

# From the Celestial Mountains to the Mountain in the Sea

The Journey of the Apple to Africa

The modern apple originated in the Tien Shan Mountains or the Celestial Mountains between modern Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in Western China. In a valley of this great mountain range there is a city with the name of Alamy (city of apples), known previously as Alma Ata or translated from the Kazakh to Grandfather Apple, where apples grow wild in forests. These apples are regarded as the genetic source of all of today's apples.

From the fertile heartland of central Asia, trade and travel were slow, and it was only during the rule of Rameses and his son Seti (the XIX Egyptian Dynasty or New Kingdom) that apples were recorded for the first time on the walls of the great burial chambers of that country.

Alexander the Great was the first of the great western conquerors to enter this apple region and is credited with bringing apples to Macedonia and Europe. With the demise of Alexander's empire, the Romans then took this "fruit of the gods" to the corners of their empire. The empire included Portugal and the Netherlands.

It was the Portuguese who first took the apple to strange lands in their search of trade routes to the lands of spice. They must have planted the apples on St Helena Island as some of the valleys were known as "Apple Valley" on the maps of the old seafarers.

During the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, the world's first multinational company, the VOC (Dutch United East India Company) decided to start a halfway station at the Cape of Good Hope. The sole purpose of this settlement was to supply ships with fresh meat, vegetables, wheat and, naturally, fruit to combat the effects of scurvy that decimated the poor sailors on their way to the spice lands and back.

After a journey of about 22 000 kilometres, here in the shadows of Table Mountain or Mountain in the Sea (*Hoerikwaggo* in the original Khoisan language), the first apple seeds were planted by Van Riebeeck shortly after his landing on the shores of this strange land with its high winds and many wild animals.

It is then that the African history of the apple began.

# The First Cape Apples

The Years 1652-1657

## Wynappel

Jan van Riebeeck wrote in his diary on August 24, 1652 that he would plant some apple seeds he brought with him from the Netherlands as soon as the weather became warmer. It seems, then, that the first apple trees at the Cape came from seeds planted by Van Riebeeck.

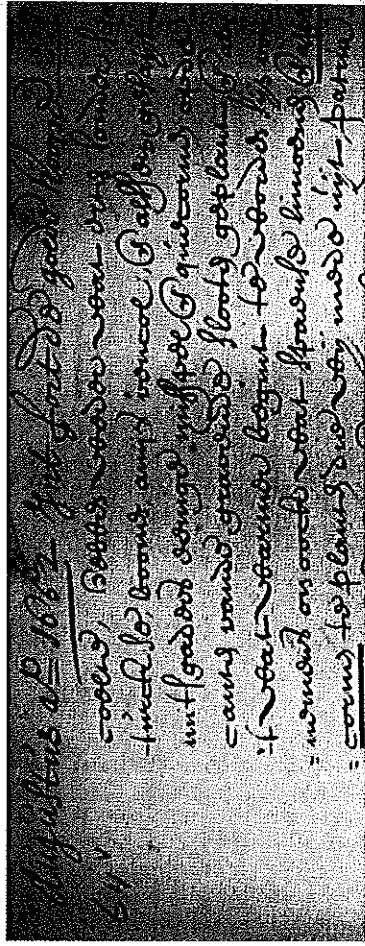


Plate 1: First records of apple seeds planted by Jan van Riebeeck at the Cape on August 24, 1652.

On December 17, 1652 he wrote that he planted apple seed "zoals al eerder ook gedaan is" ("Which has also been done earlier"). This indicates that he had already planted some seeds before that, most probably in the spring of 1652, ie September or October.

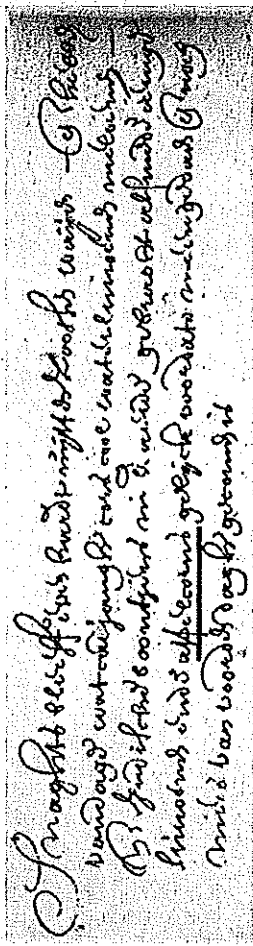


Plate 2: Van Riebeeck's record on planting of the apple seed at the Cape on December 17, 1652.

