



A legacy of world-class wines, centuries in the making

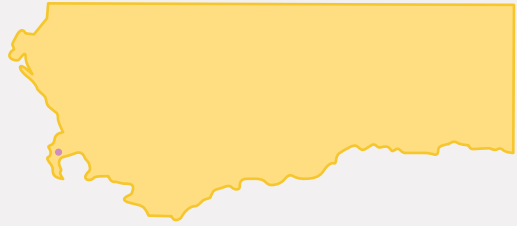
A reputation for world-class wines is not something you can grow overnight. It takes years, possibly even decades. In the case of Groot Constantia, it's been centuries in the making.

The legacy that is Groot Constantia began some 340 years ago in 1685 when 891 morgen of land (about 763 hectares) were granted to Simon van der Stel, then Dutch Governor of the Cape of Good Hope. He was a man whose deep and abiding love of wine drove him to found what became South Africa's first wine farm.

It's possible that van der Stel may have been inspired by his predecessor, Jan van Riebeeck, who was the first European to plant vines at the Cape, and successfully harvest them to make the first South African wine.

There's an oft-quoted excerpt from van Riebeeck's journal which starts: "Today, praise be to God, wine was made for the first time from Cape grapes." So, van Riebeeck was the first settler to plant vines in the Cape, but van der Stel was the first to establish a fully productive wine farm – and he called it Constantia.

Now, centuries later, after Constantia's phenomenal success, van der Stel is known as the founding father of South Africa's wine industry. It seems fitting, then, that Stellenbosch, a town he founded and named after himself, has emerged as the hub of the industry. But the vintage roots, and indeed the roots of the wine industry itself, were first planted on the estate we now call Groot Constantia.



A long season of transition

When Simon van der Stel died in 1712, ownership of the 891 morgen reverted to the Dutch East India Company, since they had originally granted him the land. The Company decided the farm, Constantia, was too large for any one person to manage, so they divided it into three smaller properties (Groot Constantia, Klein Constantia and Bergvliet), which were auctioned off in 1716.

A wealthy Swede, one Oloff Bergh, acquired Groot Constantia, but died in 1724 without contributing much of anything to the viniculture or the farm. Instead, it was his widow, Anna de Koningh, who left an indelible mark. She was the daughter of Angela of Bengal, who was one of the earliest known slaves to be brought to the Cape; Angela was sold to Jan van Riebeeck, and finally freed in 1666, along with her children, one of whom was Anna. So when Anna's husband died, Anna became the first woman, and the first woman of colour, to inherit and own a wine farm in South Africa. It must be said, Anna had little interest in wine farming, but

she thoroughly enjoyed her life as a wealthy and widowed socialite who, remember, had been born into slavery. To this day, Groot Phesantekraal, another wine farm she also inherited, produces an "opulent and elegant" Chenin Blanc Reserve called Anna de Koning, in her honour.

And then came the Cloetes

After Anna's death, the farm changed ownership several times, but was eventually purchased by Hendrik Cloete in 1778; and so it was that Hendrik, followed by four generations of Cloetes, brought to Groot Constantia the qualities of constancy and fervour first envisioned and put into practice by Simon van der Stel. When he bought the farm, Cloete was already an established and wealthy wine farmer, born into privilege on his family farm, Nooitgedacht, near Stellenbosch. Records show that Cloete paid ninety thousand florins (Dutch guilders) for Groot Constantia, which was considered an exorbitant price at the time. It was during this Cloete era (from 1778 to 1885) that Groot Constantia wines became world-renowned and enjoyed in drawing rooms throughout Europe.

It must be acknowledged that when Cloete first bought the farm in 1778, he also bought the 16 resident slaves who had belonged to the previous owner. He then bought a further 16 slaves to add to his workforce. Clearly, many of the accolades rightfully belong to the slaves. One man can give direction, but somebody has to do the physical work, and in the case of Groot Constantia, the work was done by slaves. In 1834, slavery was abolished in the colony, but the slaves still had to apprentice themselves to their owners for a further four years. So, next time you enjoy a glass of Groot Constantia wine, raise your glass in silent salute to the slaves of yesteryear.

