



VERSAILLES
WINES

The Malan Name

The name “Malan”, or “Malanot”, stems from the French word for leper, and was probably intended as a slur against religious renegades who had abandoned the Roman Catholic Church and were ostracised for their new “heretic” creed. In time, the name “Malan” would be elevated to a name of honour amongst fellow Protestants.

“Deus arx mea” – God is my fortress

This family crest is said to be that of Alexandre de Mérindol Malan, a resident of Geneva, Switzerland (Switzerland being the “spiritual home” of the Protestant movement) in 1780. Many Huguenot families fled to Geneva to avoid persecution. An official family seal bearing the words: “Sigil. Malan de Mérindol, 1250. Deus arx mea.” is also said to have existed, which means that Alexandre de Mérindol Malan is probably a direct relative. It is generally accepted that the South African Malans originated from the south of France, near the Papal town of Avignon.

Being Huguenot – A matter of faith, for a proudly Protestant family

The role the Malan family played in the history of the Huguenots is a fascinating one, and may date as far back as the year 830 AD, when Claude, Bishop of Turin, rejected the sovereignty of the Pope, and went into exile in the valleys of Piedmont, Northern Italy. Many who had previously been believers of the “Old Religion” followed him, including the Malans.

Early in the eleventh century, a small church was established for “brothers in the new faith”. Its founder was a Malan, and the hamlet that sprang up around it became known as Les Malanots. During the later middle ages, the family settled in Mérindol, near Avignon, in Provence, along with other committed French anti-Papists.

Over the next few centuries, the Malans and those who shared their faith were to be widely persecuted for their religious convictions. They were branded as heretics and were punished by confiscation, banishment and even death by fire and sword. The Edict of Nantes (which had afforded French Protestants a measure of religious freedom) was revoked by the Catholic King, Louis XIV, in 1685.

Huguenot churches were destroyed, and believers were forced to convert or be put to death. As a result, 200 000 to 400 000 Protestant refugees fled their homeland between 1681 and 1721, and were given safe haven in sympathetic countries, including the Netherlands.

Farming for the Dutch – Le Cap De Bon Esperance – Good hope for the hopeless

In the late 1600s, the Cape of Good Hope belonged to the Dutch East India Company (VOC), having been established as a refreshment station for passing ships by Jan van Riebeeck in 1652.

The company directors were aware of the plight of the French refugees and realised that they could use this to their advantage. One way in which this was done was to dramatically increase food and wine production in the new Cape colony (the Huguenots were known to be industrious and many were skilled in the art of viticulture).

Furthermore, Jan van Riebeeck's wife, Maria de la Quellerie, had also been a high-born Huguenot, and because of the strong religious ties between French and Dutch Protestants, the integration of refugees with the existing Dutch "free burghers" at the southern tip of Africa was not foreseen as a problem.

A letter was duly dispatched to the Cape Governor, Simon van der Stel, suggesting that the French refugees be given sanctuary at the Cape. Van der Stel agreed with enthusiasm and so the Huguenots were offered free passage on the VOC merchant ships. They were also given farming implements and land, on the condition that they remained in the Cape for a minimum of five years.

From France...to Freedom, In Le Quartier Francais

On 1 December 1687, the ship, Voorschoten, departed from Rotterdam, bound for the Cape of Good Hope. Huddled, ill and afraid amongst the commodities on board was the first precious cargo of French refugees, en route to a new beginning in a strange, foreign and faraway land.

The fifth ship to sail from Dutch shores in early 1688 was the 160-foot East Indiaman Berg China. Amongst its 175 passengers was 16-year-old Jacques Malan, the youngest of four brothers, from the village of St Martin-de-la-Brasque, near Mérindol in Provence. The fate of his brothers is uncertain, as all four went their separate ways when leaving France.

The voyage was long, demanding and beset with danger. Many lives were lost due to illness. After four and a half months at sea, the ship finally docked in Table Bay on 4 August 1688. Of the 34 refugees on board, only 14 had survived to see the "Promised land".

