Klein Constantia Wakes Up
New owners are making big changes to revitalize a historic South African winery

Issue: September 30, 2013

Most wine regions have deep roots in history, and the fortunate ones can boast at least one iconic wine. In South Africa, that bottling is Vin de Constance, a naturally sweet dessert wine from Klein Constantia.

The estate dates to 1685, when Simon van der Stel, the second commander of the Dutch East India Company’s settlement on the Cape of Good Hope, was granted 891 morgen of land (approximately 6,000 acres) on a steeply pitched property behind Table Mountain near Cape Town. He named it Constantia. The original farm carved from this land grant, equivalent to approximately 1,886 acres, equaled the size of Amsterdam at the time.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the sweet “Constantia” wines, made in both red and white versions, were sold to a who's who of the European and North American upper classes, at exorbitant prices for the times. Though South African exporters tried to muscle in on the action with similarly styled bottlings, it is widely accepted that the Groot (“Big”) Constantia and Klein (“Little”) Constantia farms produced the bona fide versions. Napoleon, Thomas Jefferson, King George IV and Queen Victoria all partook of Constantia wine.

The original Constantia farm was split into three sections when Van der Stel died in 1712. Groot Constantia winery (today an unrelated winery, managed by the Groot Constantia Trust for several decades) was formed during the original division. But the farm now called Klein Constantia probably dates to a sale by Hendrik Cloete’s widow, Anna Catharina. History suggests that Anna Cloete sold a substantial portion of Groot Constantia to her youngest son, John Gerard, in December 1823; evidently, 33,000 vines were already planted on the property they named Klein Constantia, which extended up the slopes of the Constantiaberg mountains. However, over time, due to a convoluted history comprising changes of ownership, restraints on trade and various vineyard maladies, production of sweet “Constantia” ceased at both Groot Constantia and Klein Constantia.

It was not until the late 20th century, when the Jooste family purchased a neglected Klein Constantia rife with outdated equipment, unsuitable grape cultivars and overgrown vegetation, that the winery’s puzzle began to be pieced back together. The Joostes’ maiden harvest, 1986, was pressed in a new cellar, and succeeding vintages bolstered the refurbished estate's reputation for sound reds and quality whites. The Joostes decided to re-create the legendary sweet white of Constantia, using a recipe cobbled together from old ledgers and diaries. (Created from reducing the crop drastically and letting unpicked berries hang for extra time until they shrivel naturally into raisins, this unique sweet wine involves no botrytis.) To this end, a clone of Muscat de Frontignan, propagated in a local nursery and believed to be from the original Constantia vineyard, was planted on lower slopes in 1982.

The first Vin de Constance vintage from the new vines was created in 1990 by winemaker Ross Gower, who joined Klein Constantia in 1984. When Gower resigned in 2003, Adam Mason took over, tweaking the style to greater heights until his exit in 2011. Mason’s assistant winemaker Matthew Day, 27, was promoted to the top job and given a simple instruction: Prove yourself. Two vintages on, he’s doing just that. The 2007 vintage of
Vin de Constance, the most recent release, was awarded a classic 95 points by *Wine Spectator*.

In late 2011, Klein Constantia was sold to Czech-born U.S. citizen Zdeněk Bakala and his British investment banker colleague Charles Harman. Bakala, 52, Klein Constantia's majority investor, has a history of turning businesses around. He's held senior positions in European investment banks, played a key role in Czech privatization and cofounded the BXR Group, whose portfolio of global assets was valued at $6 billion in 2011.

As a child, Bakala spent most Septembers picking grapes at his mother's family vineyards in Southern Moravia. Today, the Geneva-based businessman has a passion for German and Austrian Rieslings, and a soft spot for California wines, developed during his student days at UC, Berkeley. He calls Swiss wines the "best-kept secret," and enjoys Burgundies and New World Pinots alike.

Bakala visits his Cape Town holiday home regularly, and claims to "love wine and love South Africa." So when Klein Constantia came on the market, he jumped at the chance to acquire it.

While Klein Constantia's mostly south-facing slopes are focused on white varieties, its 2012 merger with Stellenbosch's Anwilka Vineyards guaranteed a future supply of red wine components, as well as cellar space for secondary labels. Anwilka's two Bordelais partners, Hubert de Bouard de Laforest, owner of Château Angélus, and Bruno Prats, formerly of Château Cos-d'Estournel, took minority shares in Klein Constantia as part of the deal.

Bakala's March 2013 trip to South Africa was timed so that he could pedal 67 scenic miles alongside 34,500 sweating participants in the Cape Argus Cycle Tour, Cape Town's most popular bicycling event. But Bakala also wanted to monitor the barrage of bulldozers transforming Klein Constantia's slopes.

"Do you know of another Southern Hemisphere winery that can match Klein Constantia in terms of its history?" asks Bakala. "It's the only one that combines potential and international marketability with a true pedigree. The farm was in decline and deserves to be the best." Bakala insists that Klein Constantia's business plan involves standard shareholder accountability, but says he will "support whatever needs to be done to bring this property to its former glory."