A century of extraordinary success

The first fourteen years of the Cloete era saw the construction of a batch of new outbuildings, among them, the wine cellar behind the homestead, now known as the Cloete Cellar; as well as the row of outbuildings in front of the farmstead known as the Jonkershuis complex. The homestead itself also acquired decorative additions in the form of slender gables, and the figure of "Abundance" in the niche of the main front gable, as well as ornamental vases on the side gables. Thibault and Anreith are reputed to have been the architect and sculptor respectively.

Vineyards of new vines were planted to replace old neglected ones, and nurtured with the care and expertise that only a born viniculturist can bring. There followed decades of dedication to cultivating the finest wines



An outstanding view of Groot Constantia

the Cape had ever known, which led to a resounding achievement in 1833, when King Louis Philippe I of France became the biggest buyer ever of Groot Constantia wines. He evidently considered some of their wines to be better than those of his own country. In 1855, Groot Constantia won its first ever medals, silver medals at the Paris Exhibition, followed by more silver in 1867, two medals in Vienna in 1874, and two more in Philadelphia in 1876. Eventually, in 1878 came the supreme accolade, a gold medal in Paris. And in 1881, Groot Constantia wines won six awards in Melbourne.



Wine barrels at the winery

The Little Corporal and the Literati

Through the centuries, Groot Constantia wines have left an indelible mark on popular culture. The iconic Grand Constance, for instance, was a firm favourite of Napoleon Bonaparte, and references to other Constantia wines are found in the literature of various European cultures.

Grand Constance found particular favour with Napoleon during his exile on the island of St. Helena from 1818 to 1821. Records show that Groot Constantia supplied Napoleon with at least 30 bottles of Grand Constance every month during his exile, which suggests that he averaged a bottle a day. He insisted that it sweetened the bitterness of exile. He probably meant it metaphorically, but it would have been just as true, literally, because Grand Constance is a sublime dessert wine – among the world's best, if not the best.

One of the earliest literary references to Constantia wines appears in the poetry of German poet Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock in 1795. In his ode "Der Kapwein und der Johannisberger," Klopstock sings the praises and the virtues of "daughter Konstanzia," preferring her wine with its "bridal blush and scent of rose oil" over wines from his homeland.

In 1811, Jane Austen immortalised Constantia wines in her novel, Sense and Sensibility. In a scene where Mrs. Jennings offers Elinor a glass of Constantia wine, she reminisces about her late husband's fondness for it, emphasising its medicinal properties and exquisite taste. Austen's inclusion of Constantia wine in her novel highlights its status as a beverage of choice among the literary classes.

In 1870, Charles Dickens referenced Constantia wines in his novel, The Mystery of Edwin Drood, further cementing their place in popular culture. French novelist, Joris-Karl Huysmans, mentioned Constantia wines in one of his novels in 1884, reinforcing their international acclaim and recognition.

The ultimate literary accolade came from French poet, Charles Baudelaire, when he referenced Constantia wine in his most famous volume Les Fleurs du Mal. He had this to say: "Only the lips of a lover surpassed it in heavenly sweetness."

Pestilence, plague and geopolitics

In 1859, Groot Constantia was hit hard by a fungal disease called Oidium Tuckeri which causes a powdery mildew to form on all the green tissues of the vine, including leaves and young berries. If left untreated, it can cause crop loss and poor quality wine, which would be a disaster for a wine farm of world renown. Back then, the Cloetes partially succeeded in combatting the disease by treating the vines with sulphur. But, of course, partial success comes with partial failure; there were losses. Today, powdery mildew is treated with a combination of effective fungicides such as sulphur, potassium bicarbonate and neem oil.



1. Jonkershuis Restaurant
2. Simon's Restaurant & Deli
3. Production Cellar (Sales, Tasting, & Art)
4. Historical Bath
5. Cloete Cellar (Sales & Tasting)
6. Manor House (Museum)
7. Bathrooms
8. City Sightseeing Bus Stop
9. Art Gallery



Hendrik Cloete Sr. (1725-1798) with his slave attendant Augustus van Bengalen

Starting in about 1860, a tiny root louse called phylloxera decimated vineyards in both America and Europe. This louse was introduced to the European continent by unwitting Victorian-era botanists who brought native American vines to Europe. From there it spread, and in 1866, it reached the vineyards of the Cape, including those of Groot Constantia – and wreaked havoc.

