

THE MOST FAMOUS sweet wine of the eighteenth century was beloved by Napoleon, esteemed in the courts of Europe, and praised in the novels of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens. Baudelaire transforms it in *Les Fleurs du Mal*. “Château d’Yquem?” you guess, picking the only sweet wine included as a First Growth in the Bordeaux classification of 1855.

Pas de tout. The wine is called “Vin de Constance.” It was, and is, produced in South Africa. The unlikelihood of its name and pedigree is only matched by the fact that Vin de Constance happens to be the favorite wine of Nelson Mandela.

Welcome to the world of startling juxtapositions that make up the Rainbow Nation.

Over the past decade friends returning from South Africa have reported that the Cape Winelands were the most beautiful wine country they had ever seen, a landscape defined by lush valleys hemmed in by dramatic mountain ranges. And the wines? “Very good,” was the tepid reply, their enthusiasm for the geography only slightly dampened by their qualified endorsement of its product.

And then something changed, shifted. The trade press, importers and distributors characterized the wines with words like “restraint,” “elegance,” and “complexity,” terms not usually associated with New World winemaking.

I have to confess to an Old World bias. After owning a French restaurant for two decades and extensive travel through the vineyards of Europe, my cellar is dominated by French, Italian and Spanish bottles. When I venture across “The Great Water,” I instinctively measure what I’m drinking against the best wines of Europe. It was time to go and see and taste for myself.

WINE IS NO stranger to the Cape. Although the Dutch brought vines with them, traditional cultivars were first planted by French Huguenots who fled the old country to escape religious persecution. Viticulture has roots in South Africa deeper than those in North America, and the presiding sensibility – French rather than Spanish or Italian – yields wine that is at once more restrained and more sensitive to “terroir” than its New World corollaries either side of the equator.

The Cape Winelands fan out from Cape Town in an accessible arc: Constantia to the South; Somerset West and Stellenbosch to the Southeast and East; Franschhoek and Paarl to the Northeast; and Darling and the Swartland to the North. Within easy driving distance from the city, the hotels and restaurants of the Winelands are so lovely that they beckon the visitor. While you can cover most of the ground in three days using Cape Town as a base, I’d recommend that you succumb to temptation and spend five or six days in the countryside. You won’t regret it.

THE VINEYARDS OF Constantia, the country’s original “wine farm,” date to the late 1600s, the beloved project of Simon Van der Stel, first commander of the Cape, who planted 100,000 vines on the property. They sit on the backside of Table Mountain and can be reached in fifteen minutes from Cape Town. It took me a couple of hours.

This was my first visit to South Africa, and I insisted on seeing the Cape of Good Hope. Ewalda Matthews, my guide, is one of those rare individuals whose knowledge is encyclopedic, and as we drove south, I received incisive lessons in South African history,

politics, geology, and horticulture, the last an impassioned disquisition on the precious indigenous flora called *fynbos*, beloved by South Africans. As we approached the Constantia Winelands from the south, the vineyards laid out before me just as Van der Stel had planted them over three hundred years ago.

Like Europe, South Africa suffered from the devastation wreaked by phylloxera, and Klein Constantia fell into disrepair by the 1890s. The estate ceased production for nearly a hundred years. When Duggie Jooste and his son Lowell purchased the property in 1980, they had to begin from scratch.

The place had been used variously as a turkey farm and a venue for parties thrown by the previous owners. The Joostes replanted the vineyards with new rootstock, equipped the winery with state-of-the-art fermentation tanks, and replaced the cooperage. The grounds were restored. In fact, the whole of Constantia is so luxuriant, so lush, that it feels more like an extended garden than a suburb of Cape Town, an effect reinforced by the presence of the Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens which compose the area's crown jewel.

As for Vin de Constance, the tradition continues. The small grapes of Muscat de Frontignan are left to raisin on the vine and hand-picked late in the season. The sweet, concentrated must is fermented in temperature-controlled stainless steel tanks and aged in French oak for 18 months. Then the wine is laid down and only released five years after harvest. The result is a lush, deep honey-gold elixir redolent of dried apricots and peaches with a fine acid line that extends the opulently balanced finish. Gorgeously packaged in traditionally shaped 500 milliliter bottles, Vin de Constance is a wine lover's sensuous link to a glorious past.