"This is likely to be the most substantial winery investment in South Africa to date," says managing director Hans Astrom, 52.

The final figure for refurbishment will likely exceed the estimated $8 million put toward updating Stellenbosch winery-and-lodge Delaire Graff's production facility, cellar equipment and barrel cellar, as well as the $8.4 million that Bordeaux's May-Eliane de Lencquesaing's spent on Glenelly winery (additional costs were incurred developing that property's 150 acres of Stellenbosch vineyards).

Currently, Klein Constantia owns 370 acres; 197 are under vine. Production averages 35,000 cases annually, and plans are in place to increase that figure to 60,000. Planting vines in South Africa is priced at approximately $6,700 per acre, depending on topography, soil and vine conditions. It is not surprising, then, that at Klein Constantia the most ambitious project is overhauling the vineyards.

"We have a 10-year master plan for all the farm's vineyards," explains Astrom. Sauvignon Blanc dominates the middle and upper slopes of Table Mountain's sandstone and decomposed granite soils, which climb to 1,125 feet at their highest point. Heavy winter rainfall, averaging 70 inches per year, makes soil erosion the biggest bugbear, so phase one of the overhaul involves installing a complex network of drainage pipes and canals at steep gradients. Platforms are being built on mountainous rows for tractors to turn.

Phase two will see a redesign of contour paths and gravel roads to extend the vineyard footprint. "Our goal is to have a whole green mountain, so you won't see the roads," says Astrom. "It's not economical to make average wines on this sort of real estate."

Finally, Astrom intends to gradually uproot and replant vines in better locations—or simply plant new vines altogether. Viticulturist Stiaan Cloete, 31, points out a new section at an elevation of 590 feet—a future 4.2-acre site of Muscat de Frontignan vines where drainage is being constructed. Vine row aspect has also been
adjusted to maximize sun exposure. (Despite the shared name, Cloete isn't sure if he is descended from the family that owned Klein Constantia during its 19th-century heyday.)

"The hottest row direction will be turned to run north-south away from the back of Table Mountain," he explains. "We know trellised vines work well for Vin de Constance, so by moving the rows to a 50-50 morning-afternoon sun split, with vineyard drains to capture the runoff, we should have more even ripening."

On the flatter, lower, north-facing loamy soils, Cloete has successfully grown an experimental block of Muscat in traditional bush-vine style, initially raised with poles from the ground to improve radial exposure. Presently, Vin de Constance is 100 percent Muscat de Frontignan, but Cloete's team will explore other varieties that may have enriched the original wine. As Astrom puts it, "We're not here to change Vin de Constance. It's already very good. But it's our duty to take it forward."

No more than 30,000 500ml bottles of Vin de Constance are produced each year, and the unique container—with its distinctive side lip—will soon be available in limited-quantity magnums.

The cellar upgrade scheduled for after the 2014 vintage should add at least $3.3 million to the winery's total outlay. Winemaker Day experimented with new drainer tanks during 2013 and updated the basket presses to achieve gentler results. "Klein Constantia was a state-of-the-art winery back in 1986, but it hasn't changed much since then," Astrom explains.

Day emphasizes that the cellar's focus will be on functionality over flashiness, customized around top-end Sauvignon Blanc and Vin de Constance production in particular. "Last year we picked our shriveled Muscat berries 12 times. This year we probably returned to pick 16 times," he says of the detailed approach.

Although whites are Klein Constantia's focus, dedicated red wine fermentors are planned for varieties grown on the warmer, northeastern slopes. "We're putting our best foot forward and releasing a Klein Constantia Red 2011 later in 2013, using only farm fruit. My ideal base would be Cabernet-dominated, with Petit Verdot, Malbec and Shiraz," says Day about the new blend.

A small-volume reserve Chardonnay 2012 is also set to debut. But the biggest prospects lie with Sauvignon Blanc, currently accounting for 60 percent of the winery's production.

Cloete's experiments on the high-altitude, cool yet wind-battered Sauvignon Blanc slopes have triggered a switch from trellised to bush vines in order to balance yields. Showing off the 2013 tank samples of pungent Sauvignon, Day declares he's taking the cellar back to "a natural state of winemaking" by using less sulfur and additives, with natural-yeast fermentations on occasional reserve-label parcels. The future tanks will be smaller, allowing the winemaker to treat sections of vineyard blocks as stand-alone entities from fermentation through blending.

"I'm fermenting small batches in large tanks now, but with the new cellar we'll go even more microbatch for better expression. It creates countless options to make up a premium blend," says Day. "We want the estate Sauvignon to be the best in South Africa."

Icons don't stay standing by themselves; historic achievements erode and crumble without constant support. The new team at Klein Constantia has the resources and the talent to bring a fabled tradition to fresh heights of quality, adding new elements while respecting the past.

*Kim Maxwell is a wine and food journalist based in Cape Town.*