The root damage caused by phylloxera eventually kills the vine. In the nineteenth century, there was no truly effective cure. However, investigations during the earlier phylloxera plague across America and Europe showed that America's fox grape (*Vitis labrusca*) was immune to phylloxera, unlike the common grape vine (*Vitis vinifera*) which

was almost annihilated by it. Subsequently, most *Vitis vinifera* grapevines are now grafted onto *Vitis labrusca* rootstocks, making the *vinifera* vines highly resistant to the tiny but destructive lice.

However, the damage done on Groot Constantia was immense. Furthermore, South African wine farmers exporting to Europe were greatly disadvantaged by a 10-year free-trade agreement signed between Britain and France in 1860, which facilitated export and import between those two countries, but at the expense of others. By 1885, Groot Constantia was struggling financially, and was auctioned to the Cape government for the paltry sum of 5,275 pounds.

Did you know?

Noble Rot is a thing much desired in sweeter wines. It is a form of the grey fungus, *Botrytis cinerea*, which shrivels and decays wine grapes. Why, then, do winemakers hope and pray for it? Because it intensifies the sweetness, adding flavour and complexity. Dessert wines made from Noble Rot grapes are more viscous, sweeter, and may have higher alcohol content.

Still scooping awards today

Groot Constantia still scoops multiple awards at every top award ceremony. At the 2024 National Wine Awards, for instance, they achieved no fewer than 14 top awards, among them, three Grand Cru Awards, six Top 100 and Double Platinum Awards, two Double Gold Awards, and three Double Silver.

Groot Constantia is noted particularly for its production of high-quality reds, including Shiraz, Merlot, and a blended red Gouverneurs Reserve. Among their whites, the Gouverneurs Reserve White and the Chardonnay are noteworthy.



A stucco relief on the pediment of the cellar, baroque-style, dated 1791, showing Ganymede surrounded by gambolling cherubs.

In vineyards, roses make the best canaries

In the past, miners at work would use a domestic canary as an early warning sign for the presence of noxious gases. Carbon monoxide affects a little canary long before the gas becomes dangerous for humans, so if the canary suddenly keeled over and collapsed, this was an early alert to the miners to move to a safer area immediately.

Roses in vineyards work much the same way. Roses and grapevines are both vulnerable to the fungus known as powdery mildew, which is the most widespread fungal disease of grapevines worldwide. So wine farmers plant roses in their vineyards to warn them of the presence of this fungus. It will show on the leaves of the roses first. So, the roses are not there just because they're pretty. They're there because they could be the difference between life and death – if you're a grapevine.

A monumental legacy

A few days before Christmas in 1925, tragedy struck. A fire completely gutted the magnificent manor house, the foundations of which had been laid by Simon van der Stel toward the end of the 17th century, the homestead that the Cloetes had remodelled and lived in for a hundred years. At the time of the fire, the Groot Constantia homestead was considered the most historic farmhouse in South Africa.

An excerpt from the Herald of the day reveals the full extent of the damage: *"Other than bare blackened walls and gables, nothing of the historic wooden roof beams, ceilings, heavy wood lintels, wooden doors, window frames and built-in cupboards survived this great fire. Furthermore, a great deal of the internal wall plastering damaged by the extreme heat peeled off and continued doing so because of subsequent exposure to the elements."*

This disaster could so easily have spelt the end of the legacy. Instead, Groot Constantia rose like a phoenix from the ashes. Within weeks, architect Franklin Kendall started investigating the architectural history of the manor house and, after some debate, accepted the task of restoration. Kendall's research revealed that several 'modern' additions had taken place during the Cloete era, and rather than restore these, he set about his task guided by the principle of "Constantia, at its best." He did away with modern architectural features that, he felt, had detracted from the authenticity of the structure. Among the features to disappear forever was a lean-to corrugated iron roof that had been added, for some reason, to the back of the house.

