

WINE
TALK

350 Years On

Jacqui Latimer explores the colourful history of Cape winemaking, which celebrates its 350th birthday on 2 February 2009

350 years ago it took months to sail from Holland to the Cape. That's a long time to wait for your wine stocks to be replenished. Perhaps this frustrating reality prompted the original *boer* to "maak 'n plan" and try his hand at winemaking. Five years after arriving at the Cape, Jan van Riebeeck diversified his fruit and veg portfolio in the company gardens and planted some vines. Three years later, on 2 February 1659, he recorded in his diary, in Dutch, "Today, praise be to God, wine was made for the first time from Cape grapes, namely from new must fresh from the vat."

In their brief history of winemaking at the Cape, compiled for the 350 year celebrations, Dave Hughes and Bennie Howard point out that nowhere does Jan comment on his wine's drinkability. Dubious or delightful, viticulture had arrived at the Cape, and before leaving for Batavia in 1662, Jan made a few hectolitres of good quality wine from grapes planted on his farm, Bosheuvel, in Wynberg.

350 years on, a winemaking history packed with skulduggery, triumph and tragedy has delivered a thriving South African industry. Between 1995 and 2007 exports grew by 335 per cent, thanks to the dawn of South African democracy. Currently, more than 3 999 farmers cultivate some 101 950 hectares of land under vines. The industry



provides around 256 900 people with employment and the annual harvest in 2007 amounted to 1 351 447 tons.

Impressive stuff. But, what was that mention of skulduggery? A pop history blitz through the characters, plus highlights and lowlights of Cape winemaking, may help to contextualise the cup that brimmeth over.

After Jan got the ball rolling, things cooled off at the Cape on the winemaking front until Simon van der Stel was appointed Governor in 1679. Simon was an ideas man and policing a refreshment station didn't blow his powdered hair back. He wanted to develop the Cape settlement into an agricultural colony and he established farming communities at Stellenbosch along the Eerste River and later in the Drakenstein Valley along the Berg River.

The Drakenstein area proved

particularly suited to viticulture and by 1700 it was producing more wine than the Stellenbosch and Constantia districts. Things were helped along, somewhat, by the Dutch East India Company importing persecuted French Protestants who knew their way around a wine press.

Back on the Peninsula, Simon took a personal interest in developing viticulture in the Constantia Valley and, for his selfless efforts, was granted a 770 ha farm on the lower slopes of the Steenberg. He named the farm Constantia and well into his retirement made, from a few thousand vines, excellent wine of Muscadel, Pontac and Muscat de Frontignan.

Simon's good wine proved an inspiration to his colonists, who were thrilled with the results when they adopted his fastidious viticultural practices. Back then, ideas like pressing grapes only when fully ripe, fining the wine and keeping casks and cellar clean were cutting edge.

By the time Simon's eldest son, Willem Adriaan, took over as Governor of the Cape in 1699, viticulture was emerging as a profitable agricultural endeavour. And if there was something Willem Adriaan fancied, it was profit.

The farm Vergelegen was born when a visiting Commissioner of the Dutch East India Company granted Willem Adriaan a huge tract of land on the

upper course of the Lourens River. The Directors of the VOC didn't approve of this generous act and their reservations weren't unfounded. Willem Adriaan promptly set about illegally extending the original 344 ha to 525 ha and started pilfering the best plants from the company gardens.

Before his dodgy dealings caught up with him, which led to his removal from office in 1707, Willem Adriaan had planted about 40 000 vines at Vergelegen, doubling the total vineyard footprint of the colony. His prized farm was divided up and sold to colonists but thanks to his avarice, wine production had increased enormously. By the end of the 18th century viticulture had developed into an independent branch of agriculture at the Cape.

Of course, the expansion of agriculture and industry all over the world at the time was fuelled by the slave trade, which provided colonies with cheap labour to carve out their dominions. The Iziko Museum at Groot Constantia and the Museum de Caab at Solms Delta pay poignant homage to the slave men and women who enabled the rapid expansion of viticulture at the Cape.

For the next two centuries, the fame of Constantia wines spread. Napoleon Bonaparte was a fan during his exile on St Helena and Dickens, Baudelaire, and Jane Austen all sang its praises.

In stark contrast to the famous Constantia wines, until the late 19th century, the balance of the colony's wine production was inferior quality Madeira made mainly from Semillon. By 1850 even the robust colonial love

of drink couldn't absorb the surpluses of this rough and ready stuff. Farmers endured periods of feast or famine at the mercy of short-term markets created by overseas wars and trade embargoes.

In the 1880s, this volatile industry spiralled into crisis. A scourge crept into world vineyards. Only America, the source of the pest, was immune. The villain was the root louse, *phylloxera*, which decimated Cape vineyards.

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Farmers were forced to destroy their vines and replant vineyards with phylloxera-resistant American root-stock.

The phylloxera fallout and the period of over-production which followed led to the formation of the Koöperatiewe Wijnbouwers Vereeniging Beperkt van Zuid-Afrika (KWV) in 1918. KWV protected the interests of farmers by regulating the sale and purchase of grapes and wine through a quota system and establishing a minimum wine price.

The industry stabilised and innovation flourished. A new South African grape variety was born when Prof A I Perold crossed Pinot Noir and Cinsaut (Hermitage) to create Pinotage, released commercially in 1961. At Nederburg, Günter Brözel made the first botrytis-type noble late harvest wine in modern times from the 1969 vintage and opened up sales via postal auction. The foundation for the annual Nederburg Auction, first held in 1975, had been laid.

Nederburg again pushed the envelope

with cold fermentation, pioneered by Johann Graue in the 1950s. By the end of the decade, this technique was being widely adopted.

Science was proving integral to good winemaking, and the establishment of the Viticultural and Oenological Research Institute at Nietvoorbij in 1955 took local viticulture to the next level. One of their first projects with Stellenbosch Farmers' Winery led to the

launch of Lieberstein—the people's drink. In 1964 this semi-sweet table wine was a sensation. It got South Africans into drinking wine in a big way and even became the world's top selling brand.

In 1979 we see the Cape Wine Academy being established, the Independent Winemakers' Guild (now known as the Cape Winemakers Guild) held its inaugural annual auction in 1985, and the next year saw the birth of the Wine-of-the-Month Club. The launch of the Veritas awards came in 1991. And in 1992 the KWV quota system was scrapped. As democracy dawned, international markets opened up—perfect timing for an industry now freed for growth.

Towards the end of the 20th century, the SA Wine Exporters' Association was formed, now known as Wines of South Africa, to promote South African wine on international markets.

So, as we charge our glasses with the country's finest, we're not just celebrating great wines. We're paying homage to the *skelms* and heroes and 350 years of human suffering, hard work and setbacks ... and a touch of inspiration. **GT**