



Groot Constantia

Cape Town • South Africa



The story of Groot Constantia including historical information and other interesting facts



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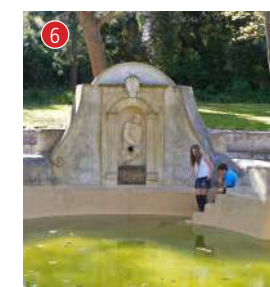
Nineteenth century poet, Charles Pierre Baudelaire, on visiting Constantia and tasting its wine.



A good excuse for making wine

The legacy of Groot Constantia has its roots in one man who needed to have a very good excuse to make wine. His mandate was to start a permanent replenishment station at the Cape, supplying fruit, vegetables and meat to passing ships en route to the Far East – all this under the orders of the Dutch East India Company (DEIC or VOC). This man was Jan van Riebeeck, who landed at the Cape in 1652. The making of wine was never on the company's agenda, but any man of high standing knew that producing wine from one's own vineyard was the epitome of status. Within a month, Van Riebeeck had sent a letter to Holland explaining the need for vines. The reason that he came up with was that wine was the best way to combat scurvy. Having a medical background, he had noted that European powers whose sailors were given wine as part of their rations had a much lower mortality rate. His request was granted and grape vines were duly sent. With the help of the Company's gardener,

Hendrik Boom, and his assistant, Jacob Cloete van Kempen (whose descendants became the cornerstone of the history of Groot Constantia), the first vines were planted in the Company's Garden. These vines flourished even though no one had a clue about viticulture. A larger site was needed to expand this important new project. Green Point Common was the next site chosen but this turned out to be too windy and the water in the vlei was too brackish. Van Riebeeck then turned his attention to the other side of Table Mountain – to the banks of the Liesbeek River in the area of today's Mowbray, Rondebosch and Newlands. This area, when it came to growing vines, surpassed his expectations. By 1658 the company farm, Boschevel, had its first substantial vines growing.



The oval bath has its own scrolled gable with a niche containing a figure of Triton, flanked by pilasters and two built-in benches.

A few years later, free burghers had crossed the Cape Flats and set up farms under the shadows of the Cape Fold Mountains. Van Riebeeck left the Cape in 1662. Wine continued to be made and consumed at the Cape but the quality was dreadful because the grapes were picked far too soon in order to prevent the birds eating them. In addition the long sea voyage adversely affected the wine; therefore the European wine drinkers found it generally unpalatable. Before the founder of Groot Constantia arrived at the Cape 17 years after Van Riebeeck, there was a slow decline on all levels; the small colony was in disarray and the wine industry was in a sad state.