Authentic old Cape features, on the other hand, were lovingly restored to a level even better than their former glory. The large thatch roof, for instance, made a reappearance; this despite the fact that the disastrous fire had started in the original thatch. Kendall added a brandsolder to the loft, to prevent a repetition of a similar disaster in the future. He also instructed his crew to preserve the original building material wherever possible.

After a year of restoration, the Groot Constantia homestead opened as a museum in 1927, and in 1936, it was proclaimed a national monument, along with all the objects and furniture in it. The structure, as an example of Cape Dutch architecture, is unparalleled. It bears testimony to Kendall's determination

to preserve authenticity at all cost. Consequently, the magnificent manor house that we see today is even more impressive than it was during the Cloete era.

From manor house to museum

The Groot Constantia manor house, now a museum, is furnished and maintained in the style of an affluent Cape farm homestead of the 18th and early 19th centuries, and most of the furniture was hand-crafted in the Cape. Wherever possible, the curators have placed items of furniture in matching pairs, and positioned paintings according to themes. For those who admire antique furniture and artwork, a visit to this museum is an absolute must.

Of course, all the original wooden furniture burned in the fire, so after the restoration, finding suitable antique Cloete-era furniture would have been a major challenge, had it not been for the generosity of a South African businessman, art-collector and philanthropist, one Alfred Aaron de Pass. He offered to furnish the entire homestead at his own expense. From 1927 when the museum first opened till his death in 1952, he ceaselessly sourced, bought and donated suitable artefacts and antique furniture for the Groot Constantia manor-house museum.

The main bedroom is situated on the eastern side of the homestead, with a view of the garden, the vineyards, and the Atlantic ocean in the distance. The furniture here dates from, and reflects, 18th and early 19th century life. The four-poster bed, alone, is worth a visit. It is said to have belonged to J H Hofmeyr, renowned Afrikaans poet. The lack of inside bathroom and toilet facilities was typical of the times, since outhouses were all the mode. What you will see is a baby bath and a bidet, side by side, as examples of the kind of portable wash facilities that were in use during those times.

The great satinwood cupboard that is believed to have been built and crafted for Anna de Koningh is a thing of astonishing achievement. For one thing, it is massive at 2,3 metres high; it has eight huge ornate drawers, and multiple shelves. Clearly, Anna did not suffer lack of cupboard space. However, the most remarkable feature of this cupboard is the fact that it can be dismantled into eight pieces, to be loaded onto an ox-wagon, in order to accompany its mistress when she travelled. Arguably, the biggest piece of flatpack furniture on the planet, and centuries ahead of Ikea. When assembled,

not a single join is visible. It is the work of a master craftsman who will remain forever nameless.

The great dining hall is the most impressive room of the manor. It was created by Hendrik Cloete and his architect during their remodelling phase. They widened what used to be a long narrow passageway to create an elegant reception area and dining room of majestic proportions. It was here that elegant soirees and luncheons were held, for society guests such as Lady Anne Barnard and Lord Morningson, the elder brother of the Duke of Wellington.



Cloete Cellar building, the original wine cellar at the estate.

The Cloete Cellar

The beautiful Cloete Cellar was originally a wine production cellar. In fact, it was the birthplace of Grand Constance, Groot Constantia's iconic dessert wine. The cellar is now a wine museum and tasting room. Architecturally, it is a work of art. Kendall, the architect who restored the manor house after the fire, was of the opinion that Hendrik Cloete must have hired Louis Michel Thibault and Anton Anreith as architect and sculptor, respectively, to design and beautify the cellar. There is no evidence to validate this, save for the style of the structure itself and its adornment. According to Kendall, the cellar, once completed, would have surpassed the original farmhouse in appearance. For instance, there is a stucco relief on the pediment of the cellar, done in baroque-style and dated 1791, which shows Ganymede, cupbearer of the gods, on Jove's eagle and surrounded by gambolling cherubs.

