

Most people with an inkling of the history of South African wine would regard the Constantia Valley as the cradle of our wine culture. Its case rests less along the lines of “first one there” and more upon the role it played in nurturing the country's incipient fine wine culture. Van der Stel's farm, which opened up the region, became a model agricultural enterprise. The governor wrote a rule book for wine production which was probably worth more in terms of driving quality wine standards than the Huguenot influx. His example, coupled with the region's viticultural potential and (a century later) Hendrik Cloete's genius, produced the dessert wine we know today as Vin de Constance. In the late 18th century it became the most sought-after wine in the world. It's difficult to ignore the claims of Constantia with this kind of pedigree.

The region's glory days didn't last forever. The British occupation of the Cape brought to an end the lucrative VOC Amsterdam auctions of the Constantia dessert wines. The collapse of the wine trade following the end of Imperial Preference hit the quality sector at least as badly as the bulk business. By the end of the 19th century Groot Constantia was bankrupt. For most of the 20th century urban encroachment put paid to the region's pretensions as a wine producer.

By the 1980s there was every indication that the developers would turn the remaining agricultural land into upmarket homes. It was primarily Duggie Jooste's acquisition of Klein Constantia and Richard Mueller's purchase of Buitenverwachting (together with a host of awards won the moment the vineyards came into production) that changed all this. Constantia suddenly had critical mass. Since then a further six or so properties have added their weight to the appellation.

In a sense, new generation Constantia dates to the 1986 maiden vintages of Klein Constantia - the first wines produced by Duggie Jooste's team. Several extraordinary sauvignon blancs sent a message that the appellation was perfectly suited to this heat sensitive variety. The growers responded accordingly: today Constantia is more closely identified with sauvignon than any other cultivar.

Time will tell whether this does justice to an appellation as important to South Africa as the Constantia Valley. Several of the prime examples are unexceptional. Many winemakers battle to achieve full fruit ripeness at acceptable alcohol levels. At the very least a new way of managing its viticulture is required. There's evidence that it can be done - to judge from the latest vintages from Klein Constantia. The estate came under new ownership and new management in 2011/2. Since then a massive replanting and cellar renovation programme has been under way. I tasted some of the fruit of that investment recently, including, and most importantly, wine from individual sites, separately harvested and separately vinified.

For the first time my reservations about Constantia's sauvignon potential have been assuaged. The standard release Klein Constantia 2018 is worth every cent of its R125 per bottle. The 2017 Metis (a joint venture with Loire producer Pascal Jollivet) is a marked step above earlier vintages, and delivers Old World finesse with New World intensity. The 2017 Perdeblokke has real weight and personality, while the Block 382 (from a relatively recently planted low-yielding bush-vine vineyard) makes it clear that thoughtful planting and harvesting strategies do make a difference.

At nearby Constantia Glen, the top cuvée of the Bordeaux blend (known as Constantia Glen Five because it is composed of five of the authorised Medoc varieties) continues to impress: the 2014 is one of the best to date and is certainly one of the most delicious of the Cape's Bordeaux blends.

In short, Constantia's leading producers are starting to lift themselves off the laurels which made a comfortable cushion for the previous generation. The expectations of an ever-more demanding market are being met by a few of them: the others will have to follow suit.

For notes on a recent Klein Constantia vertical go to <https://winewizard.co.za/article/560>