

Vignerons de Franschhoek

The modern South African wine industry is built on the foundations laid by the brave and hard-working French Huguenots who arrived at the Cape in the late 17th century.

— BY JOANNE GIBSON



The Franschoek Valley lies almost due west of Stellenbosch and to the southeast of Paarl. It is enclosed on three sides by mountains



South Africa's French heritage is kept alive through initiatives like the Burgundy Exchange organised through Elsenburg Agricultural College



Everyone wears red, white and blue at the Bastille Day celebrations in July



The Huguenot Memorial Monument in Franschoek was inaugurated on 17 April 1948. The woman personifies the spirit of religious freedom

Every year, on 14 July, the South African town of Franschhoek is painted red, white and blue as thousands of visitors celebrate Bastille Day.

It's an all-weekend festival of food and wine, boules, barrel-rolling and berets. "I was in France last July and didn't see a single beret," laughs local winemaker Dieter Sellmeyer of Lynx Wines. "In Franschhoek, everyone wears one on Bastille Day."

It's fun and unashamedly cheesy, with nobody actually speaking French (except perhaps for Champagne importer and sparkling wine producer Jean-Philippe Colmant, who is Belgian). But in fact the "vignerons de Franschhoek" (as they call themselves) take the valley's French heritage very seriously indeed, and rightly so.

In the 1680s, three decades after Commander Jan van Riebeeck and a small group of Dutch settlers set up a halfway station at the Cape in order to supply ships sailing between Europe and the Dutch East Indies with fresh meat, vegetables, water and wine, things were not going as well as planned. In particular, new governor Simon van der Stel despaired about the quality of the wine, realising that most of the farmers had no real experience or expertise in winemaking.

The revocation of the Edict of Nantes on 22 October 1685 - incidentally the same year that Van der Stel established Constantia as a model wine farm - resulted in countless Protestants fleeing religious persecution in France, and it occurred to Van der Stel and his Directors at the Dutch East India Company that these refugees ("especially those understanding the cultivation of the vine, the making of vinegar and the distilling of brandy") should be offered a new home at the Cape.

It must have taken unimaginable desperation (and courage) to embark on a sea voyage that took up to six months, with an extremely high mortality rate, to face an uncertain future in an unknown land. "These people



ISAAC TAILLEFERT WAS SAID TO MAKE THE CAPE'S BEST WINE IN THE LATE 1600S

are now destitute," explained the Directors to Van der Stel on 16 November 1687. "On their arrival they are to be welcomed by you and supplied with whatever is necessary for their subsistence until they have settled down and are able to earn their own living."

Van der Stel was informed that the refugees included "vine cultivators as well as those who understand the manufacture of brandy and vinegar, so we hope that the lack of these articles so frequently deplored by you will now be supplied".



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HONOURS HIS HUGUENOT
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Among the first group to reach Table Bay on 26 April 1688 was Isaac Taillefert from Château-Thierry in Brie, described as “een wijngardinier en hoedemaecker” (wine gardener and hatmaker). It seems Taillefert’s wife, Suzanne Briet, had inherited a vineyard in Monneaux, which the Directors no doubt hoped would qualify him to make wine - and indeed he

succeeded on two adjacent farms on the slopes of Paarl mountain, Picardie and La Brie (the latter still operating as Laborie). When French traveller Francois Leguat visited the Cape in 1698, he said Taillefert’s wine was the best in the country: “Not unlike our little wines of Champagne.”

As more Huguenots arrived (around 200 in all), they were granted farms further along the Drakenstein valley stretching from Paarl towards Olifantshoek (“elephants’ corner”), so named because elephants still roamed there. But elephants were the least of the Huguenots’ worries: the district tax was called the Lion and Tiger Tax - for good reason - and Charles Marais from Plessis Marly was “murdered by a Hottentot” within a year of his arrival! Fortunately his family prospered on the Drakenstein farm whose name gradually morphed into Plaisir de Marle (where Dr Paul Pontallier of Châteaux Margaux was a consultant for two decades).

In Olifantshoek itself, the first Huguenots to be granted land included Pierre Jourdan from Cabrières d’Aigues in Provence, who named his farm Cabrière (with the

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current owner of Haute Cabrière, Achim von Arnim, paying tribute to his Huguenot predecessor through the Pierre Jourdan range of traditional-method sparkling wine while also specialising in Pinot Noir).

Pierre Joubert, who famously hid his bible in a loaf of bread when he fled La Motte D'Aigues in Provence, named his farm La Provence, which today comprises Grande Provence (boasting a state-of-the-art cellar, excellent restaurant and luxurious accommodation) and Rickety Bridge, originally named Paulina's Drift after the widow Paulina de Villiers, to whom a quitrent grant was given in 1797). So prosperous was Joubert that he gradually acquired several other local farms, including the one he named La Motte after his birthplace (today

boasting an award-winning cellar of mostly organically grown wine as well as one of the Cape's top restaurants).

Even greater things were expected of the three De Villiers brothers from La Rochelle in Aunis, who arrived at the Cape on 6 May 1690 with a glowing reference: "We are informed that these persons have a good knowledge of laying out vineyards and managing the same. You are recommended to give them a helping hand."

Pierre was duly granted the farm Bourgogne (where the subdivision La Bourgogne today honours the Huguenot descendents though its Semillon named Progeny); Abraham settled on land he named Champagne (frequently sub-divided over the centuries, but initially lucrative enough for Abraham to acquire Boschendal, which had originally been granted to Huguenot forerunner Jean le Long in 1685); and Jacob was given La Bri (since split into three, with today's La Bri priding itself on "attention to detail, emphasis on elegance and most importantly wines people want to drink and enjoy").

