

VINEYARDS AND WINE AND HISTORY

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Viticulture and the art of wine-making were introduced to India, Egypt and Persia by the Arians centuries before the birth of Christ. In the West, the Phoenicians, the Greeks and the Romans discovered that they could have no better ally than the grape in their efforts to bring some measure of civilization to the barbarian. We find a striking example of that alliance in the Roman campaign to subdue Gaul, the valleys of the Rhineland and the Danube: having plied the hostile natives with wine, the Romans promised them trees that would produce that very same wine year after year; all the locals had to do was to cut down or burn the trees on the lower slopes of the hills along the river and plant vines in their stead. Which they did. And as the Roman colonies spread ever further over Western Europe, so did the tradition of growing vines and making wine, and thus were laid the foundations of the far-famed French, Rhineland and Spanish wine and vineyard traditions.

By the time the New World was discovered, viticulture and viniculture had been known for two thousand years in Western Europe. The Europeans continued that tradition in their overseas territories, planting slips of *Vitis vinifera* wherever it would grow. In the sixteenth century the Portuguese carried the European viticulture and viniculture to Brazil, and so did the Spaniards to Argentina, Chile, Peru and Mexico. In the seventeenth century the Dutch brought European viticulture and viniculture to the Cape of Good Hope, and in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century the British introduced them to Australia and New Zealand.

From the earliest times, then, vines and wine formed an integral part of the economic and cultural activities of many thousands of people. Wine was drunk at meals and on festive occasions; it travelled with man along dusty roads and on long voyages. Like food, wine became inseparable from the daily lives of royalty, noblemen, soldiers, sailors and labourers.

From Europe to the Cape: the transplant

It is rather ironic that the Dutch should have been the ones to establish European viticulture and viniculture at the southern tip of Africa: Holland is by no means a wine-growing country, and her inhabitants are mostly beer drinkers. As middlemen, however, they had gained some knowledge of French, Rhineland and Spanish wines and were shipping these from the producers to England, Denmark, northern Germany and the Norse countries.

It was only natural, then, that Jan van Riebeeck, first Commander of the Dutch contingent who set up a victualling post at the Cape in 1652, should have turned to France, Spain and the Rhinelands for the first vines on which to found the Cape viticultural and vinicultural industry. Why Van Riebeeck chose to grow vineyards is not quite clear, since it was by no means part of his instructions from his masters, the Lords XVII in the Netherlands: his sole task was to produce enough food and provide fresh water for passing V.O.C. ships and for the settlement.

Perhaps he did it out of force of habit: the European habit of passing on the vine and its fruits to the "uncivilized". Or it might have been due to his vision of a Table Mountain with its slopes verdant in vines. Whatever his motive, he was also this country's first — and very capable — experimental farmer, and he wanted to find out whether *Vitis vinifera* would grow here.

The first vines arrived in July, 1655, but the first Cape wine was made of grapes from two-year-old vines imported from France, the Rhineland and Spain in 1656 and planted in the Company Gardens, on the site of the present Grand Parade. On February 2, 1659, the first-ever wine was harvested at the Cape — a modest 15 litres made of Muscadel grapes and "round white grapes" (most likely Green or Spanish grapes).

Commander Van Riebeeck's elation knew no bounds. In his Journal he recorded with great satisfaction that "today, praise be to God, Wine was pressed for the first time from Cape Grapes, and the new must was tested fresh from the vat".

The seventeenth century: Cape viniculture takes shape

The first crop of wine, be it ever so modest, laid the foundations of an

industry that would come to affect the lives of thousands of South Africans, whether producers, dealers or consumers. It has also made a vital contribution to the Western Cape economy and has put its stamp on the cultural and political life of the region.

Following its typical historical pattern, the vine spread its tendrils over the Cape Colony, seeking ever more *lebensraum* beyond the confines of the Table Valley. Van Riebeeck himself was responsible for the first transplantings and for spreading Cape viticulture: in 1658 he put in some 1 000 vines on his farm Boscheuvel (now the Bishop's Court suburb), near the source of the Liesbeeck River. This successful venture was also the first dramatic development in the history of viticulture at the Cape. Once Van Riebeeck had proved that the vine would do well in the Cape soil and climate, his example inspired the free white farmers, former V.O.C. officials, to concentrate more on viticulture and to see vines as more than merely decorative pergolas shading their homes and stables.