WINETASTING: A SENSORY EXPERIENCE

Many professional wine tasters claim that wine tasting uses all five of our senses: sight, smell, taste, touch and hearing. You may well ask, where do touch and hearing come into it? Touch is in the way you hold the glass. The typical wine glass has a slender stem attached to a rounded bowl which narrows towards the open end, to concentrate the aromas. You should hold the glass by its stem, because cupping your hand around the bowl may warm up the wine, above its optimum temperature. Our hearing is piqued upon the sound of a cork being extracted from its bottle, the sound of wine being poured, particularly sparkling wines like champagne.

APPEARANCE IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER: Pour about 400ml of wine into your glass, or have the sommelier do it for you. Holding the glass by the stem, angle it slightly, above something white, to examine the appearance. Assuming it's a white wine, the colour could range between almost colourless to deep gold. If it is a deep gold, this could signify that the wine has been aged in oak, for quite some time.

SMELL MEANS PUTTING YOUR NOSE IN: Gently swirl the glass to release the flavours, then lift the glass to your nose. The tip of your nose should be inside the glass as you breathe in, gently, preferably with a slightly open mouth so as to open up the olfactory system. Your nose may detect fruit such as citrus, florals like honeysuckle, spices such as cloves or nutmeg, even toasty or nutty notes. The buttery, yeasty notes in some chardonnays signify that the yeast cells may have been stirred while the wine matured. Cloves and nutty notes also signify oak ageing.

TASTE AND TONGUE (MOUTHFEEL): Take a small sip and hold it in your mouth for a few seconds, swirling it around your tongue as you breathe in, slowly, through your nose. We do this because taste is an extension of smell, so many of the flavours you taste actually come through your nose, since the nose is connected to the back of the mouth. Be aware of "the finish," that is to say, how long can you taste the wine after you have swallowed it, or spat it out? A long finish usually signifies grapes that were harvested full of flavour, suggesting a high-quality wine.

THE WINE SPITTOON: Often, good manners prevent us from spitting out the wine after tasting it. However, if you're determined to taste every vine available, best you use the spittoon, as do most professionals. Alternatively, make sure you have a dedicated driver in your group.

The historic ornamental bath

The estate also boasts an early version of the family splash pool. You'll find it at the end of an oak-lined pathway that leads about 500 metres up the gentle foothills of Table Mountain. It is a pleasing oval in shape, and about 12m x 8m in size. You can visualise the Cloetes having a family picnic poolside, shaded from the summer heat by several trees, with an expansive view of the vineyards and the ocean in the distance.

The mystery of the missing slave bell

Until fairly recently, Groot Constantia was home to a historic slave bell, cast in 1716, but it disappeared in the early hours of 1 September 2024. The 300-year-old brass bell was 30 to 35cm in height and width, and weighed 110kg. The assumption was that it was stolen for its value as scrap metal. A subsequent investigation led to the recovery of the clapper, but the remaining parts of the bell are still missing. A more romantic legend has it that the slave bell was "done away with" as a protest against slavery.