No excuse for making bad wine

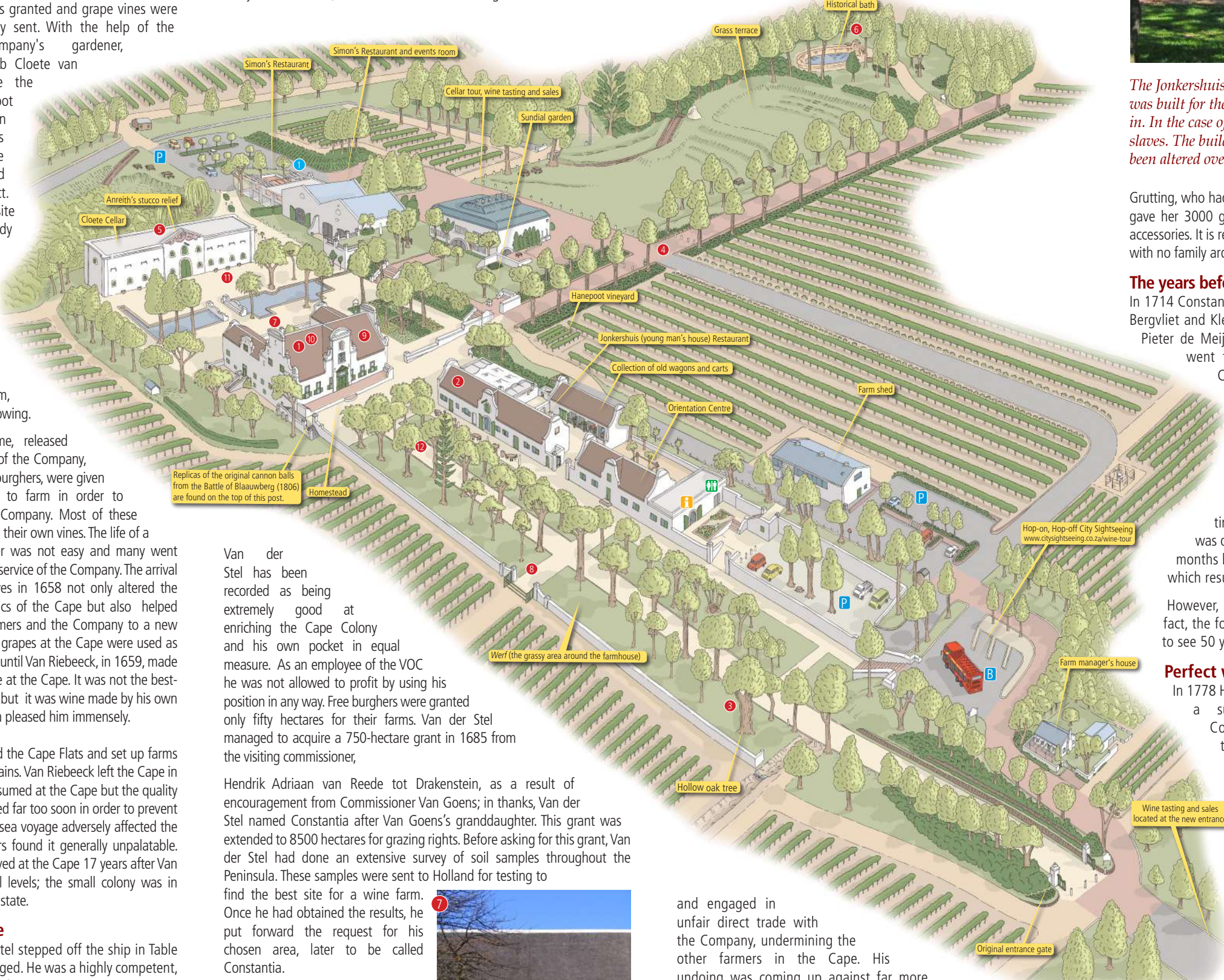
The minute Commander Simon van der Stel stepped off the ship in Table Bay (1679), the fortunes of the Cape changed. He was a highly competent, learned and busy man. He was the son of a mixed marriage and hailed



A breathtaking view of Groot Constantia from one of its higher vineyards. The homestead can be seen just left of the centre; beyond is the Constantia valley with the Cape Fold Mountains in the distance and False Bay and Muizenberg mountain on the right.

from the Island of Mauritius. His re-organizing of the Cape started with a visit to the Hottentots-Holland with a chance detour to an area loosely called Wildebosch, where he founded a free burgher settlement and called it Stellenbosch, a name that has become synonymous with the wine industry of South Africa. At first the free burghers who produced wine did not want to follow his advice on methods of grape cultivation and winemaking. His new ideas included leaving the grapes on the vine for as long as possible, new processing methods and promotion of hygiene. However, with the first favourable export of wine from Van der Stel's vineyard to Holland, the farmers started following his methods.

It is recorded that he held lavish parties, with many well-known guests. On the business front he had a thriving wine export business. The last few years of his life were a different story. His sons, Willem Adriaan and Frans, were recalled from the Cape for their extravagant misuse of their positions in the Company. Willem Adriaan had succeeded his father as governor and had taken self-enrichment to a new level. He gave himself a farm, Vergelegen, in Somerset West with the use of 600 Company slaves at no charge



Van der Stel was recorded as being extremely good at enriching the Cape Colony and his own pocket in equal measure. As an employee of the VOC he was not allowed to profit by using his position in any way. Free burghers were granted only fifty hectares for their farms. Van der Stel managed to acquire a 750-hectare grant in 1685 from the visiting commissioner, Hendrik Adriaan van Reede tot Drakenstein, as a result of encouragement from Commissioner Van Goens; in thanks, Van der Stel named Constantia after Van Goens's granddaughter. This grant was extended to 8500 hectares for grazing rights. Before asking for this grant, Van der Stel had done an extensive survey of soil samples throughout the Peninsula. These samples were sent to Holland for testing to find the best site for a wine farm. Once he had obtained the results, he put forward the request for his chosen area, later to be called Constantia.