A second dramatic development in Cape viticulture came in 1685, when Governor Simon van der Stel staked out the well-known Constantia farm on the lower slopes of the Steenberg. Here on Constantia (subdivided into Groot Constantia and De Hoop op Constantia) and on its neighbour, High Constantia, were produced the famous Constantia wines: the first South African wines to gain worldwide renown. For nearly two centuries these remained the Cape's best-known and most sought-after wines, far surpassing ordinary Cape wines in nobility and character.

Constantia wines were natural sweet wines made mainly of Muscadel grapes (red and white), but small quantities were also made of Pontac and Frontignac grapes. The famous Constantia owners were our country's first master-vintners: Governor Simon van der Stel, the Colyns of De Hoop op Constantia, the Cloetes of Groot Constantia, and the Van Reenens of High Constantia. Here, in the mild coastal climate on the eastern slopes of the Steenberg, vintners could leave the grapes on the vine until the berries had virtually become raisins. Picking late in March, they kept the must in their well-equipped cellars until the wines had acquired a delicate, full-bodied flavour.

Constantia wines were highly popular among connoisseurs, both locally and abroad. Hundreds of eminent visitors or residents of the Cape visited the farm every year and paid steep prices for a half-aum or a few bottles of Constantia wine. Thus the Constantia farms became the first wine

estates in the Western Cape — a tradition that would be revived only in the latter half of this century. Abroad, Constantia wines were the most sought-after sweet wines, snobbishly doled out to guests and drunk by European kings, emperors, statesmen and merchant princes. Poets such as Baudelaire and authors like Jane Austen waxed lyrical over the exceptional qualities of Constantia wines. In more ways than one the Constantia vintners were centuries ahead of their time and of other wine farmers: they tilled their vineyards with great care, made superb wines, put a high premium on the quality of their wines, and concentrated on quality rather than quantity.

A third major development in the seventeenth century was the establishment of viticulture beyond the boundaries of the Cape Peninsula, namely in the new farming areas of Stellenbosch and Drakenstein, in the last quarter of that century. These areas were opened up mainly because the Cape government hoped that the new colonists might produce enough grains to meet the needs of the victualling post at the Cape. Initially, therefore, viticulture played a secondary role, and colonists were in fact instructed to give preference to grain farming. They were permitted only a morgen of vineyard for every six morgen of grain.

The settling of the French Huguenot refugees, mainly in the Drakenstein valley, gave enormous impetus to wine production, since most of the farms in that valley were better suited to viticulture than to grain farming. By 1700 the Drakenstein was already producing more wine than the other two wine-growing districts, Stellenbosch and the Cape. In less than two decades after its settlement, then, the Drakenstein had become the foremost wine-producing area of the Cape Colony, a predominance it was to surrender — to Worcester — only in the twentieth century.

The eighteenth century: the emergence of negative patterns

The first dramatic development in Cape viticulture during the eighteenth century was the building up of a wine surplus in the first decade. The Cape market for the vin ordinaire produced by the vast majority of farmers outside Constantia was too limited to absorb the growing production. Abroad, too, the poor quality of Cape wines made for an unstable market, especially in the Netherlands and in the eastern V.O.C. territories. The wine farmers found themselves stuck with surpluses for which they could find no market, and thus began a problem that would give the wine producer

his worst headaches right into the twentieth century.

In the absence of any control over the planting of vineyards and production, wine production grew steadily, reaching some 9 000 leaguers by the end of the 18th century. From the beginning of the eighteenth century the wine farmer therefore found himself dependent on *ad hoc* markets forming suddenly as a result of European wars that stimulated shipping to and around the Cape and consequently a rise in demand. In some cases — for instance during the Seven Years' War (1756—1763) and the American War of Independence (1775—1783) — such increases in traffic took up the farmers' surplus wines, but when there was a drastic drop in shipping, as after the beginning of the European war in 1793, despondency over unsold surpluses drove some wine farmers to broach their casks and spill the wine.

Two basic problems, therefore, confronted Cape viticulture in the 18th century: first, that too much wine was being produced for the local demand and the unstable foreign market; and, second, the poor quality of the vin ordinaire that made up the bulk of the Cape crop. The mediocrity of Cape wines (with the exception of Constantia and other sweet wines) resulted *inter alia* from the shoddy viticultural and wine-making methods used by most Cape wine farmers, their ignorance of the wine-making process, and their failure to produce good wine from Green grapes, which went into over 90 per cent of the vin ordinaire known as Cape Madeira. In their attempts to prevent spoilage as a result of continued fermentation the farmers used to treat or fortify their wine with sulphur dioxide and locally made, inferior brandies, which gave it odd and unpleasant flavours that the more sophisticated consumer found offensive and even disgusting. No wonder that as late as the nineteenth century, when England had become a major export market for Cape wines, shocked connoisseurs had the following to say about them: "With regard to Cape Madeira and the wines in general of this Colony, it is a fact which is acknowledged by everybody, that nothing is so bad in England as the wines of the Cape". Cape wine also drew comments such as "miserable trash", "villainous", "wretched", "horrible", "filthy", "unremarkable" and "it smells like a bad potato".