HOTELS CAN BE measured by how they handle crises. That weekend Cape Town and its environs suffered a wave of random power outages, a reminder that the First and Third Worlds regularly rub shoulders in the new South Africa. As I prepared for dinner at The Cellars-Hohenort in Constantia, the lights went out. I had seen a taper and matches in a desk drawer and showered by candlelight. By the time I left my room, the staff were setting votives down the hallways of the hotel. Restaurants can operate so long as the gas stays on, and *The Cape Malay*, one of two restaurants at The Cellars, was doing a brisk business. Candlelight bathed the room in a warm and exotic glow that seemed appropriate to the flavors of curry and cardamom, chutney and sambal covering the table.

ALTHOUGH VIN DE CONSTANCE was the iconic wine of South Africa in the eighteenth century and Constantia itself the cradle of Cape winemaking, today the estate of Vergelegen has assumed the definitive position as the Cape's showcase wine farm. The property dazzles the visitor with its ancient camphor and oak trees, its immaculately laid out gardens, and the historic residence. Now owned and operated by the Anglo-American Company (parent to DeBeers) who have spared no expense in either the visitor's center, restaurants, or winery, Vergelegen offers a full range of award-winning wines under the direction of André van Rensburg.

Although it's beautiful and imposing, Vergelegen has a corporate feel to it. Vergelegen's wines feel like they could have been made anywhere. There's no "there" there, no unique sense of place, and I failed to detect those grace notes of restraint and complexity I had come to discover. We left Somerset West and drove another hour to

Hermanus.

As you traverse the arid uplands across Houhoek Pass, baboons appear at the edge of the road as if hitchhiking, and the vast high desert stretches in a ripple of undulating waves. Nothing prepares you for the sudden transition as you enter the Hemel-en-Aarde, Heaven-on-Earth. It's another world: a sheltered, verdant valley whose unique combination of geographical position – the most southerly appellation in Africa – of site and soil and exposure, makes this the one place where great Pinot Noir finds its true home on the Cape.

Eschewing the multi-tiered, vineyard designated bottlings favored by so many winemakers these days, Anthony Hamilton Russell makes two wines at his eponymous wine farm: a Pinot Noir and a Chardonnay. "I rejected the concept of a *tête de cuvée*," Hamilton Russell said over lunch. "This is the best we do. There's nothing left lurking around the corner."

Low yields, little to no irrigation, selective hand-harvesting, gentle handling, and traditional vinification produce results in bottle that are singular: an individuality and expression of origin so concentrated and pure, so beautifully delineated and elegant, that I wasn't certain that I was tasting New World wine at all. They possess an Old World depth and complexity, an austerity and finesse, that one immediately associates with the finest wines of Burgundy, but sitting on the terrace before lunch, I was sure I could smell the maritime breeze wafting over the crest of the hill from where the Atlantic meets the Indian Ocean.

STELLENBOSCH FORMS THE HEART of the Cape Winelands and has the oldest wine route in the country. The town and appellation take their name from the original land grants given by Simon Van der Stel ("Stel's bush") to expand agricultural support for the Dutch East India Company. An estate crops up every half-mile, most of them tucked into the tiny microclimates formed by the mountains and hills lining the valley floor.

Before wending our way north to taste, we needed to fortify ourselves. *96 Winery Road* sits at the southern base of the valley. The place reminded me of some of the easygoing bistros in Napa or Sonoma. Owned by Ken Forrester, a fine winemaker, it seemed only appropriate to taste one of the proprietor's wines. South Africans are doing marvelous things with Chenin Blanc, a varietal undervalued and little appreciated in America. Forrester's 2001 Chenin, made from 30 year old bushvines, showed remarkable richness and body, its lush fruit elegantly set off by perfectly integrated oak with a finish that seemed to go on forever.

Rustenberg has been making wine for over three hundred years, a patrimony Simon Barlow, its current owner, takes seriously. "I don't think anyone ever really owns it," Barlow said as we walked across the impeccable lawn to the modern tasting room housed in a converted stable. "The task is to pass it on to the next generation in better condition than when I got it."