Here Van der Stel created his pride and joy, which became the showcase of wine farms. Most of the layout of the farm we see today is Van der Stel's but the buildings have changed in appearance, from ones of red face bricks and clinker bricks to beautiful neoclassical buildings under Hendrik Cloete's watch.

During Van der Stel's time at Constantia (without his wife, who



The back of the homestead with the door into the agterkamer



The Jonkershuis with its beautiful bell-shaped gables (klokgewel) was built for the jonkheer, or oldest son of the farm owner, to live in. In the case of Groot Constantia, these buildings probably housed slaves. The buildings were built in Van der Stel's time but have been altered over the years.

Grutting, who had been born on the farm and lived there her whole life; he gave her 3000 guildens, half the governor's linen and a bed with all its accessories. It is recorded that he died on his beloved farm a lonely sad man with no family around him. He is buried in the Grootte Kerk in Cape Town.

The years before the golden age

In 1714 Constantia was divided up and sold. The property was split into Bergvliet and Klein Constantia, both of which went to the auctioneer, Pieter de Meijer, and the remainder, later called Groot Constantia, went to Captain Oloff Bergh. Bergh had worked for the Company and had been sentenced for theft and neglect of duties. With this background, it is understandable that he did nothing to improve his newly acquired farm. He is better known for his marriage to Anna de Koningh, an extremely beautiful woman who was the daughter of Batavian slaves. After Bergh's death, Anna owned the farm for the next ten years. After she had sold the farm, it changed hands several times, coming into the possession of Jan Serrurier who was once the owner of Alphen. He owned Constantia for 11 months but did not make a success of it, owing to hail damage, which resulted in a poor crop.

However, the fortunes of Constantia were about to change. In fact, the fortunes of the wine industry throughout the Cape were to see 50 years of unprecedented success and prosperity.

Perfect wine, golden years

In 1778 Hendrik Cloete, one of the Cape's largest landowners and a successful wine farmer, bought Constantia. This was the beginning of the Cloete dynasty which was to span five generations and would put Cape wines on the world map. These wines were of such high standing and unique taste that they were drunk by kings and noblemen.

Cloete was an excellent winemaker but history also played a part in his success and that of the wine industry at the Cape. During the last half of the 18th century, the politics of Europe played a major role. The French Revolutionary wars and the Napoleonic wars cut off the flow of wine from France, and the Cape became a new source of wine for England (a new wine-drinking country) and other European powers. At this stage, the Dutch East India Company was in decline, never to recover.

The new wealth resulting from the export of wine was



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Basic Information on Cape Dutch Gables

Wolfsneus Gable
 'Wolf's nose' gables were the first front gables to be designed and built as a functional 'eyebrow' over a dormer window (to provide light for the loft) above the front door. From this humble gable, based on the medieval architecture of the Netherlands, the style of Cape Dutch gables grew into one of the most recognisable 'settle' architectures in the world.

Bolbol Gable
 By the mid-1750s, the gables at the Cape had reached their full height, a reflection of the prosperity of the time. From then, gables would be defined by whether the edge was concave or convex in shape. In the case of this early gable type, there was a distinct repeat of the rounded convex shape.

Holbol Gable
 By the end of the 1700s, the gables at the Cape were influenced by the Baroque style, which meant many more decorative elements, swirls and flourishes, but the defining feature that set this gable type apart from the bolbol style was the mix of convex and concave edges.

Neo-classical Gable
 This was the last of the Cape Dutch gable styles before the Second British Occupation of the Cape in 1806. The style could be defined as singularly elegant, restrained and dignified, with minimal ornamentation between the gable edges. Gable-caps might contain urns. More than likely the concave shape was used and, in some cases, a straight edge. A strongly defined pediment and pilaster are defining features. The pediment could be triangular, rounded or sculpted.

Basic Cape Dutch house plan development

Basic Oblong and L-Plan
 The first houses at the Cape were simple three-roomed houses, with utilitarian end gables to hold the thatch in place. At a later date an afdak was added to form an L.

Basic U-Plan
 Within 20 years, the L-Plan was repeated on the other side of the house, forming a U-shape. The courtyard between these two rooms was roofed over, forming an agterkamer. Rooms were added at the back.

Basic T-Plan
 While the U-Plan was developing in Cape Town, the T-Plan was evolving in the rural areas. This design consists of a voorkamer, agterkamer, a kitchen at the end with a built-in chimney and two front rooms off the side of the voorkamer.

