when the newly formed farm of Klein Constantia with its 30,000 vines was granted to Johan Gerhard Cloete), many people rode out to buy Constantia wine including astronomers Herschel and Maclear and Cape silversmiths, Lawrence Twentyman and John Townsend. Perhaps the most august and honoured guests were the emissaries who arrived in 1833 to buy wine for Louis Philippe, the King of France. They tasted the wines of Groot Constantia, then trooped over to de Hoop, before deciding after a third tasting, that Cloete's wines were definitely superior. An extremely good time was had by all and when the gentlemen returned, a trifle unsteadily, to their ship, they left a contract from the King which is still in the Manor House today.

Louis Philippe obviously continued to import Constantia into France, for in a letter dated 1847 - fourteen years after the original contract - a Monsieur de Cerlan requests red and white Constantia which he wishes to offer to certain Ministers of State who have been fortunate enough to drink it with the King. "Please be sure it is your very best," he says "I would be desolate if they felt that mine was not as good as his!"

Jacob Pieter Cloete wrote and spoke French perfectly. He had set up an agent in Paris, where his wines won several silver medals and he had sent his son Henry to Nantes to learn the language. He could not have foreseen that this interest in all things French might become an overriding passion, but this is exactly what happened. Henry went back to France in 1875 and stayed in Europe for ten years, losing interest in the farm which had been the pride and joy of his family for four generations.

However, winds of change had started to blow through the Valley earlier than this. They were imperceptible at first, but then they reached devastating force. Bankruptcies swept many old families from the scene, a fungal disease called oidium was discovered in the vines followed by phylloxera which caused utter destruction.

When Henry returned from Europe in 1885, Groot Constantia was sold by public auction to the Cape Government for 5,275 pounds sterling. It was decided to use it as training and experimental farm and a new Austrian viticulturist, Baron Carl von Baow, took over.

"The old order changeth, yielding place to the new ..." and with it went the famous Constantia wines, living on in memory, immortalised in poetry and prose, yet still vibrantl alive in many old bottles forgotten in the cellars of Europe's great wine collectors.

The Klein Constantia team with Ernst le Roux and prizewinning winemaker Ross Gower were filled with nervous excitement after their first harvest of the Muscat de Frontignan grapes in 1986. They had followed the style of the old Constantia step by step, reducing the crop by almost 50% and allowing the remaining grapes to ripen on the vines until late March, when they became sweet and shriveled, almost like raisins. What Hendrik Cloete wrote so many years earlier, namely that the making of this wine was a labour of love, a high-risk, low yield, labour-intensive enterprise, still holds true in modern times. For Klein Constantia the effort was definitely worthwhile; they had achieved their goal - a golden, almost amber coloured wine, with an intense aroma, high alcohol and a lingering sweetness. A renaissance of "the sweet, luscious and excellent wine of Constantia" had finally been achieved.

It had been ten years since the decision had been taken, eight since planting the new Muscat de Frontignan vines at Klein Constantia, five since the first harvest and four since Vin de Constance had been put into wood. And, Ross Gower, when asked what stage, out of the whole procedure, was the most difficult, the answer came without hesitation....

"Waiting for it," he says, "just waiting for it. That was the hardest part of all.

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