Then on July 8, 1655 the ship De Tulp brought "enige appelbomen van St Helena naar de Kaap" ("Some apple trees from St Helena to the Cape"). It seems that apple trees were planted on St Helena before they were brought to the Cape on July 8, 1655.

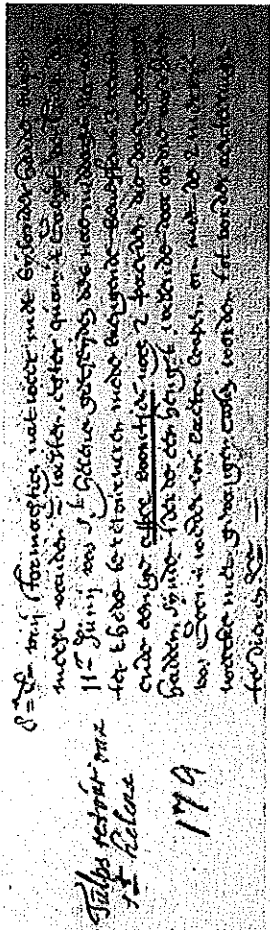


Plate 3: The record in Van Riebeeck's diary of the first planting of apple trees from St Helena on July 8, 1655.

Apparently the apple and orange trees did quite well at the Cape especially after Van Riebeeck had a hedge planted around the Company's Garden against the wind.

In 1656 the ship Nachtiglas was again sent to St Helena and to the delight of Van Riebeeck returned with a further 300 apple and orange trees.

In November of 1657 the ship Maria went to the island and returned with more apple and orange trees; this time 900 altogether.

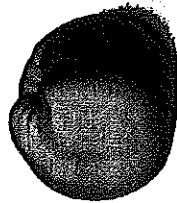
Then on April 17, 1662 Van Riebeeck made this historic entry in his diary: "Heavy drizzle in the morning and a strong north-westerly wind blowing in from the sea. Today the first two ripe Dutch apples were picked in the Company's nursery garden. They came from a little tree no more than 5 feet high. This type of apple is known as a *Wijnappel*. They weighed between 11 and 12 loot, there being not a grain of difference in weight between the two. They had been growing side by side, the one touching the other, and had reached maturity." (Note: One loot is equivalent to about 15 grams.) A historic day and date to be remembered by every South African apple grower! Deepest appreciation is due to the first Governor of the Cape of Good Hope for his meticulous observations and the notes in his diary. Not only did he make that historic entry in his diary on April 17, 1662 when he picked the first two Dutch apples at the Cape, but he went further and noted that it was in fact the *Wijnappel* - the first apple variety recorded in our history!

Who better to describe the first apple variety to be harvested at the Cape than Herrmann Johann Knoop in *Fructologia*, of *Beschrywing der Vrughtebomen en Vrughten* in 1763 as

well as the colour drawings in *Pomologia* in 1758. He describes two *Wijnappels* i.e. the *Witte* and the *Roode Wijnappel*. As Jan van Riebeeck omitted to say which of the two was first, we will look at both as described by Knoop: ("The poor Governor can be excused for this oversight as, undoubtedly, he had many other more important duties at the Cape!) Freely translated from Knoop's Dutch the *Roode Wijnappel* is large, rather irregular in shape ie on the same tree one finds some flat and some lop-sided. The fruit is "rough" to look at, the skin smooth, the colour red, but sometimes green or yellowish on one side. The flesh is soft, very juicy with a good taste. It is a good-looking apple and very tasty when stewed. It is also suitable for making apple wine. The tree is strong and bears well when it gets older. The *Witte Wijnappel* very much resembles the shape of its red namesake, but is rather a whitish green. The taste is also very similar, but not as flavoursome and therefore of less value. It makes a good tree that is reasonably precocious.