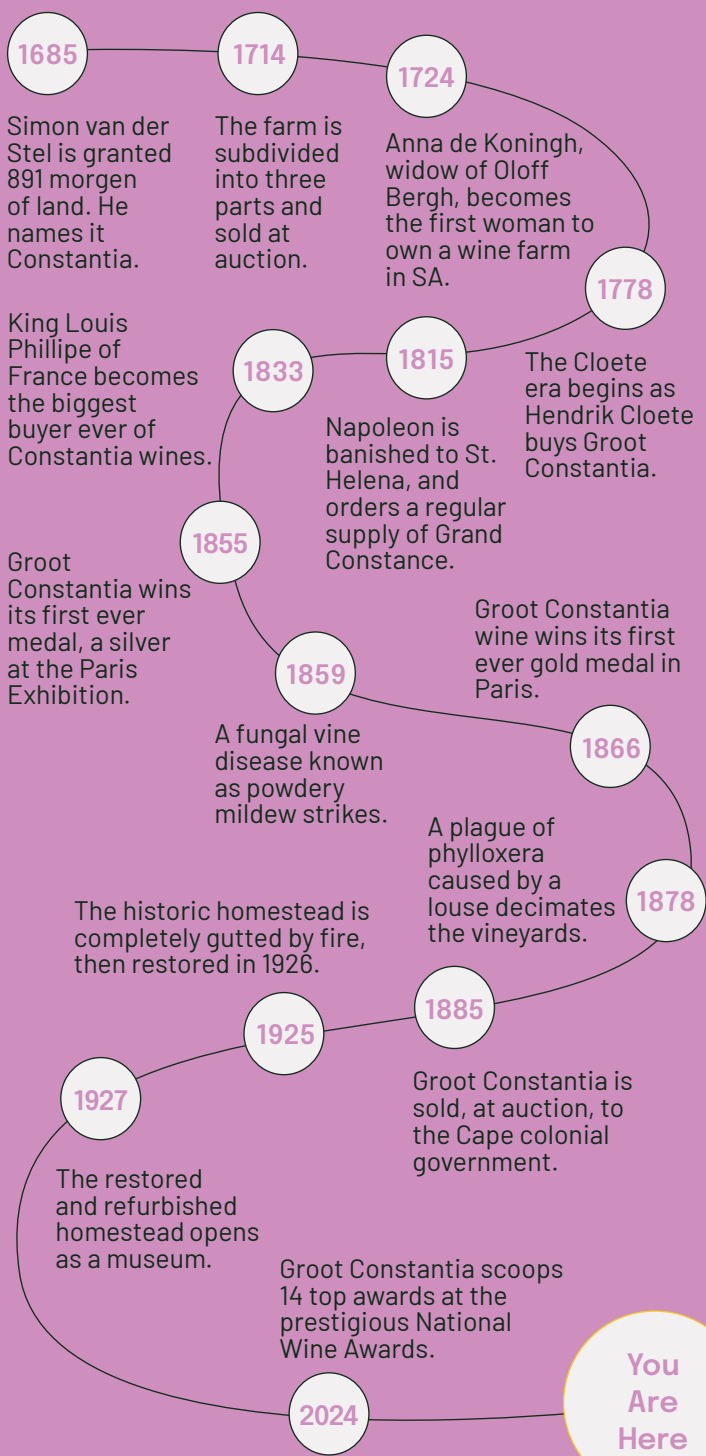
Fine dining and wining on the estate

Visitors to Constantia can choose between two fine restaurants: **Jonkershuis and Simon's**. Jonkershuis offers diverse dining styles, from private dining grandeur to intimate fireside dining, as well as family-style lunches on the front lawn. Simon's Restaurant offers breakfast, lunch, dinner, and decadent high teas. All meals can be accompanied by the finest wines.



Jonkershuis Curry

The Timeline



Groot Constantia manor house, a historic Cape Dutch building

The legacy lives on in Grand Constance

About twenty years ago, in 2005, the legacy of Constantia wines was revived by the relaunch of the multi-award-winning Grand Constance, that same heavenly desert wine so favoured by Napoleon during his exile on the Island of Saint Helena. This historic wine continues to captivate modern audiences with its rich history and exquisite taste. The association with Napoleon has led to record-breaking sales of Grand Constance wines at auctions, further solidifying its status as a collector's item and a symbol of luxury. Groot Constantia's Grand Constance can honestly claim to be South Africa's oldest, most revered and best-selling brand. It is the most iconic brand on every connoisseur's bucket list.

Evidently, 2021 was a particularly good bicentennial year for the 1821 vintage, because in May of 2021, a bottle of 1821 Grand Constance was sold at auction for R420,000. In September of the same year, another bottle of 1821 Grand Constance was auctioned by Strauss & Co at one of their virtual live auctions for the staggering amount of R967,300 (that's almost a million). Apparently, those two bottles were earmarked to be shipped to Napoleon, but word arrived of his death in May 1821, before the shipment could be finalised. So now, at least two twenty-first century collectors sit with this quandary: do we open it and enjoy it before we die, or do we hoard it in some secret cellar somewhere as an investment for future generations?



Groot Constantia Wine and Gift Shop



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