

(then and now)



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RED SEMILLON RETURN OF THE WINE GRAPE

Tim James relates the rise, fall, and recovery of a grape variety that was once the most widely planted in South Africa, but that has until recently been nothing more than an ignored and interplanted oddity

The nearest vineyards to this one are far away, across at least a mountain or two. Inland from the Cape's Atlantic west coast, some three hours' drive northward from Cape Town, after a few unconfident turnings on the long, gravel roads, we eventually found the farm for some forgotten reason called 't Voetpad—an old Dutch name meaning The Footpath. The country is mountainous, grand, but austere, with little sign of habitation. We saw the occasional sheep but hardly anybody at work; a few people trudged along the road to some unimaginable destination or simply stared as we passed, shielding their eyes from our dust. At the end of one of the large, empty valleys is Dirk Brand's farm, mostly rooibos tea and bleakness, but next to an old homestead and a rare cluster of trees was our destination: the vineyard that EOrmarins viticulturist Rosa Kruger had discovered when looking for old vines.

These few unkempt hectares were planted in the first two decades of the 20th century. They are bushvines, ungrafted—and unirrigated, despite the heat. "This vineyard surely stands at the gates of hell," says Eben Sadie cheerfully. Unconcerned now about cool-climate virtues, Eben is going to make wine from these grapes—the first time for decades that they will not disappear into a nameless cooperative blend.

There are few old vines in the Cape, let alone ones growing on their own roots. Unlike in Australia, phylloxera here appeared in winged form, and nowhere was too distant to escape its devastating attentions after it arrived in the 1880s. But this was a remote enough corner, perhaps, for the aphid to leave in peace; and a few decades might not have been long enough for news to reach an isolated farmer that he need worry about complications like scion and rootstock.

Rationally, the vineyard should have been uprooted or abandoned years ago, but Dirk Brand's mother felt sentimentally attached to it, so the vines were dutifully if minimally maintained and the grapes sold off cheaply. The real question is why they were planted in the first place, so obscurely, so isolated. The answer is surely that this was never a normal commercial vineyard but, rather, one of a type that must have been, for a few hundred years, scattered throughout the farmlands of the old Cape Colony—planted to make wine for domestic consumption and to sell to neighboring farms. In the early 1900s, the notorious "dop system" was still used widely and without embarrassment, with frequent rations of wine doled out to the farmworkers (descendants of slaves and the indigenous population) as part of a method of social control and scanty wages. Other farmers within easy reach by

All photography by Tim James

ox wagon would have wanted the wine for their farmworkers as well as for themselves—no doubt it was a useful source of nutrition, too, as it was for the peasants of Europe.

In keeping with his vineyard, Dirk Brand puts more store in character and essence than in superficial show: His splendidly shapeless hat, with sulfurous sweat-stained ring, is of indeterminate age and may have been passed down as an heirloom from father to son; his shoes (the type called *velskoen* in South Africa, of rough, untanned hide) are tied with baler twine. He discussed harvesting plans with Eben Sadie and Rosa Kruger while I wandered through the vineyard, looking for Red Semillon. Rosa had told me there was some, and this was why I had come: to learn more about a grape variety that has played an extraordinary role in Cape wine history and to see for the first time the red mutation that seems to have occurred—perhaps uniquely—in this country.

Simply “wine grape”

Semillon was probably among the varieties planted in the early decades of the Dutch East India Company's viticultural ambitions for their settlement and refreshment station at the foot of Africa, where the first tiny harvest took place (“Praise be to God,” noted Commander Jan van Riebeeck piously in his journal) in 1658. Then, and for 200 years, no connection was made to the great white grape of Graves and Sauternes, and the variety came to

be known simply as Greengrape or Green Grape—*Groendruif* in Dutch and Afrikaans. The reference was to the color not of the grape but of the foliage. When a red mutation occurred and became widespread, it was referred to as red Greengrape and the original as white Greengrape.

The variety became so dominant in the Cape vineyard that it was frequently called simply *wijndruif*, or “wine grape.” When William Bird, writing as “A Civil Servant of the Colony,” published his *State of the Cape of Good Hope* in 1822, he naturally had much to say about grapes, which were then the Cape's most significant crop, and noted the most common varieties planted. According to the records available to him, something like 93 percent of vines were “the common green grape.” Reports and records of Cape viticulture in the previous

century had given a different picture from this. Although there is infuriatingly little clarity about all the varieties grown, there seem to have been many, with no suggestion of any overwhelming dominance. This was the period, of course, when the internationally acclaimed sweet Constantia wines were the Cape's finest; they were mostly of Muscat varieties and the strange black teinturier variety, Pontac. The 1822 proportion of Greengrape seems extraordinary and would be so even if it were somewhat overstated. I doubted the validity of Bird's statistics, until a little historical investigation and a little consequent thinking made sense of them.