Basic H-Plan
 The ultimate design developed in the country in the form of extending the T-Plan by adding two rooms off the back room. This design developed when the Cape started to enjoy prosperity.

For More Information

Groot Constantia: Tel: 021 794 5128 • Fax: 021 794 1999
 Email: enquiries@grootconstantia.co.za
 Open: Seven days a week, including public holidays
 Closed only on Good Friday and Christmas Day.
 Wine tasting: 09h00 – 17h30 (sales until 18h00).
 Cellar tours: every hour on the hour from 10h00 – 16h00.
 Thanks to: Matthys van der Merwe of Iziko for his assistance
 Shelley Brown for editorial input
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reflected in the homes of the farmers. Homesteads became bigger; the once simple oblong houses changed into bigger U-plans, T-plans and H-plans. The most obvious feature reflecting the new-found wealth was the use of embellished gables. Fashions in Europe influenced the design of the gables at the Cape but a unique local flair was added, as the craftsmen (mostly from the Far East) were ex-slaves and tradesmen whose cultural influence crept into the designs. Hendrik Cloete plastered and white-washed Van der Stel's red face brick house. He kept the layout of the farm buildings but renovated them in the Cape Dutch style. He added the large wine cellar behind the manor house, sparing no money. He probably used the most celebrated architect of the time, Louis Michel Thibault, and had Anton Anreith create the stucco relief above the front door of the wine cellar. He raised the manor house by making the ground floor into cellars, the old first floor becoming the ground floor. The ground in front of the house was built up to accommodate this change. The house was widened and the roof made higher. Then he added a most beautiful neoclassical gable of the rare *halsgewel* type that was taller than any in the Cape.

In 1780 war was declared between Britain and France. Because the Cape was under Dutch control and therefore allied with France, a year later a large French force arrived at the Cape to defend it against the British. During their short stay, Cape Town was known as 'Little Paris' – one can just imagine the amount of local wine consumed, to the delight of the local farmers.

In 1795 the British took control of the Cape after a short battle at Muizenberg. At first, the burghers were very unfriendly to their new masters, but the burghers had to sign an oath of allegiance to the British at the Castle or face deportation. Some Anglo-Dutch friendships did develop, as in the case of Lady Anne Barnard and Hendrik Cloete. The British left the Cape for a short time after Britain and Holland had signed a peace treaty. During this time, the wine farmers experienced a slump in export sales and had to rely on local sales and passing ships.

Within seven years, the British were again at war with their old enemy and were back at the Cape after a short battle at Blaauwberg. Again, the wine trade benefited, with France once more not trading wine with Britain.

At this time, Hendrik Cloete died and his son, also named Hendrik, took over the farm. He was just as successful as his father and his red and white wines were well received and acknowledged overseas. When he died, his wife, Anna Catherina, ran the farm for six years until her son, Jacob Pieter, was old enough to take over. During his tenure, the farm was first known as Groot Constantia; this was at a time when its wines had unprecedented acceptance. Louis Philippe of France sent emissaries to the Cape to buy his wine; the King of Prussia was also on his order books. Napoleon Bonaparte, exiled on the island of St Helena, ordered it by the caseload, and it is said that while he lay dying, his last



Van der Stel planted thousands of oak trees, but because of the Cape weather, they grew too fast, making their wood useless for carpentry. They were, however, useful for windbreaks and very pleasing on the eye.