At the time, the tiny Cape settlement consisted of just over 20 farms within Table Valley, while roughly 100 families lived in the newly established district of Stellenbosch. A handful were situated as far away as the Drakenstein Valley, the vast majority of existing farmers being Dutch "burghers".

With the sudden influx of the Huguenots, it became necessary to extend the settlement beyond the Drakenstein Mountains, along the upper reaches of the Berg River. Far from civilisation, this deep and fertile valley, sheltered by towering mountain peaks, was known as Olifantshoek (due to the many elephants that once roamed the area).

It was here, interspersed amongst the widely scattered Dutch farms, that the first 10 French families (including young Jacques Malan) were deposited by the wagonload to fend for themselves. In this alien environment, these devout, honest and hardworking settlers began to tame the wilderness and till the soil.

With nothing but rudimentary mud shelters to offer protection from the climate, their only solace was the Bible and the certainty that God would reward them for their labours. Despite their relentless toil, the new settlers were desperately poor and in 1689 a special Batavian fund was established, which provided Jacques Malan and many others with financial relief. The fund enabled them to purchase necessities such as ploughs, oxen and other livestock.

The small French community began to thrive, establishing homesteads, planting gardens and cultivating vineyards, orchards, olive groves and even wheat fields. Most of them concentrated on wine farming and by 1693 the French settlers were already supplying wines to ships, for sale in the Indies.

The area earned the name Le Coin Français (French Quarter) and later Franschhoek – the French Corner. Today, no trace of their language remains, but the Huguenot legacy lives on in the lyrical farm names, stately homesteads and well-entrenched wine farming culture.

Jacques Malan – From refugee father to founding father

Jacques Malan became moderately successful, and in 1699 he married Isabeau (Elizabeth) Le Long, the widow of Jean Jourdaan (a fellow passenger on the Berg China, and a countryman from La Motte-d’Aigues, a village close to his own hometown). Malan received Jourdaan’s farm, La Motte (subsequently Bo-La Motte), in 1713, although he was to wait over 10 years for the official title deed. Little is known about his life, but the diary of Adam Tas (a prominent “burgher” and campaigner for settlers’ rights) reveals that Malan played a significant role in petitioning against corruption.

Willem Adriaan van der Stel succeeded his father as Governor of the Cape. After Van der Stel was deported, Malan prospered and in an ironic twist he was able to purchase a portion of Vergelegen – the disgraced Governor’s massive and opulent estate in Hottentots-Holland (now known as Somerset West).

After acquiring the farm, called Morgenstêr (Morning Star), Malan purchased several others scattered throughout the colony and thereby established a solid wine farming tradition which is practised to this day.

After a long and fruitful life, Jacques Malan died in 1742, having outlived his wife by eight years. He was survived by four sons and three daughters. Much of the family’s subsequent history is lost in the mists of time, but it is thanks to this early pioneer that thousands of South Africans bear the proudly-Huguenot name of Malan today.

The Beginning of the Farm, Versailles

By the end of the 17th century, the Huguenot families were flourishing in their new surroundings, which reached from Franschhoek to Drakenstein and Paarl. With another wave of French refugees expected, Van der Stel extended the settlement across the Berg River into the verdant and picturesque valley of Limietvallei (Boundary Valley). Hemmed in by towering mountain ranges, this untamed wilderness represented the very outer reaches of the colony.

Amongst the newcomers to be granted land here was Pierre Crosnier (later Cronier/Cronjé) from Normandy, who arrived in 1698 on the ship, Driebergen. In 1699, he received the ironically named farm, Versailles, although he was to wait until 1714 for the official signed title deed.

Crosnier married Susanne Taillefert of Provence and sired several children before his death in 1718. On his wife’s death, however, the farm was inherited by a son from her first marriage, Jean Gardé. He died childless and over the years Versailles changed hands many times, until, in 1846, a descendant of the Huguenot-pioneer Jacques Malan purchased a portion of the farm, together with its elegant mid-18th century homestead.

It is here, in the “Val du Charron”, or Wagenmakersvallei (Valley of the Wagonmaker), that our story continues.

