

# Filling Big Shoes & Creating His Path

Winemaker Adam Mason helps continue a sweet wine's long history, while improving it as well.



CLEARING MIST OVER THE KLEIN CONSTANTIA VINEYARDS, FACING TOWARDS FALSE BAY

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When Adam Mason took over the winemaking at South Africa's Klein Constantia, it was his first full-time winemaking job. And considering the history at Klein Constantia—the winery is part of the original Constantia estate which dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and the winemaker he followed, Ross Gower, helped get Klein Constantia started in 1986—Mason was stepping into a rather large role.

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"I was filling big shoes at the time," Mason says. "Gower was a visionary. He had worked in New Zealand and Germany before Klein Constantia, so he had world experience that many others didn't have at the time. He brought a new clone of Cabernet Sauvignon to the Cape in the

mid-'80s, which was really the first virus-free clone we had. He was a legend."

Tall, soft-spoken and studious in his approach, Mason, 36, has filled those shoes admirably while cutting his own path along the way. In particular, he's taken the winery's flagship dessert wine, Vin de Constance, to new levels in the '04 and '05 vintages. A recent vertical tasting showed that Mason has made winemaking changes and improved a wine that is arguably the country's top sweet wine.

Vin de Constance has a long history, though one with a long interruption as well. The wine, made from red and white Frontignan grapes in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, was a favored sweet wine of European royalty. Cases were sent to assuage Napoleon's mood as he sat in exile on St. Helena island. Eventually the wine disappeared. The first nail in the coffin came when the British took over the Cape from the Dutch in the early part of

the 19<sup>th</sup> century, removing preferential trade tariffs that killed the market for the wine. Phylloxera then appeared in 1866 to decimate the wine industry in general. The Constantia estate eventually was broken into pieces; along with Klein Constantia, the Groote Constantia, Buitenverwachting and Constantia Uitsig wineries are the descendants of the original estate.

With the property in disrepair, the Jooste family decided to buy it in 1980.

"At the time, the farm had some Chenin Blanc on it going to the local co-op, but basically it was a derelict farm," says Mason. "A tractor had broken down in the vineyard and was full of fermenting grapes when they bought it. Shortly thereafter, the Jooste family was approached by a University of Stellenbosch professor named Chris Orffer who told them about the wine's history at Klein Constantia. He basically provided the spark to recreate the Vin de Constance."

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With an eye on restoring the property to its winemaking glory, the Jooste family and Gower planted new Muscat de Frontignan grapes in 1983. By 1986, they had resurrected Vin de Constance, which is bottled in a reproduction of the wine's original 18<sup>th</sup>-century bottle. There were just two barrels made that year, from shriveled Muscat de Frontignan grapes. The wine has been made in every vintage since, though the '03 was not commercially released. "The balance just wasn't there," says Mason, whose first vintage at Klein Constantia was 2004. (Continued on back)



LEFT: RAISINS ON THE VINE AT KLEIN CONSTANTIA; RIGHT: THE VINEYARDS AT KLEIN CONSTANTIA

Today, there are now 10 hectares (24.7 acres) of Muscat de Frontignan on the estate, with seven of them currently in production and the additional three coming on line in 2012.

Since taking over, Mason has changed the way the wine is made, resulting in more purity and precision. By harvesting sections of the vineyard at different times, Mason starts with grapes that are fermented almost dry and then uses that as a base wine to macerate the more raisined fruit that comes in from later pickings.

"I went to Hungary and what I saw there confirmed what I had been trying to work out for myself," says Mason. "I was able to understand it properly and see the benefit of harvesting at different stages and then blending to get something homogenous every year. Prior to that, we were trying to harvest everything at a perfect time, but you had bunches with shriveled berries on one side and green grapes in the interior of the bunch, so you were just getting an average ripeness but no flexibility. Now we pick grapes at different times so we get the ripeness we want and the flexibility to make the blend from there."

The newest vintages of the wine show terrific ripeness while staying pure and vibrant. One thing that hasn't changed, though, is the wine's almost dry feel, a feeling accentuated as the wine ages. The Vin de Constance 1988 has an almost Sercial

Madeira feel to it, combining its sweetness with a very bracing edge.

"Muscat is a very thick-skinned variety and very phenolic; we aim to extract those phenols as much as possible," Mason says. "So that dry quality as it ages is a function of the grape, since it's not a high-acid grape to begin with. It's a more tannin-driven grape than acidity. We really treat it like a red wine as we make it, with lots of punch downs and aeration."

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Even as Mason's first two vintages show a noticeable shift in style and impressive improvement, he remains very self-critical.

