

BOOK AND FILM REVIEWS

Joanne Gibson and Malu Lambert: *Klein Constantia: The Home of Vin de Constance*

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Klein Constantia is a remarkable farm, *Vin de Constance* is a remarkable wine, and this book tells the tale of both in a thorough and highly entertaining manner. This comes in the form of a coffee-table book with beautiful photos, but more importantly, some serious scholarship about the history of the farm and the wine. There is also information on the farm's other wine offerings and facilities, etc., but the focus is on the history of the farm and the legend of this particular wine.

For those who do not know the farm, it is remarkable for its longevity (it was established in 1685 by Simon van der Stel, Governor of the Cape, and has had only a handful of owners since); and for the fact that it was owned from the early 1720s to the late 1850s by the Colyn family, starting with Jan Colyn, whose mother, Swarte (Black) Maria Everts (1663–1713), was a descendant of slaves. This mattered in the successive regimes of segregation, colonization, and apartheid in South Africa, to the extent that the origins of the Colyn family were effectively written out of the history books until recently, much like his almost-contemporary, Alexander Hamilton.

The book is difficult to review without spoiler alerts, so only a few salient stories are told here. The farm originated in a grant to Simon van der Stel, governor of the Cape, and the first wine was made in 1692, while *Vin de Constance* itself dates from the early 1700s—the first tasting notes refer to the 1704 and 1705 vintages. Klein Constantia itself was carved out of this larger farm in 1823. Interestingly, *Vin de Constance* was not a fortified wine, nor was it a “noble late harvest” or botrytis wine; from the beginning, it was a natural wine of high residual sugar, made from the Muscat de Frontignan grape. Chapter 5 is devoted to the process of making this remarkable wine.

Chris Orffer, Professor in Viticulture at Stellenbosch University during the 1960s, discovered that the vines in the oldest block of Muscat de Frontignan, planted in 1983, were descendants of the original Muscat de Frontignan that was brought to the Cape in the 1650s. This set in motion a process called “massal selection,” or “selection massale”

in French, to create a clone that matches this heritage with the unique terroir of Klein Constantia, whose vineyards mostly face east, lie less than 8 km (5 miles) from the ocean, have above-average rainfall, and are therefore in a much cooler area than most of South Africa's vineyards.

One of the more interesting stories, told in vignettes throughout the book, is about the “government allocation” of *Vin de Constance*. Apparently this started in 1727 when the then owner was ordered to supply a substantial share of the wine produced on the farm to the Governors of the Dutch East India Company at what at the time seemed to be a premium price, but turned out later to become a major headache when prices increased above this level. To the chagrin of the owners, this created dual incentives: producers of the wine sprouted up like mushrooms all over the Constantia Valley, and at the same time, fake *Vin de Constance* was being sold all over Europe. To add insult to injury, the British colonizers retained the practice—by 1807, the King was receiving 40 dozen bottles per year and each of his children 20 dozen.

Unfortunately, this is not recorded in the otherwise useful “Time Line” provided at the end of the book and leads to my only real gripe about the book, namely the absence of an index. Stories such as this one about the government allocation are told in stages throughout the book, much like experiencing the successive layers of taste in a complex wine such as *Vin de Constance*. This unique style is carried off successfully in the book, but cries out for an index to make it easier to keep track of the details—and of the many names that accompany them.

What is recorded in the “Time Line” is the American connection with Klein Constantia, which started when the farm was bought by Abraham Lochner de Villiers, a milliner from the town of Paarl, and his heiress wife Clara Hussey, scion of Dr. Curtis Grubb Hussey, a “Copper Baron” and staunch Quaker from Pittsburgh. Garden parties and “an era of Gatsby-like glamour” (p. 138) were ushered in.

Chapters 6 and 7 are my favorites, with Chapter 6 providing a trawl through archives that deliver quotes from people who have tasted *Vin de Constance* over a period of some 320 years, as well as more recent tastings of century-old vintages.

Chapter 7 provides the ultimate in name-dropping. The authors supplement the archives with secondary data from history books and manuscripts to record the impressions of *Vin de Constance* from “European Royalty and Nobility”; “America’s Founding Fathers”; “Rule Britannia”; Napoleon himself; “French Gourmands”; those of “International Literary Fame”: and “A few Modern Admirers.” Heady stuff! These stories start in 1744 with Danish royalty and range all the way to Nelson Mandela.

Spoiler alert: There are quite a few things that stand out in the reading, including:

- Just how famous *Vin de Constance* really was in the 18th and first half of the 19th centuries.
- The apex of its popularity was before 1850—after that, sweet wines went out of fashion. This ushered in a new era and disastrous era, also on Klein Constantia. It started with *Oidium tuckeri*, or powdery mildew, and went on to the loss of preferential access to the UK market in 1860, which resulted in bankruptcy of the farms—all before phylloxera hit Constantia on November 26, 1898, 12 years after its first discovery in the Cape.
- The effect of the cool climate on the longevity of the grapes (p. 35).

- When the farm changed hands in 1980 (bought by Duggie Jooste), his first priority was to “improve the ‘pitiful’ living conditions of the farm workers. They and their families would now be comfortably accommodated in their own houses with a crèche and recreation area...” (p. 38).
- It was Duggie Jooste who resuscitated *Vin de Constance* after a journey through the archives (in the form of “letters, ledgers and diaries” p. 39), the latter especially in the form of the diary of a previous owner, all this in the darkest days before the end of apartheid.
- The EU only allowed *Vin de Constance* entry in 2002 because of its high alcohol content (15%), and the wine was placed on a list of banned substances!

Finally, Chapter 4 tells of the massive investment and effort put into the farm by its new owners, Zdenek Bakala and Charles Harman, subsequently joined by Hubert de Boüard and Bruno Prats in 2011. This story is about the transformation that took place in conservation works, in the vineyards, in the cellar, and in the staff, from workers to executives. There is little doubt that this effort is shaping the future of this remarkable wine, with its roots dating back to the 17th century and its face toward the future.