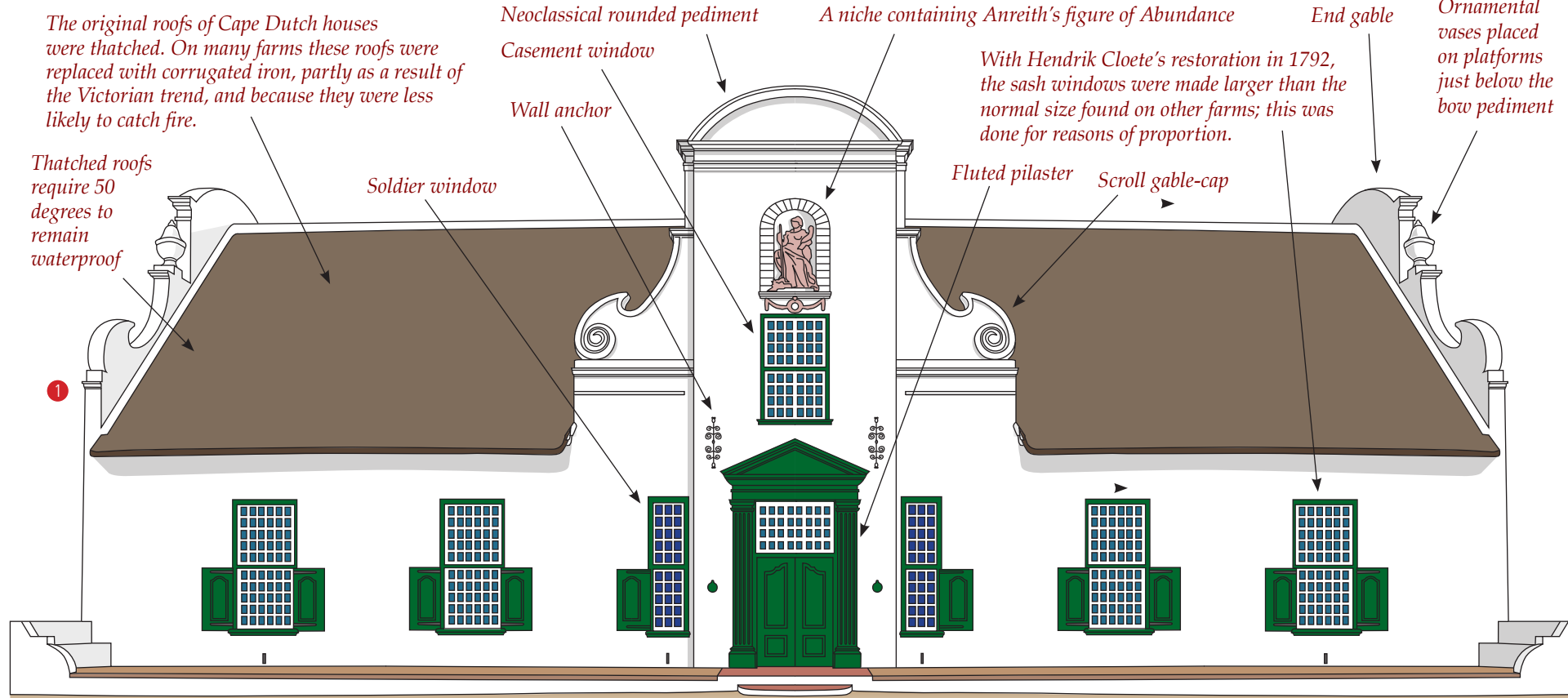


Anton Anreith's 1791 Rococo-style stucco relief of Ganymede, cup-bearer to the gods, with cherubs adorns the Cloete Cellar pediment.

request was for a glass of Constantia wine. So popular was Constantia wine that Jane Austen 'name dropped' it in her novel, *Sense and Sensibility*; Charles Dickens made reference to Constantia wine in his writings too, and famous poets sang its praises.

What made Groot Constantia wine so different? What was the secret? The renowned botanist William Burchell, who visited the farm in 1811, explained

Britain and France, which came about at the end of the Napoleonic wars, made them poorer. France once again exported wine to Britain, cutting the Cape out of the market by price and location. To save the wine industry in the Cape, the British government in 1825 placed heavy tariffs on French wine; this seemed to give the Cape farmers a reprieve. 1834 was the year of the emancipation of the slaves, which affected the farmers not just financially but politically; the



The homestead we see today is the result of the restoration efforts of Hendrik Cloete in 1792. He doubled the width of the previous roof and thatched it. The height of the roof was doubled to keep the 50 degree rule. One metre was added to the height of the exterior walls to keep the right architectural proportions, thus requiring larger sash windows. Because of the new height of the roof, a much taller gable, the tallest seen at the Cape, was required to keep the proportions correct. This new neoclassical gable, influenced by those in Amsterdam and Flanders, was known by many names, such as Slender gable, Cape Flemish gable, Straight Amsterdam gable, Peninsula Cape Flemish gable, or just Peninsula gable.

in his writing the methods used. The vines at Constantia were kept as dwarf bushes and the grapes were allowed to hang on the vine close to the ground. This allowed the heat off the ground to affect the grapes and give them a higher sugar content. The branches were twisted to reduce nutritional flow, the result being a richer, sweeter quality. Grapes were left on the vine as long as possible, to the point of allowing the grapes to shrivel, making the juice almost a syrup. Finally, wines were always blended. The result of all these methods was an incomparable sweet full-bodied dessert wine.