In mitigation of the Cape wine farmer's indifferent wine-making one might mention his ignorance of and lack of respect for the connoisseur's tastes. Besides, he had to make his wine in the summer months in a hot climate, and in poorly equipped cellars that could not provide the required low temperatures. He did not have the capital to age his wines long enough and

was compelled to market them within six months. As a result most Cape wines remained unacceptable to the sophisticated South African consumer, who preferred imported European — especially French and German — wines up to the twentieth century. The local consumption of vins ordinaires was, therefore, restricted to the working classes.

Thus were established in the 18th century — which saw the development of viticulture as a distinctive branch of farming at the Cape — certain patterns that were to remain characteristic of the industry up to the twentieth century. In the first place the wine farmer found himself up against constant wine surpluses and the problem of getting rid of them. Secondly, he had become dependent upon the foreign demand for his wine — an unstable market, since even under normal circumstances the poor quality of the bulk of Cape wines ruled out good sales; only when Europe was at war or her crops had failed did a demand for Cape wines arise. Thirdly, the consumption of the bulk of Cape wines was limited to the working classes, unsophisticated drinkers who were erratic in their drinking pattern and prone to alcoholic abuse. Fourthly, inferior wines were used more and more for distilling brandy, but of such a poor quality that the more sophisticated consumer of strong liquor preferred foreign spirits. Only the Constantia wines and the sweet wines (mostly from Muscadel and Hanepoot grapes) made by some farmers at Paarl, Robertson and Montagu could stand the test of time.

The nineteenth century: prosperity and crises

After an initial spell of prosperity the nineteenth century put the South African wine industry before one of the worst crises of its existence. Two factors brought prosperity to wine farmers in the first two decades of the century. First, the presence of a strong military and naval force at the Cape stimulated the demand for Cape wines; and, second, a strong demand for Cape wines developed in Britain after 1813 when that country, owing to Napoleon's blockade of ports on the European continent, introduced preferential tariffs for Cape wines. These measures led to a spectacular boom in wine exports, quadrupling wine prices. In the first decade after 1813 the price of wine varied from £17 to £23 a leaguer, which meant huge nett profits to wine farmers, considering that at that stage production costs were no more than £2 to £3 a leaguer.

But the boom was short-lived. After 1825 Britain gradually reduced her preferential tariffs, finally abolishing them in 1861, when a free-trading

agreement was concluded between Britain and France. This led to a collapse in the Cape wine-exporting trade, which was not resumed until the twenties of this century.

Meanwhile the wine farmers had suffered a series of setbacks that led to their systematic impoverishment as a farming community. The first, which struck them in the early decades of the nineteenth century, was the abnormal rise in the cost of living and production brought about by the rapid depreciation of the Rixdollar, the currency of the time. The prices of agricultural implements, slaves and household articles doubled and trebled. After the twenties there was also a drastic drop in wine prices, with the result that for decades wine farmers could barely make ends meet. That drop in prices was accompanied by growing surpluses, the result of the large-scale expansion of vineyards following the introduction of preferential tariffs by Britain in 1813. From the 1820's onward, numerous petitions to the government deplored the lot of wine farmers. Most were in such a parlous case that they had been forced "to employ the utmost exertion and economy to enable them to supply the wants of their families and to pay their taxes".

To anyone concerned with the wine industry it must have been clear by the middle of the nineteenth century that there were just too many wine farmers, that they had been planting vineyards with too much abandon, and that the mediocre quality of their produce made it acceptable only to the labouring classes.

Although wine farmers experienced a spell of comparative prosperity in the latter half of the 1850's, when large quantities of wine were exported to meet a shortage in Britain, that prosperity was short-lived, for in 1861 the export trade collapsed once again. At the same time the industry was stricken with the first major epidemic of vineyard disease, *Oidium tuckeri*, or white rust, which from 1859 to 1862 ravaged the bulk of the wine crop.