"If I look at my learning curve, I picked '04 a little too soon, as I panicked a bit. It was the first vintage of making this incredibly important wine," he says, noting his nerves at the time. "Then in '05, I waited longer. I felt more confident so we pushed it a little farther and maybe we pushed it too far. The residual sugar was much higher so it struggled to ferment all the way through, which is why the alcohol is significantly lower, two percent compared to the '04, which is a lot. The '06 is 13 percent alcohol, and that's ideally where I'd like it to be."

The '05 does come off as significantly lighter in feel (just 12 percent alcohol) when tasted alongside the '04 (14.4 percent alcohol), but it's still balanced, with super clean quince and clementine fruit flavors and a very long finish. It will be fun to watch it age alongside the weightier '04, though both vintages are likely to age on a different track from the vintages made by Gower.

"My guess is they will not age the same," Mason says. "Ross was a rustic guy and the older vintages show that green hint with a Madeira-like edge. I'm not that style, so my wines are different. I have a feeling my wines are a little fresher, which is what I'm looking for. I hope they continue to evolve in the way of earlier vintages in that they keep that dry, nervy edge, but I don't think they'll change color as quickly. I fine the wines, which removes brown pigments, as I want the wines to be very clean and fresh stylistically."

Mason's tweaks to the process have done exactly what he wanted; they've put his own personal stamp on the wine without sacrificing its overall character or personality. And, at \$50 per 500ml, the wine is priced attractively vis a vis Sauternes or late harvest Loire, German and Austrian dessert wines.



*Following are my notes on seven vintages of Vin de Constance. The wines were provided directly from the winery and were tasted non-blind in my New York office without anyone from the winery present.*

## NINETY-FOUR

KLEIN CONSTANTIA Vin de Constance Constantia 2005  
Score: 94 | \$50 / 500ml

A very bright, racy style, with superclean apricot and tangerine notes laced with hints of quince and clementine. The long, pure finish is sweet but stylish, and this just sails on. Puts on weight and shows more drive as it airs. Should give the superb 2004 a run for its money.—Non-blind Vin de Constance vertical (2010). Drink now through 2023. 3,004 cases made. —J.M.

## NINETY-FOUR

KLEIN CONSTANTIA Vin de Constance Constantia 2004  
Score: 94 | \$50 / 500ml

Superfocused, with racy, mouthwatering acidity, this has extra layers of delicious tangerine, peach cobbler, orange peel, green tea and quince that course through the very lengthy finish.—Non-blind Vin de Constance vertical (2010). Drink now through 2025. 2,537 cases made. —J.M.

## NINETY-THREE

KLEIN CONSTANTIA Vin de Constance Constantia 2002  
Score: 93 | \$50 / 500ml

This has put on some weight, with butter pecan and maple notes now moving in on the orange peel, clove, quince and fig flavors. Long and lush on the finish, with the acidity nicely buried.—Non-blind Vin de Constance vertical (2010). Drink now through 2020. 1,788 cases made. —J.M.

## NINETY

KLEIN CONSTANTIA Vin de Constance Constantia 2000  
Score: 90 | \$50 / 500ml

Offers a lovely amber color, with blood orange, bitter almond, clove, green tea and dried persimmon notes backed by a noticeably spicy Muscat hint on the finish. More rustic and broader than the other vintages, and not quite as deep or long.—Non-blind Vin de Constance vertical (2010). Drink now through 2017. 2,425 cases made. —J.M.

## NINETY-TWO

KLEIN CONSTANTIA Vin de Constance Constantia 1996  
Score: 92 | NA / 500ml

This has the color of dark iced tea, with a burnished edge to the maple, clove, date, green tea and mulled spice notes all laced with tangy acidity and a long, incense-infused finish. Clearly maturing in its flavor profile, but still with plenty of zip.—Non-blind Vin de Constance vertical (2010). Drink now through 2014. 1,036 cases made. —J.M.

## NINETY-TWO

KLEIN CONSTANTIA Vin de Constance Constantia 1993  
Score: 92 | NA / 500ml

This has a gorgeous, clear maple color, with delightful date, golden raisin, dried quince, fig and bitter orange notes laced with hints of Meyer lemon and persimmon. There's nice taut focus on the finish, with a hint of chamomile flower lingering at the end.—Non-blind Vin de Constance vertical (2010). Drink now through 2014. 1,197 cases made. —J.M.

## NINETY-ONE

KLEIN CONSTANTIA Vin de Constance Constantia 1988  
Score: 91 | NA / 500ml

Dark fig in color, with a green rim, this looks and drinks like a Sercial Madeira at the moment. Fully mature, with alluring incense, toffee, date and Christmas pudding notes allied to a racy, fine-grained palate. This has nice minerality, with black tea and incense notes extending through the tangy finish. Showing more acidity than sweetness now, this may be a bit taut for some, but there's still plenty of complexity.—Non-blind Vin de Constance vertical (2010). Drink now. —J.M.