The intrinsic quality of the estate's soils and its range of elevation permit Barlow to produce extraordinary wines. Its size – the property forms an amphitheater of just under 3,000 acres with southern exposures and framed by the Simonsberg Mountains – enabled Barlow to select the position and orientation of his vineyards. We took Barlow's SUV to the top of the property where he pointed out the "Peter Barlow" block, the most prized rows of Cabernet Sauvignon, named after his father who purchased Rustenberg in 1940.

Back at the exquisitely appointed tasting room, we sampled a range of Rustenberg and Brampton, Barlow's second label, out of Riedel stemware, finally arriving at the flagship 2003 Peter Barlow Cabernet Sauvignon. Stringent work in the vineyard (they make three passes at harvest) yields a dark purple, nearly opaque wine. Aged in 100 percent new French barrels for 20 months, the wine is lush, its super ripe tannins showcasing the sweet blackberry, cassis, plum and prune-layered fruit to full advantage.

GREAT WINEMAKERS KNOW that work begins in the vineyard, and these days, people go to crazy lengths to figure out what they want and need to do to produce the best and most consistent fruit, but nothing can compete with the obsessive attention brought to bear by Mike Ratcliffe at Warwick Estate. Situated at the northern edge of Stellenbosch, Ratcliffe is employing some of the most advanced technology in the world to gather information and understand his terroir. EM38, ground-penetrating radar provides a 16-foot-deep picture of his soils. Crazy? Perhaps, but Ratcliffe is intent on taking the guesswork out of "wine growing," as he calls it.

With their new vineyard program and Louis Nels celebrating his fifth anniversary as winemaker at Warwick, Ratcliffe's revolutionary approach is bearing very consistent fruit. You can sample their wines on Warwick's lovely terrace overlooking the vineyards.

A long day of tasting and touring leaves one thirsting for an oasis at the end of the road. As dusk gathered and the moon rose over the Drakenstein Mountains, we arrived at The Grande Roche, a Relais & Châteaux bastion of civility whose luxurious thatched-roofed suites and cottages sit at the base of The Big Rock in Paarl.

Bosman's is the only Relais Gourmands restaurant on the continent. An elegant dining room sits off the lobby of the hotel, but the night I was there—a picture-perfect evening midway through harvest—candlelit tables were arrayed the length of the terrace overlooking gardens and vineyard. A starter of pigeon breast fanned across the plate on a celeriac purée with an apple brioche tart and truffle foam was an exercise in classical balance and restraint, while the entrée, a filet of kudu topped with generous slabs of seared foie gras with onion confit, florettes of broccoli and a cherry jus, showcased indigenous foodstuffs with decidedly Old World flourish.

TRADITIONS AT KLEIN CONSTANTIA and Rustenberg go back three centuries. At Fairview they started three generations ago. The first Charles Back arrived in South Africa in 1902, a Lithuanian immigrant who made his way from manual laborer to butcher to dairy importer. He purchased his first wine farm, Backsberg, in 1917, and moved swiftly to clear the land and replant the vineyards. By 1923 the self-taught winemaker had won an award for producing the best wine in the country. He bought Fairview in 1937.

Clearly this restless, creative, and acquisitive gene has been passed down. Charles Back II, who joined the family business in 1978, can't seem to get out of his own way. The current operation, a sprawling facility that includes an enormous tasting room, food emporium, gift shop and restaurant, encompasses four different product lines: Fairview, Spice Route, Agostinelli, and Goats do Roam.

Cyril Back, Charles' father, bought his first herd of goats in 1980. Today Fairview makes 75 tons of cheese a month and produces 60 percent of the exotic and specialty cheeses in South Africa. The river of milk coursing through Fairview provides the revenue stream that has fueled Back's acquisition of vineyard property that now extends

to every viticultural district in the country. The man is literally everywhere.

Wine tasting can be a grueling exercise. Your palate suffers fatigue and your energies flag. Sometimes you need just a little something to keep you going. *The Goatshed* at Fairview is the perfect fix. Though the restaurant offers two or three blackboard specials on a daily basis, I recommend that you order one of the cheese platters, a plate of cured meats, and a bottle of mineral water. The cheeses—you can select a sampling of six or eight from the two-dozen offered—are uniformly lovely.