The wine farmer suffered three further setbacks in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. The first was the economic depression of the sixties, which, coupled with the loss of the vital British export market, led to a drastic drop in the value of farms. Second, towards the end of the seventies the government levied a new excise duty on locally manufactured brandies in order to boost the depleted exchequer. The farmers' furious reaction made the government withdraw that imposition, and thus, for the first time, the lot of the wine farmers became a factor in Cape poli-

tics. But the worst and most important setback was yet to come: the 1880's saw the first outbreak of the dreaded *Phylloxera* insect, which was to herald the technological and economic metamorphosis of the industry.

Phylloxera vastatrix, an almost microscopically tiny insect of the *Phylloxera* plant aphid family, and regarded as one of the most serious insect pests of the vineyard, entered France for the first time in 1861 along with some American vines. It immediately began to destroy the vineyards of France, and from there spread like an epidemic throughout Europe and other parts of the world.

At first the Cape wine farmers and the government were not too concerned about *Phylloxera*, regarding it as a "European problem". But when this plague broke out and wreaked havoc in Australia in 1875, the Cape government and the farmers took immediate steps to prevent the importation and spreading of the insect. Despite their efforts, however, the first insects were discovered in a vineyard at Mowbray, near Cape Town, on January 2, 1886. That same month more insects were found in vineyards in the Moddergat district, near Stellenbosch — a major viticultural area. In the next two decades *Phylloxera* spread rapidly to all the main vine-growing areas of the Stellenbosch and Paarl districts and close to Cape Town.

Phylloxera compelled farmers to destroy millions of vines, resulting in massive financial losses to wine farmers. The government did all it could to combat the plague and prevent its spreading: inspectors were appointed to locate the insects, strict quarantine regulations were promulgated, and import regulations were tightened up. All these measures were of little avail. Eventually the only successful means of combating the insect proved to be the eradication and burning of all affected vines and the replanting of vineyards with *Phylloxera*-resistant American stock. Another successful measure was the grafting of European vines on American rootstock. With a view to providing farmers with American or grafted vines the government established nurseries in the Western Cape, including ones at Stellenbosch and Paarl, and in distant areas such as East London and Fort Cunyngame.

The American and grafted vines saved the Cape wine industry from total destruction. Although *Phylloxera* inflicted severe financial losses on wine farmers in the 1886—1900 period, it also had some positive effects. The lower wine production boosted prices. Wine farmers began to diversify their farming activities, a step that had not been possible before 1900 be-

cause their farming units were too small and there was no alternative to viticulture. With the rapid growth of the deciduous fruit industry after 1886 most wine farmers began planting orchards, which provided them with a significant source of income in addition to vineyard produce.

In various respects, then, the nineteenth century saw wine farmers suffering major setbacks. The struggle against wine surpluses and the concomitantly low wine prices spelled bankruptcy to many farmers. Although the end of the 19th century brought a measure of hope, the poor quality of the vin ordinaire remained the worst single problem. Attempts by both the government and various wine-growing organizations and agricultural societies — founded in a drive to dispose of wine surpluses and improve the quality of wine — proved relatively futile. The only significant result was the distilling of large quantities of wine into brandy, for which a strong demand had developed in the northern parts of the country. The brandy that towered above all others was "Paarl Rock", produced by the Paarl Wine & Brandy Co. from the 1850's onward; by the turn of the century this brandy had won over 200 quality awards.

The twentieth century: transformation

In this century various revolutionary factors contributed to saving the precarious wine industry from collapse, to stimulating its dynamic growth, and to a radical change in the consumption of wine, especially in recent decades. That transformation was spearheaded by the unification of wine-producers' interests under an umbrella body, the KWV, in 1918.

The founding of the KWV was preceded by the worst crises in the history of the industry, primarily as a result of the uncontrolled planting of vineyards in the wake of the destruction wrought by *Phylloxera*. During the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) wine and brandy still found a ready market and fetched excellent prices (wine £12 a leaquer, and brandy £42 a leaquer), but after the war surpluses began piling up and prices tumbled. In most of the post-war years wine farmers, unable to dispose of their surpluses, were paid prices that could not nearly cover their costs. The worst crisis occurred in 1916, when the portion of the surplus that was in fact sold fetched only £2-15s a leaquer. Wine merchants exploited the impotence of the farmers by fixing prices at whim. It was clear to all that the industry was teetering on the brink of disaster. Charles W.H. Kohler, especially, was deeply affected by the parlous state of the industry and the farmers: "Never before had the wine industry been at so low an ebb as

in 1916. Never before were wine-farmers in deeper despair”.