The De Villiers brothers and Isaac Taillefert (Pierre's father-in-law) went out as "consultants" to encourage farmers to adopt better winemaking methods, starting with "neatness". Meanwhile, through acquisitions and marriage alliances, the De Villiers family network eventually covered the greater Franschhoek area, from La Cotte (land originally granted to Jean Gardiol, now home to Cape Chamonix, Winery of the Year according to the 2013 Platter's Guide to South African Wines) all the way back to Vrede en Lust near Paarl (originally granted to Huguenot merchant Jacques de Savoye) and even Babylonstoren, the Dutch farm purchased by Jacob de Villiers' great-grandson, Petrus Johannes, in 1762.

Recently restored into one of the Cape's showpiece estates, Babylonstoren was named after a hill supposedly resembling the biblical Tower of Babel, where God introduced new languages and people could no longer understand each other. But in Franschhoek, ironically,



SIMPLE FARM WORKER COTTAGES HAVE BEEN TRANSFORMED INTO LUXURIOUS ACCOMMODATION AT BABYLONSTOREN

the Dutch East India Company's policy of integration proved extremely successful. Thanks to Huguenot farms being deliberately spaced between Dutch-owned farms, Huguenot and Dutch children attending the same schools, and French church services gradually being phased out, by the time French astronomer Nicolas Louis de la Caille visited "De France Hoek" in 1752, he wrote that only the children of the original refugees, now all deceased, could speak French. Moreover, he was informed (without regret) that within 20 years no one in Drakenstein would be able to speak it.

During the first British Occupation of the Cape (1795-1803), the governor's private secretary, Sir John Barrow, found it "remarkable" that no one spoke French here despite the place names: "It would seem as if these persecuted refugees had studied to conceal from their



BABYLONSTOREN BOASTS ONE OF THE BEST PRESERVED "WERFS" (FARMYARDS) IN THE CAPE DUTCH TRADITION

children their unfortunate history and their country's disgraceful conduct."

Whatever the case, their descendents were thriving in this beautiful valley. "Everything here flourishes with great luxuriance," wrote Barrow in a letter to Lady Anne Barnard. "All sorts of fruit are in abundance...but the chief produce is the Vine, and I can assure you that the Wine here is altogether different and infinitely superior to that at the Cape."

Historically, though, Franschhoek was better known for the quantity rather than quality of its wine. By 1701, it had surpassed Stellenbosch in terms of vines planted. By 1714, Pierre Joubert had 16,000 vines planted, while Pierre Jourdan had 25,000 (though, alas, an inventory of his deceased estate dismissed the 48 half-leaguers of wine in his cellar as "not of great importance"). By 1824, more than half of the 31.9 million vines counted in the Cape wine districts were planted in the Franschhoek valley, which also produced more than half the wine!

Today the picture is completely different. According to the latest industry figures, there are only 1,276 hectares under vine in Franschhoek (less than 1.3% of South



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Africa's 100,093ha planted). But instead of farming in the fertile sandy soils near the river, as their Huguenot predecessors did, modern vigneronns have planted grapes further up the mountain slopes where aspects and soil types vary dramatically, and it is cooler. According to Platter's 2013, the main varieties are Sauvignon Blanc (202ha), Cabernet-Sauvignon (193ha), Chardonnay (179ha), Shiraz (176ha) and Merlot (11ha), with old vineyards of bushvine Semillon particularly treasured and several producers specialising in so-called Méthode Cap Classique (traditional-method) sparkling wine.

"While a number of Franschhoek cellars make wine from grapes that are brought in, the plantings in Franschhoek itself are true to their French heritage," says La Bri winemaker Irene Waller, who also chairs the Vignerons de Franschhoek winemakers' association. "These are being used to make five-star wines."



IRENE WALLER, LA BRI WINEMAKER AND GENERAL MANAGER

The most highly awarded wineries in recent years are Boekenhoutskloof and Cape Chamonix, but wines from all the farms mentioned in this article are worth seeking out.

Franschhoek Wine Valley:

Tel. +27 21 876 2861, www.franschhoek.org.za.

HUGUENOT HERITAGE

The first Huguenot to put down roots at the Cape of Good Hope was Francois Villion, who arrived from Clermont in Grenoble in 1671 and was granted the Stellenbosch farm Idas Valley in 1682. Today this is home to Glenelly, owned by May-Eliane de Lencquesaing, former owner of Château Pichon Longueville Comtesse de Lalande. “I find it very humbling to think of the French Huguenots,” she says. “It is with great pride that I carry on the work they started centuries ago.”

The first French vigneron to invest in post-Apartheid South Africa was Anne Cointreau (of the famous Cognac family) who purchased Morgenhof in 1993. From its octagonal barrel maturation cellar to its formal French rose garden, the historic Stellenbosch estate now has a certain *je ne sais quoi* about it. “We farm dryland vineyards and our style of wine is very elegant and accessible,” says Mme Cointreau, who has also



MORGENHOF ROSE GARDEN



ANNE COINTREAU OF MORGENHOF

introduced the French tradition of letting wines age in bottle until they are ready to be released.

From Jean-Vincent Ridon of Signal Hill, who loves South Africa’s relatively unregulated wine industry just as the Huguenots enjoyed freedom of religion in the late 17th century, to Baron Benjamin de Rothschild’s partnership with the Rupert family at Rupert & Rothschild Vignerons on the historic Huguenot farm Fredericksburg, modern French investment in the Cape is significant.

“What better place to make wines?” asks Christian Dauriac of Bordeaux Châteaux Destieux, Montlisse and La Clemence, who purchased Marianne Wine Estate near Paarl in 2004. “In a romantic way, I feel we are all descendants of the Huguenots, if not by lineage then spiritually.” ■