In late 1795, just as the vines were coming into leaf, Dutch

East India Company rule of the Cape was ended by the first British occupation. War, the presence of the garrison, and the rise in shipping were all good news for the winemakers, whose businesses expanded dramatically. Just under a million vines were recorded for 1795, and the number more than doubled over the next decade. In 1813, with the new masters now firmly in possession of their colony and seeking to help its export revenues, duties payable on Cape wines imported into Britain were reduced substantially, helping to bring about a golden age for Cape wine exporters (the luster was dulled from as early as 1825). The local population was also burgeoning. The



Dirk Brand with badly needed protection from the scorching sun at his 't Voetpad farm

number of vines recorded by William Bird for 1822 was some 25 million. This opportunistic 25-fold increase in just about as many years makes the preponderance of one grape across a large and varied terrain more understandable. Wine buyers had comparatively little choice, while farmers were in a hurry to produce more wine and chose to plant only the vine that seemed, of those generally available, the most satisfactorily prolific and the most resistant to the locally most common vine disease of the day, anthracnose.

By the 1820s, the red mutation of Greengrape had emerged and become common. This is clear from generally fascinating evidence given in 1826 by farmers to an official wine-trade committee charged with “ascertaining the cause of [Cape wine] not being of a better quality and flavour.”

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A Paarl farmer reported that most of his 100,000 vines consisted of interplanted red and white Greengrape: “For ordinary wine I [...] crush the red and white Greengrape together in order to equalize the colour and taste.” We are talking, remember, of a red, rosé, or *gris* grape, not a black one, which was used to make a white wine. Charles Marais of Stellenbosch had only Greengrape, “all of the same age, about 12 years.” Most interestingly, he speaks of “ordinary and white Greengrape,” implying that the red variety predominated and was regarded as the more basic. A leading farmer, Daniel Dixon, furnished information to the committee on “pursuing the principles of making Cape Wines to imitate Madeira” (in those good old pre-protectionist days, the colonial wine industry was free to name its most common product Madeira—or Hock, or whatever its hopeful imagination settled on). He prescribed that “red and white grapes [should be] used in nearly equal proportions.”¹

We are, then, more or less obliged to come to the quite remarkable conclusion that by the third decade of the 19th century, the Cape vineyard was planted with more Red Semillon than anything else—if, indeed, Greengrape is correctly equated with Semillon. (In Bordeaux, Semillon Rouge is a minor synonym for Merlot, but that is not in question here.)

As late as 1927, in his *Treatise on Viticulture* (the Afrikaans version appeared the year before), viticulturist Abraham Perold suggested that the best strains of white Greengrape he had observed in the Cape “agrees very closely with the Semillon of Sauternes.” With regard to the color mutations, he notes: “Sometimes red and white bunches occur on the same shoot; sometimes red and white berries in the same bunch; sometimes red and white occur on the same berry.” Perold says that, despite the possible association with Semillon, he had “not yet been able to determine the identity of Greengrape compared with varieties grown in Europe.”²

Someone had already determined it, however—at least to his own satisfaction—decades earlier, through ampelographical observation. Chance reading revealed (to a neophyte and amateur historian, such a moment is wonderful!) when the identification was made. A viticulturist

named JP de Waal contributed a chapter called “The Propagation and Culture of the Vine” to a book published in 1903, one “specially prepared for the guidance of those who seek a home in the Cape Colony.”³ In his list of wine grapes, de Waal suggests that “White Green Grape” is “most likely Weisser Elbling of Germany, and Vert doux or Gouais blanc of France”—speculation that I have not seen elsewhere. In another chapter of the same book, however, its main author states that de Waal had recently died while on a study tour of important wine-producing regions in Europe, America, and Australia. This chapter reports that, in Bordeaux, de Waal had noted that “White Green Grape” is identical to

Semillon—no mention of the oddity of there being a well-established red version in the Cape but not in Bordeaux.

Around the time that this book was advising prospective new wine farmers (surely there were none—with any sense, at least—for the Cape wine industry was in the throes of one of the most severe of its recurrent slumps), which was also around the time that the vineyard was being planted at t Voetpad, Greengrape no longer held as all conquering a position as it had in 1822. Affected by a much more demanding market, informed by improved communications (which facilitated de Waal’s reports back to his homeland), and with the replanting necessitated by phylloxera, South African viticulture was now undergoing significant

change. Evidence from a government commission that analyzed the 1909 harvest suggests that Greengrape was still by far the largest contributor to the total, but at only about 40 percent. Steen (Chenin Blanc), White French (Palomino), and Red Muscadel were among the big producers, but Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc now featured among the lesser, Shiraz was minutely represented, and rising star Cinsaut (known as Hermitage and having a splendid career making sweet red wine for the black mineworkers of Johannesburg) was already the third most important grape.