Kohler, a former dentist and gold magnate who had settled on the farm Riverside, Simondium, in 1890, set about implementing a master plan that would bring an end to the chaos that had bedevilled the wine industry for so many decades. Briefly, his philosophy implied the founding of a co-operative involving all wine producers. Its tasks would be to apply strict production control, which had become absolutely imperative; to prevent the dumping of wine surpluses on the South African market by having it distilled into spirits and exporting the latter; and to improve the economic position of producers by fixing minimum producer prices that would secure a livelihood for its members.

Kohler's concept was enthusiastically received by wine farmers, and in the course of 1917 90 per cent of the farmers declared themselves willing to become members of a national wine-growers' association as set out in Kohler's proposals. On January 8, 1918, the new organization was registered as an ordinary company to be known as the “Ko-operatiewe Wijnbouwers Vereniging van Zuid-Arika, Beperkt”. Under its abbreviated title, the KWV, it has gained local and international renown.

Led by Kohler, who remained chairman of the KWV until his death in 1952, the wine industry and its farmers were saved from the morass. The KWV brought stability to the industry, placing it on the road to growth and prosperity. For the producer it meant a secure income and strong financial growth.

Like the KWV, the scores of co-operative cellars founded, especially after 1939, have made an invaluable economic and technological contribution to the rise of the wine industry. Through them, farmers could pool their resources and jointly mobilize more capital, which enabled them to produce wine at lower costs and of higher quality than individual farmers could have managed.

A third major development that contributed towards the transformation of the wine industry in the twentieth century, especially after World War II, was the advance in scientific and technological expertise, for which viticulturalists and oenologists both past and present deserve great credit. Their achievements cover a broad range, from developing new cultivars to cold fermentation. At the same time, producers, viticulturalists and oenologists have benefited enormously from better theoretical and practical training

and experience gained both locally and in the traditional wine-growing countries.

The accumulation of positive factors led to a dramatic improvement in the quality of Cape wines in the first half of the twentieth century. Although most South African consumers were then still favouring fortified wines, a number of good natural wines had appeared on the local market under various brand names, and these were becoming household words to a growing number of South Africans.

The true foundations of the South African wine industry were, however, laid in the fifties of this century, with the introduction of a number of table-wines that were to spark off a revolution in South African wine consumption. These wines had had a number of well-known precursors even before 1959: white wines such as Witzenberg, Bellingham Premier Grand Cru and Kupferberger, and reds such as Roodeberg Nr. 1, Roodeberg Nr. 2, and Tassenberg, a very popular light, dry wine.

But the moving force behind the white-wine revolution was the Stellenbosch Farmers' Winery, followed by Distillers Corporation. The great breakthrough was made in 1959, when Stellenbosch Farmers' Winery backed up its launching of semi-sweet white table-wine with a massive advertising campaign, promoting it countrywide as "the low-cost wine for any occasion". That first concerted marketing campaign for a brand-name natural wine achieved astonishing results: by 1965 Lieberstein had become the biggest seller of brand-name natural wines anywhere in the world. It was followed by numerous other brand-name natural white wines, many of which became immensely popular with a public that had changed its drinking pattern. From 1959 to 1964, the consumption of natural wines soared by 85 per cent.

Since the sixties the consumption of table-wines — initially whites, but since the seventies also reds — has risen dramatically, and their quality has improved vastly. Various factors have contributed to that improvement, including the better viticultural techniques and new cultivars resulting, to a large extent, from scientific research and guidance by the Viticultural and Oenological Research Institute, improved cellar equipment and techniques, large-scale advertising drives by major liquor companies, encouragement from the state in various areas, the fostering of public awareness and appreciation of wines, the founding of numerous wine es-

tates that brought the public to the source, and legislation to enhance the quality of wine.

South Africans are now picking — or sipping! — the fruits of the wine revolution of the fifties. High-quality wines are being produced to meet every palate, wines that compare well with the best in the world.

This is the proper occasion to pay tribute and drink a toast to the South African wine industry and its "creators", to pioneers such as Jan van Riebeeck and Charles Kohler, to early and present vintners, to the masses of wine farmers who kept producing through years of adversity and prosperity, to the stabilizing role of the KWV, to the younger-generation owners of wine estates, to the major liquor companies for their role in the wine revolution and as producers of superb brandies, to the positive attitude of the government, and to the efforts of oenologists and viticulturalists both in the public and in the private sector. Let us also drink to the well-being of the South African consumer, and to his response to the challenge of observing moderation in the face of so many top-quality wines.