To us what is most encouraging is that fairly recently an in-depth investigation was made in the Netherlands in an effort to trace some *Wijnappel* trees as described by Knoop. It was truly a "speurtoeg" (investigation) by Bas van Andel which took him to many old-timers in different parts of the Netherlands, to many orchards and many waist-deep nettle patches. In short, Bas van Andel has found the two remaining *Witte Wijnappel* trees in the garden of a Mr Bouman in Wijk and Aalburg between the Rhine and the Maas, but of the *Roode Wijnappel* he could so far find no trace. It would appear that the *Wijnappel* was of Dutch origin and that some of the *Witte Wijnappel* was still grown in the 1960s between the Waal (Rhine) and the Maas in the northern part of the Netherlands.

He relates how one of the people he spoke to recalled how, during World War II, *Wijnappels* were all that stood between her and terrible hunger. We are confident that the *Witte Wijnappel* will, in the not too distant future, once again find its way to the Cape to take its rightful and honourable position among our Heritage varieties. But this time the courier will not be the ship De Tulp.



Overleaf: Plate 4: The record in the transcribed diary of Jan van Riebeeck recording the picking of the first apple at the Cape.

## Acknowledgements

When attempting to delve into the history of anything one relies on information gathered in past years by people who had the foresight to sense that someday somebody might find it valuable. We certainly found the information gathered at the three libraries we consulted invaluable. These are the JS Gericke Library University of Stellenbosch, the ARC Infruitec- Nietvoorbij Library at Stellenbosch and the National Library of South Africa in Cape Town. We thank their librarians.

Our visits to the Apple Museum in Grabouw and the Huguenot Museum in Franschhoek were most useful and the treasures we found there are included liberally in this publication. Our thanks to the staff of these two museums.

No search is complete without a visit to the National Archives of South Africa in Cape Town. To page through the Daghoermaal of Jan van Riebeeck, written between 1652 and 1662, is the experience of a lifetime. Our thanks to their most helpful and friendly staff who went out of their way to help us. Our special thanks to Jaco van der Merwe.

Because of the theme of our book we needed what we refer to as "old-timers" with very good memories. We found this ideal in the following people: Koos Lötter, who has spent his entire life in fruit: thanks for your wealth of information and especially for donating your booklet on fruit-growing by Pillans and McOwan of 1896 to us.

To Mrs Wendy Pickstone, granddaughter of the legendary HEV Pickstone: we are very much indebted to you for sharing your memories of your grandfather with us. Thank you, too, for the copy of his first Catalogue of Fruit Trees for the year 1895.

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Mark Twain once said he never lent books to friends, and that the only books he owned



Plate 19: The oldest apple tree we encountered. This tree stands in the garden of Misgund Orchards. In front of it are Robin Allen Baldie and James Wayne Baldie. The tree might have been planted by the previous owner - Commandant Rademeyer, who owned the house before the Baldies during the late 19th century.

were the ones he had borrowed. So thanks to the many friends who lent us books and other documents on apples, especially to Anthony Rawbone-Viljoen, Derek Corder, Ian Moodie, Jean-Marié Nel and Chris Kelly.

In Europe many friends helped us to gather information, especially on the history of the pre-1720s varieties. Our thanks to Walter Guerra, Jan van Ingen, Ton den Nijs, Jacobus Bosschaerts, Koen Carolus, Achiël Ryckaert and Vincent Turkelboom.

Then a special thank you to Bas van Andel for the extensive research and detailed information he unselfishly shared with us on the Wijnappel, the first apple variety to be harvested at the Cape by Jan Van Riebeeck on April 17, 1662. Bas, we appreciate it very much.

No research into the first fruit planted at the Cape is complete without a visit to the Company's Garden in Cape Town. Here Rory Phelan, the general manager, imparted his deep knowledge of the garden as it was in the days of Van Riebeeck. Thank you Rory.

Without the help of Kenneth Tobutt of Infruitec-Nietvoorbij we would not have been able to launch our project on the preservation of old Cape apple varieties. He made available budwood of many of these old varieties and we thank Kenneth and his institute. The first batch of heritage apple varieties from these buds was made for us, and donated by Caledon Valley Nursery near Ficksburg. We thank Nigel Cook and Chris Berend for this most generous gesture.

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Finally to Charles Hughes, Managing Director of Tru-Cape Fruit Marketing (Pty) Ltd for writing the preface for us. We thank both you and Tru-Cape Fruit Marketing for your continuous encouragement and your generous contribution towards a publication which we truly believe to be unique for South Africa.

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