Jacob was riding high at this time, but just as the war in Europe had benefited the Cape wine farmers and made them rich, peace between



The homestead was refurbished as a gift by Alfred Aaron de Pass

result was the beginning of the Great Trek by many Cape farmers. The final nail in the coffin, to end the golden years of wine farming in the Cape, was a disastrous fungal disease that swept through the wine-farming communities in 1872. Jacob's financial situation took such a bad knock that he was declared insolvent. He managed to keep the farm, which he gave to his son, Hendrik, who then gave it to his son, Freddie. Hendrik, probably still in shock from what had happened to his father, left for Europe on a ten-year quest to study and find solutions to fungal problems in viticulture.

The end and a new beginning
 In 1885 Groot Constantia was sold by public auction for £5000 and was



Cellars under the homestead Cloete Cellar with Iziko museum



The avenue of oak trees leading up to the oval pool

bought by the Cape government to be used as an experimental wine farm. This new institution was run by Baron Carl von Babo who, on his arrival at the farm, could not believe that grapes were still pressed by labourers' feet. That same year, the dreaded phylloxera epidemic, which had ravaged vineyards around the world, finally arrived at the Cape, starting on a farm at Mowbray. It did not take long for it to spread to other vineyards throughout the Cape. Groot Constantia did not escape the scourge, which meant new vines, grafted onto American disease-resistant stock, were planted. An advantage of the need to replant was that rows were made wider in accordance with modern practice.

For 40 years the farm experienced no major commercial problems, but in 1925 all this changed with one little spark. The homestead was destroyed within hours by a fire that started from a spark from the kitchen chimney. Virtually everything was destroyed except the walls and gables. A team under the architect FK Kendall, a one-time associate of Sir Herbert Baker, who was Cecil Rhodes' architect, undertook a meticulous restoration, the end result being what we see today. One positive thing that the fire did was to reveal details about the house before Cloete's restoration in 1792. The homestead was refurbished as a result of the generosity of Alfred Aaron de Pass.

The government handed over the farm to an independent trust in 1993 and since then it has been run as a profit-making business, to which visitors have free access that enables them to enjoy this special part of our heritage and buy wines with a long history.



The neoclassical gable of the Halsgewel style with a niche containing Anreith's figure of Abundance



January Early varieties of grapes are beginning to ripen. Irrigation of young vines takes place. Weeds growing close to the vines must be eradicated. Equipment for the pressing season is prepared.

February Aeration of the grapes is of the utmost importance. Fertiliser for next season is planned. Vines are selected for grafting. Grapes are harvested throughout the month to a fixed plan according to their type.

March By the end of March, the crop has been brought in. Irrigation takes place to stop deformation and allows the wood to mature properly. All undesirable grass is destroyed.

April Soil is prepared before winter. Sown cover crops are grown. Contouring, piping and ditches are constructed or inspected. Biological control methods are used to eliminate undesirable insects.

May Soils for new plantings are fully prepared. Preparation for pruning is underway. Pruning is started as soon as the leaves have fallen and preferably after a good rain to prevent dry wounds.

June In new vineyards, different trellises are chosen and erected according to different conditions. At the end of this month, final pruning of some vine types is started. Ant control also takes place.

July Weather permitting, cleaning and ploughing takes place around the vines. Blocks are planned and laid out for new vineyards. Gaps of missing vines are filled in a year after planting the vineyard.

August Grafted vines for new vineyards are put in note. The spring fertilisation is applied. Cover crops are ploughed in. The vines will start growing. Lime sulphur is applied as necessary.

September New vineyards are watered if dry. Missing vines are replaced. Cleaning around vines is done. On windless days dusting of vines is done to prevent diseases that could destroy the vines.

October Second ploughing is done. Young vines are attached to pegs to form a straight line. Dead vines are replaced. Insect control is undertaken. In trellised vineyards, the shoots are removed from the stem.

November Weed control is done if required. Vines need moisture for sufficient growth and leaf surface. Slight topping takes place. Trellised vines need their shoots tied up.

December Minimum cultivation takes place. Irrigation is important during this hot month. The main shoots of young trellised vines are tied up. Spraying against insects and diseases is imperative.

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