

Constantia is pretty much the cradle of the South African wine industry. While the earliest plantings were very close to the city centre, growers swiftly moved southwards down the peninsula. Wynberg (unsurprisingly) derives its name from the beverage produced from the fruit grown on its slopes. Less than thirty years after the founding of the Dutch settlement, vineyards were established in what is now Constantia. Less than a century later the wines produced here had become the most sought after and most expensive in Europe. The best known of them were known simply as "Constantia" in England and as (Vin de) Constance in France. They were sweet and perfumed - made from Muscat varieties - though the area was also known for its Pontac, and even, it seems, for its Pinot.

It would seem a safe assumption that given the international recognition enjoyed by Constantia in the 18th century, the appellation would have flourished. However, this was not the case. By the end of the 19th century the properties were all bankrupt, the state took over a portion of what had been Van der Stel's estate as an experimental farm, and viticulture all but died out - a situation which prevailed for almost a century.

The restoration of Buitenverwachting and Klein Constantia in the 1980s heralded a renaissance for the whole area. There are now nine members of the wine route, and several other smaller growers selling fruit or limited quantities of wine under their own labels. For reasons which largely elude me, almost all of them have made sauvignon blanc the region's calling card. Notwithstanding a few notable successes, Constantia's sauvignons often come to market in the leaner, more herbal style which can be quite aggressive in its youth. To be fair, they become more interesting with bottle age - a feature of cool climate sauvignons the world over. (Incidentally, the adage that you should drink sauvignon blanc in the year of its vintage has no basis in fact or experience. Its origin is probably a cynical attempt by producers to optimise their cash flow.)

This doesn't mean that you should avoid Constantia sauvignons - none are bad, and the good ones deserve serious attention. At a recent tasting I discovered Silvermist for the first time - a tiny organic producer located right at the top of Constantia Nek. It's taken Gregory Louw almost twenty years to clear enough land and to plant sufficient vineyard to get his little estate into production, but the 2015 - selling at about R120 - is worth seeking out. It's soft, dense, with light asparagus hints and entirely free of the capsicum notes that come from under-ripe fruit.

Amongst the better known producers, Klein Constantia's regular bottling is more interesting at present than the Metis and Perdeblokke (where the oaking has - probably temporarily - diminished the fruit). On the other hand, Buitenverwachting's 2016 Husseys Vlei (the cellar's reserve wine) is a standout example of the style of sauvignon on which the area built its reputation: intense, still very youthful, and very linear.

Moving away from sauvignon (or at least pure sauvignon) leads to a more compelling wine experience. Eagles Nest's Viognier continues to be the property's most striking white wine - perfumed but still savoury, food friendly and happily free of overt alcohol notes. Steenberg's Magna Carta (a blend of sauvignon and semillon) is the cellar's best (and most expensive) white. Beau Constantia's 2017 Pierre (co-fermented sauvignon-semillon) is utterly sumptuous and worth every bit of its R230 price tag. Constantia Glen's Two is a similar white Bordeaux blend, and is similarly delicious.

Finally, by way of showing the potential of the region's reds, the 2013 Constantia Glen Five (all five Bordeaux varieties) delivers a perfectly integrated, accessible yet concentrated, classically styled blend. Priced close to R300, it's not a first choice for a picnic - unless you're going to Glyndebourne and wish to induce a sense of envy amongst those who've arrived with a Cru Bourgeois Bordeaux.