Throughout the 20th century, Semillon’s role in the South African vineyard continued to decline steadily. By the time Professor Orffer edited his little book *Wine Grape Cultivars in South Africa* in 1979, it was still the fifth most important in



Eben Sadie amid the t Voetpad vines used for a field blend in his Old Vines series

terms of volume but at just 3.4 percent of the total crop.⁴ The red version was still noticeable. Even in 1993, after more uprootings, recalls winemaker Louis Nel about his first harvest job at Tulbagh Cooperative, there was a good deal of Semillon there, and it was common for a Semillon vineyard to be composed half of red grapes. In the early 21st century, at just more than 1 percent, Semillon's contribution is perhaps rising slightly once more—though no longer condemned to supplying the equivalent of Cape Madeira, being used more for serious varietal wines, both dry and sweet, and arguably even more importantly, as a partner for Sauvignon Blanc in some of the country's most ambitious white blends.

The red version had come to survive only as an interplanted and ignored oddity or nuisance in a few old, mostly tucked away vineyards. It seems only rarely to have aroused any interest or prompted questions. In the Franschhoek area, where there are comparatively many mature Semillon vineyards, Nigel McNaught's Stony Brook has made two occasional vintages of a dessert wine from the red version.

His guess is that “about 10 percent of the old *bosstok* [bushvine] vines in the valley are ‘red,’” but he notes that the older blocks “are being grubbed up at an alarming rate.” The viticulturists who McNaught consulted knew nothing at all about the historical significance of the mutation.⁵ In Wellington, Graham Knox took cuttings in 2006 from the few red-fruited wines in his Stormhoek block of Semillon (planted in 1972) to make a small new vineyard, all of the red version.

The eminent vine expert José Vouillamoz informs me that the *Vitis International Variety Catalogue* lists a Semillon Rose, available at three grape collections, two in France and one in Stellenbosch (the latter clearly referring to the wine known here now as Red Semillon). But Dr Vouillamoz “could not determine whether the mutation occurred in South Africa only or also elsewhere” and suggested the possibility that the French accessions could even represent imports from the Cape. Reference to Semillon Rose or Gris in France is very rare, certainly now, though not unknown.

A domestic vineyard

Standing in the vineyard at 't Voetpad, it is easy to feel that it was planted exactly as a vineyard might have been planted two or three centuries ago, rather than just one. The oldest part, planted to Hanepoot (a long-established local name for Muscat d'Alexandrie), dates to about 1900 and reinforces the idea of a domestic vineyard, since it was presumably intended for table grapes. The rest is an interplanting of varieties that were probably already established in the Cape

by 1700: Chenin Blanc, Palomino, and, of course, Greengrape. Eben Sadie has made a 2009 vintage wine from this field blend, as well as a sweet wine from the Hanepoot; both are to form part of the Old Vines series he is releasing in 2010—about 600 cases of six wines packaged together.

Rosa Kruger, who often works collegially with Sadie, has found other old vineyards in her exploratory wanderings among the scattered vineyards up the Cape West Coast (most of them in the Olifants River WO, though 't Voetpad is in the far-reaching Swartland). The two shared the fruit, for example, from an old block (40 years or more) of Red and White Semillon on the slopes of the Skurfberg (Ragged Mountain). Previously these grapes had also been swallowed up by a large cooperative—at a fraction of the price that the newcomers have contracted to pay in order to make the farming of the vineyard a more reasonable commercial proposition. At the cellar at EOrmarins in Franschhoek, the Johann Rupert-owned property that employs Kruger, they had enough of the red to vinify it separately from the white

but in the same way—and in terms of taste and structure, the two wines are identical, impressively so. They are likely to go into the EOrmarins top white blend. Sadie, with just a little of the red, vinified the two together as the old Cape Colony farmers had done and enthusiastically claims the wine as among the best whites he has ever made.

It can also be reported that Kruger, with a little skepticism but with no lack

of respect for her predecessor without such resources at his disposal, sent samples of red and white Greengrape from these West Coast vineyards for DNA testing. The results confirmed the accuracy of de Waal's observation in Bordeaux 110 years ago: Both profiles matched the reference for Semillon. ■

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Notes

1. The quoted testimony appeared, with some of the other responses to the committee's questionnaire, many years after the event, in *Het Zuid-Afrikaansche Tijdschrift* of November 1878. Portions were translated by Al Perold in “Historical Notes on the Cape Wine Industry,” a chapter of *The Wine Book of South Africa: The Western Province of the Cape and Its Wine Industry* (no editor named; published by *Wine and Spirit*, Stellenbosch; 1936).
2. Al Perold, *A Treatise on Viticulture* (Macmillan, London; 1927).
3. ARE Burton, *Cape Colony for the Settler* (King, London; 1903).
4. CJ Orffer (editor), *Wine Grape Cultivars in South Africa* (Human & Rousseau, Cape Town; 1979).
5. There is, in fact, remarkably little awareness of the historical significance of the red mutation even where one might expect to find it. A recent dissertation—“The Fall and Rise of Semillon in South Africa” (2009), written by Eftyhia Vardas for her Cape Wine Master diploma—has just one brief mention of it, as “unusual.”