NOT ALL OF the Cape's wineries have an established pedigree. History at its finest is endlessly balanced and refreshed by innovation. Two of the country's maverick winemakers were classmates in the viticultural school at Elsenburg University, and though they both express a profound respect for tradition, Eben Sadie and Marc Kent represent the best of the new wave and share a like vision: to make the best wine in South Africa.

Sadie is a radical "terroirist." Following a ten-year peripatetic apprenticeship that took him from Germany to Austria, from Italy to America and finally to France, Sadie worked for Charles Back at his then-fledgling Spice Route wine farm. Back knew that Sadie wouldn't stay put and let him make a few barrels of his own wine. But Sadie was out scouting for property. Believing that the climate and soil of his beloved country had nothing to do with those of Europe, Sadie religiously studied the viticultural landscape and finally selected a diverse set of sites in and around the Swartland.

Clos Cheval is Sadie's most prized site. It sits on a high slope up an impossibly rough track. As we got out of his truck, we were startled by an explosion that reverberated against the rock face towering above us. "Baboons," he said cryptically. He lost Clos Cheval's entire crop to baboons the first year. Now he's installed electronic sensors throughout the vineyard that release enormous blasts at random intervals to save his crop.

Sadie only makes two wines: a red called "Columella" and a white blend he calls "Palladium." Both make viticultural reference to ancient practices.

We drove back down the mountain and ended at two small, whitewashed buildings. These house the handful of barrels that had held the 2004 vintage he had bottled the month before and hold what will become Columella from 2005. Sadie drew wine from the barrels with his "thief," and we tasted the components: Perfumed aromatics of violets, *fraises de bois*, and black cherry; a graphitic mineral line that Sadie described as "what I've been looking for all these years"; and vibrant, fresh acidity. "In this climate, to get acidity in the wine is the true craft."

FRANSCHHOEK—LITERALLY "FRENCH CORNER"—was founded by Huguenots in the late 17th century. If Stellenbosch is the Cape Wineland's "Napa," then Franschhoek is its "St. Helena," a charming town of galleries, shops, and casual eateries. Le Quartier Français is an award-winning country inn transplanted to the center of town.

Though its bar is urbane and *iCi*, its casual restaurant, a fine wine country café, the draw at Le Quartier Français is *The Tasting Room*. Margot Janse is the real deal, a supremely talented chef who, after 11 years at the stove, doesn't miss a beat. I ordered the four-course menu. Perfectly executed throughout, my second course—a filet of crisp skinned Cape salmon served with chanterelle, rosa tomato and pickled anchovy salad on a parmesan velouté—was especially lovely. I matched my selections with glasses of

wine from the tasting menu and finished with a half-bottle of Marc Kent's "Noble Late Harvest" from Boekenhoutskloof that I shared with a deputy of Denmark's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and his wife who were celebrating an anniversary. They declared *The Tasting Room* the best restaurant in South Africa.

Kent's wine was so astonishing that I paid a visit to Boekenhoutskloof on my way to the airport. Unlike his former classmate, Kent minimizes the importance of *terroir*. If I describe his wines as "fruit driven," it is not to suggest that they lack complexity. On the contrary, his entire range exhibit a set of multi-layered, beautifully structured personalities: a semillon of exceptional finesse and balance; a premium white blend that resembles the finest *blancs* of the Rhône valley; and a syrah that's a classic of backward power and opulence. 2004 represents Kent's third vintage of The Chocolate Block, a scrumptious blend of grenache, syrah, cinsault and cabernet sauvignon with a touch of viognier added to give a hint of delicacy and perfume.

THERE ARE OVER 500 wine farms in South Africa. In the six days I was there, I visited a handful. The dedication, passion and brilliance of its winemakers are only matched by the warmth, graciousness and hospitality of its hotels. Add to these the natural beauty of its viticultural districts and the quality of its restaurants and you get a combination that makes the Cape Winelands the most welcoming and dynamic wine destination in the world today.

A week at a luxurious lodge in one of South Africa's game reserves, a drive along the Garden Route to Hermanus to do a little whale watching, a week in the wine country: Now, that's my idea of The Great Escape.

I've only been home a week and I already want to go back.