

Wine Spectator



Stirring the Lees with James Molesworth

A Sit Down with Adam Mason of South Africa's Klein Constantia

The winemaker goes against the grain to take his vineyards green

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Adam Mason is tall, lean and studious looking, which fits because he's waist-deep into learning. Learning about a new way to farm the vineyards at South Africa's Klein Constantia, where he has been making the wines since 2004.

Klein Constantia is best known for its Vin de Constance bottling, a dessert wine made from naturally shriveled Muscat de Frontignan grapes. The 2004 vintage was the best yet for this wine while the 2005 is due out early next year. The winery, which totals 65 hectares of vines, also produces chiseled, nervy Riesling and Sauvignon Blanc, along with small amounts of a Cabernet Sauvignon and Cab-based blend, though only the Vin de Constance is currently in the U.S. market.

I sat down with Mason here at my office yesterday to get caught up on his recent efforts at Klein Constantia. Turns out Mason is "going green," big time.

Two years ago, working with a new viticulturist, Mason and the team at Klein Constantia (including owner Lowell Jooste) decided to stop using herbicides and fungicides, began a composting program, started using cover crops and stopped plowing.

On the surface, it might seem like Mason is just another in the recent long line of winemakers that have suddenly decided to go green, shifting to more organic and/or sustainable practices in their vineyards and wineries. But really, Mason is still in the minority.

"The perceived wisdom in Constantia is spray heavy, due to the heavy disease pressure," explained Mason, referring to the ample rainfall and high humidity in the Constantia ward where the estate is located.

"But now you can easily see the boundaries of the estate," said Mason, as the results of the shift begin to show. "It's green, and where the brown starts, that's the next property. There's still a lot of conventional farming here, which means spray the cover crop (weed growth between the rows of vines) to kill it in the early spring, and then plow it all under."

The result of this type of conventional farming is a decrease in beneficial microbial activity in the soil, which results in more detrimental fungal growth and, ultimately, weaker vines. By stopping the spray and plow programs, and adding in a composting regime, Mason and his team are hoping to rejuvenate the soils on the estate. The ultimate goal is healthier vines that produce better fruit, resulting in better-quality wines. A side benefit is reduced costs, as expensive sprays and repetitive mowing are no longer required.

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One of the reasons I like to write about these types of projects is because there is so much that goes into getting the wine in bottle. There is all the work and preparation that goes on from the ground up (literally) and all of it is at the mercy of Mother Nature to boot. It's compelling to hear the stories and then relate them. And for Mason, it's been compelling to get involved in it as well.

"When I started here I assumed we'd farm conventionally. I figured no way we could do organic," said Mason. "But once you start looking into it, you get really drawn in and then you realize you can do it."

Mason can't quantify the results in the wines just yet. The 2008 vintage, the first following the shift, was a tricky year, for whites in particular. In contrast, the 2009 vintage is extremely promising—"freaky good," said Mason. Mason feels both years will have more of a stamp on them from the weather than from the new work in the vineyards.

"It won't be until we bring in the 2010 harvest that I'll feel we can really assess the results from the change," he said.

My guess is Mason will study those results closely, and be pleased with them.

