



Gary Jordan, Kathy Jordan and Nelleen Strauss

GOING THE FULL NINE YARDS

GARY JORDAN is one of South Africa's most respected and successful winemakers. So why does he want to open a restaurant in the City of London during a recession?

He talked to John Radford



He trained as a geologist which, serendipitously, came in useful when he was deciding what vines to plant where on his estate in Stellenbosch, according to soil, altitude and variety. He bought the estate – a rundown farm – 26 years ago purely as an investment, while he continued his studies, ending up with a winemaking degree from University College Davis in California, where he and his wife Kathy worked for two years before progressing through Europe, learning new techniques and waiting for the 'right moment' to return to South Africa. The moment came in February, 1990 with the news that Nelson Mandela had been released from prison, apartheid was collapsing and a new order was approaching.

They built a winery in 1992 and produced their first vintage in 1993 from the estate near Vloottenburg. "The idea was to make the best possible wine we could. We aren't interested in supplying supermarkets – our customers are independent wine merchants and restaurants." At our meeting at the Gaucho Grill in Smithfield we tried two examples from the range. The first was Jordan Nine Yards Chardonnay 2007 (so called because the team went 'the full nine yards' to produce it), which shows impressive, rich musky varietal fruit with a toasty-oak finish: long and golden. The other was Cobblers Hill 2005 (named for Gary's great-grandfather, who pioneered the South African shoe industry in the 1800s) which is a Cabernet-Sauvignon, Merlot/Cabernet-Franc mix, and shows a rich Cabernet nose with a big, complex palate, working tannins, generous fruit and a long, structured finish: it certainly went splendidly with the steak. Both wines retail in the UK around the £18 mark.

The vineyard is spectacular, ranging from 160m to 410m in altitude, allowing for planting cooler- and warmer-climate grape varieties on the most suitable soils. The situation is magnificent, with

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commanding views over both the Pacific and Indian oceans, False Bay, and Stellenbosch itself. Such is the stream of visitors who come to see it that Jordan is building a restaurant and deli (named 'Spicy Chameleon' after one of his wine ranges) on the site to capitalise on its popularity.

Which brings us to the restaurant project over here. Why London? "Because it's the most knowledgeable wine city in the world. It has some of the finest restaurants in the world, and that's where my wines deserve to be." Handling the UK end of things is Nelleen Strauss, who was formerly front-of-house at Vivat Bacchus, which, of course, has a South African theme (and an unusual approach to cheese, with the largest cellar in London). Will this be similar? "There will be some similarities, shall we say a South African focus?" She says, "but we'll be doing it very differently in terms of what we offer, and where we are." They have acquired the ground and basement floors of a building on the north bank of the Thames, near the Millennium Bridge and opposite Tate Modern, by High Timber Street (it will be called 'High Timber'): "the only restaurant in the City with tables outside overlooking the river, in the summer." The building has been totally refitted and will incorporate a small cheese-room, a 'tiny' bar and a private room on the ground floor, with the kitchen in the basement. The wine cellar will stock 40,000 bottles including, of course, the whole Jordan range, but also some of South Africa's and the world's greatest wines... And some good-value examples as well. "We'll also be focusing on the great diversity of South Africa: we have citizens from almost every country in the world, and we'll be exploring the different styles of cooking and cuisine that you experience when you're over there, as well as the well-known proclivity for roast and grilled meat."



Justin Saunders

The head chef will be Justin Saunders, who's currently sous-chef at Dukes Hotel in Mayfair. He started his career catering for people in the music business, cooking for bands on tour and at the recording studios. "I got to go to a lot of shows: Kylie Minogue, George Michael, Take That – I've cooked for them all." He was introduced to Gary Jordan by Nelleen, who'd met him when Vivat Bacchus opened. Justin had been for an interview, and was offered the job, but it turned out that someone who had previously been offered the job and turned it down changed his mind and came back. In due course, Nelleen left to start this new project and gave him a call. In such Byzantine labyrinths does the world of cheffery work.

He leaves Dukes at the end of December for a couple of weeks off, including some time in South Africa with Gary Jordan, particularly looking at butchery techniques for the 'braaivleis' style of cooking so dear to South African tastes. So will he have *carte-blanche* with the menu? "We've got three months before the restaurant opens, in March, and I expect there'll be a good deal of discussion, argument and experimentation between the three of us before we get the final menu sorted out. I'm looking forward to it."

And the crunch question – credit-crunch, that is – opening in the City at a time when money's tight and everybody

seems to be trading down. Is that a good idea? Gary Jordan is very enthusiastic: "of course we started planning the whole thing well before all this happened, but we're confident. We've got the place, we've got the chef, we've got Nelleen who knows the London FOH scene back to front and, in the summer, we'll have that lovely terrace." How will they pitch the cost of eating at High Timber? "We plan to have a set lunch at around £15 each day – we want to give customers the choice of what they spend, whether it's a quick lunch and a glass of wine or something more extensive, it'll be available. Like the wine estate, we're in it for the long haul. We don't expect to make money from day one, and we don't intend to give up just because the going gets tough." And the investment? "It's all our own money. We're not into banks or outside investors. We know what we're doing."

If confidence is the secret of success for a new launch, there is no shortage of it here. It will be fascinating to see whether the full nine yards have been covered when the big day comes, next spring.

