



BRAND STORIES:

HISTORY OF CONSTANTIA

Simon van der Stel is the founding father of Constantia. He was the son of Commander Adriaen van der Stel and Maria Lievens of Batavia, daughter of a slave woman capture on the Commander Coast and taken to Batavia, the headquarters of the Dutch East India Company in the East.

Simon van der Stel spent his first seven years in Mauritius where his father was commander of the DEIC post on the island. Fortunes for the family changed in 1646 when Adriaen van der Stel was killed on the island of Ceylon during a military campaign; Maria Lievens passed away a few years later leaving Simon and his two sisters as orphans at a fairly young age. In December 1659, the twenty-year old Van der Stel left Batavia and arrived at the Cape of Good Hope early in March 1660, where he spent three weeks whilst the return fleet took in fresh produce and water before sailing on to Europe where he was to further his education. In 1663, at the age of twenty four, he married into the wealthy Six family of Amsterdam in Haarlem. Van der Stel and his family moved to Amsterdam where he participated in civic and military life. He owned several properties and even two vineyards at Muidenberg where wine and brandy were made. After nineteen years in the Dutch Republic, Van der Stel and his six children, accompanied by his sister-in-law, Cornelia Six, arrived at the Cape in 1679 following his appointment as commander of the Cape of Good Hope (From stories about him it could be gathered that he was a perfectionist who paid a lot of attention to detail and he never embarked on a project without proper planning or a lack of vision.)

It is clear that he chose the land which he requested to be granted to him with great care. It is said that he had soil samples taken from the Castle to beyond Table Mountain: his choice fell on a piece of land covered with heath, grass and forests in the valley beyond the Wijnberg. The land was promised to him by Commissioner Rijckloff van Goens the Younger in 1684, but the grant for the 760ha was formally signed by Hendrik Adriaan van Reede tot Drakenstein, Lord of Mijdrecht, the visiting High Commissioner of the DEIC, on 13 July 1685. Many theories abound as to why Van der Stel named the farm Constantia: the one supported by prominent historians today is that it was named after Constantia Louisa, the young daughter of Commissioner Van Goens who promised the farm to Van der Stel.

Early visitors to Constantia commented on the hospitality they received, its extensive vineyards and orchards and the quality of its wines and great variety of fruit. After developing his farm for 27 years, Simon van der Stel passed away in 1712. The farm was subdivided into three portions, Constantia, Hoop op Constantia (then known as Klein Constantia and Bergvliet and sold off to a number of individuals). During the 18th century the neighbouring Colijns on Hoop op Constantia (then known as 'klein' or 'lesser' Constantia) made significant contributions to the quality of the wines produced on the two farms. Buitenverwachting and Constantia Uitsig used to form part of

Bergvliet. Groot Constantia's history, as is the case with all the farms in the Constantia Valley, is closely linked to slave history: a number of owners were of slave descent, including Anna De Koningh, widow of Captain Olof Bergh, she was the first woman who owned Groot Constantia. Over a period of a century and a half large numbers of slaves and indentured labourers worked with the owners to transform the Constantia Valley into an agricultural landscape. Today, various businesses are operating successfully on the same land that was chosen by Simon van der Stel and are still upholding his values and sharing his vision for the future.

Steenberg was not part of the original Van der Stel property and was granted to Catharina Ras in 1682. Eagles Nest, Constantia Glen and Beau Constantia were part of Witteboomen which was purchased later by Simon van der Stel in 1697 and which he owned until his death.

Constantia is the oldest New World Wine Region in the world.

Historically, the sweet Constantia wines produced during the 18th and 19th centuries were the only great wines from the Southern Hemisphere. During this time, Constantia wine was valued by the Kings and Emperors of Europe including the Prussian **King Frederick the Great** and **King George IV** of England. **Napoleon Bonaparte** insisted on only Constantia wines and legend has it that he requested a glass on the evening of his death whilst in exile. Constantia wine was also celebrated by poets and writers. In *Sense and Sensibility*, **Jane Austen** recommended a glass of Constantia to her heroine for its “healing powers on a disappointed heart.”

These wines were made from Muscat de Frontignon and in the 1880's a devastating outbreak of Phylloxera (a virus caused by an aphid-like insect which infects the roots of the vine and restricts the flow of nutrients to the leaves and grapes) decimated the Cape's vineyards and these vines were lost.