

Smart plates in the Cape

While gastronomes laud Spain and the Nordic countries for their innovative cuisines, top restaurants in Cape Town and the Cape Winelands are emerging from the wings and creating distinctive meals that are worth a plane ride. Kim Maxwell reports from the city.



London, New York and Sydney may be the bastions of haute cuisine, but as a complete package of food, wine and service, a week of eating at a handful of top restaurants within a 70km radius of Cape Town represents more outstanding value. It used to be true that local chefs lagged behind in innovation, but South African restaurants have upped standards to such an extent that their overseas peers include the Cape on their 'to eat at' list. Smarter South African venues now offer innovative tasting menus with appropriate local wine pairings, and service is elegantly friendly without being stiff. The likes of Michel Roux Junior, Ramsay's right-hand chef Angela Hartnett, Gary Rhodes and Ferran Adrià have all been fed and impressed in recent years.

pickled aubergine sponge with *labneh* made from local buffalo-milk yogurt to understand the sophistication behind her handcrafted cuisine. But Janse insists that she doesn't subscribe to a particular style as "we are continuously trying to break the mould". "We're making more abstract dishes—so the focus is on flavours and textures rather than, say, a piece of duck. We try to have surprises within the menu to keep the fun element," she adds.

NO TWO RESTAURANTS ARE THE SAME

Some chefs pare elements to

A Mediterranean climate means small farmers and produce suppliers deliver unusual micro-herbs, old-fashioned vegetables and artisanal buffalo mozzarella cheeses.



CHEF BERTUS BASSON

PRODUCE-DRIVEN CUISINE

Quality homegrown produce or game and expert skill are in abundance. A Mediterranean climate means small farmers and produce suppliers deliver unusual micro-herbs, old-fashioned vegetables and artisanal buffalo mozzarella cheeses. At Stellenbosch's Overture restaurant at Hidden Valley wine farm, Jordan Restaurant with George Jardine, or Franschhoek's The Tasting Room, suppliers and country neighbours routinely turn up at kitchen doors to offload their pigeons, excess fruit or veggies.

Menus change frequently to accommodate the different produce that chefs receive each day. The Tasting Room's Margot Janse, for example, serves five flexible dinner courses and a nine-course chef's surprise. The culinary repertoire acknowledges the ingredients' origins, whether it's lamb breast from Klein Karoo free-range stock, crayfish from the Transkei, or duck from a neighbouring Cape farm. Janse calls it "embracing heritage", saying some local chefs are becoming micro-focused on the source of every detail, down to nuts and seeds.

The Tasting Room at Le Quartier Français was rated 31st in S. Pellegrino's The World's 50 Best Restaurants 2010 list, and took second place in South Africa's own Eat Out 2011 awards. One has to try Janse's



CHEF GEORGE JARDINE



Admire panoramic Stellenbosch views at Jordan Restaurant with George Jardine.

their essence using classic procedures and deceptively simple, elegant plating. Rust en Vrede restaurant at its namesake Stellenbosch wine farm leans in this direction, while the maturity seen on the plates at Jordan Restaurant with George Jardine epitomises this approach. Chef Jardine's deceptively simple dishes incorporate classic techniques. Local yellowtail fish or warthog are home-smoked, then braised in a wood-fired oven, pressed and thinly sliced, and served alongside honey-and-soy-glazed pork belly and edible flowers.

A decade ago, the Scottish chef ran Lafite restaurant in Kuala Lumpur's Shangri-La before moving to Sydney Shangri-La as executive chef. Jardine has married a South African and feels part of the local chef community. "What's different about the Cape in particular is the openness of the chefs. We all share ideas but maintain our individuality," he says.

The focus of South African dining now is on the product, and Jardine says this is a reaction against overworked plates. Rust en Vrede's chef agrees, pinpointing a unique element of Cape Town dining. "If you go to London a lot of chefs are protégés of the Roux brothers, Ramsay or Marco Pierre White," he notes. "In South Africa you go to top restaurants run by Margot, Luke and George and you'll experience different styles of food. It's exciting that none of the top chefs are

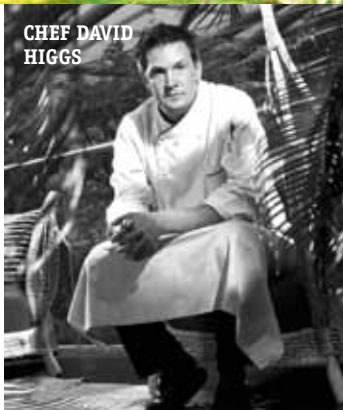
following each other."

South Africa's Eat Out 2011 winner of best restaurant, chef and service Rust en Vrede only serves dinner. Riedel stemware, Laguiole knives and plates crafted by a local ceramicist are part of the experience. You'll dine alongside German and French customers in a converted wine cellar. Higgs' style builds a series of subtle layers as you progress through a meal. Celeriac could be rubbed black in hay ash, wrapped and baked in salt dough, with grilled springbok and a parsnip coffee purée. Although delicate flavours reign, his plates appeal without the need for an over-complicated presentation. "There is a bit more freedom to play around with a dish but it's within a framework. We'll use foam or gel for texture or the explosion in your mouth, but as an extra. It isn't the main event," Higgs clarifies. "Take our cheese dish of gorgonzola, beetroot and fig, with crumbled gorgonzola, boiled marinated beetroot, and a spoon of beetroot borscht and plum. The foamy sponge spoon gives a nice injection of flavour and the fig has a coffee 'soil'. It's these little additives without going overboard."

WHEN INGREDIENTS COME FIRST

Michael Broughton of Terroir restaurant at Kleine Zalze winery gives classics a country-orientated twist >

Dine in a converted wine cellar at Rust en Vrede restaurant.



CHEF DAVID HIGGS

at Terroir's tree-shaded tables. Fantastic sauces and handmade filled pastas are a Broughton trademark. "What makes South African food exciting is that it probably came off a low base. But our top chefs are all under 45, and we're at the zenith of our energy levels," says Broughton. "As chefs we don't have to be too clever if we're getting great

produce. We're sending inferior stuff back. So I'm first on the supplier's list when the purple Adam's figs arrive."

To try that on a plate, order the Terroir summer dessert taster of chocolate *delice*, fresh Adam's Figs with raspberry coulis, and pineapple ravioli filled with mango and mascarpone.

At Hidden Valley winery, Overture restaurant chef Bertus Basson says sourcing ingredients seasonally and regionally is hugely popular. "Overworking of food is over and done with—the more real the food, the longer the restaurant will last," he adds. Foodies make the pilgrimage to this venue with knockout vineyard views. The experience is casually elegant; Basson's plating style is proof that old-style confits and braises can be innovatively presented with contemporary ingredient partners. A four-course menu could include white bean and vanilla risotto with smoked garlic and local buffalo mozzarella, followed by entrecôte, carrots, crisp ox heart and potato salad—the magic is in the combinations.

"Everything we serve at Overture we make from scratch: bread, stocks, sauces," he says. "Meat, poultry or fish come in whole as far as possible. Today, on my menu, I might have a rack of suckling pig and crisp trotter; the day after, it's confit of pork belly."



Higg's ash-rubbed springbok loin, pickled beetroot purée, glazed turnips and truffled croquette potatoes.

YOUNG AND EMERGING

Chef Luke Dale Roberts secured a 12th place ranking in S. Pellegrino's The World's 50 Best Restaurants 2010 while at La Colombe restaurant in vine-lined Constantia. In late 2010 Dale Roberts left to create The Test Kitchen, an eccentric industrial urban space in Woodstock near central Cape Town. Urbanites shop at food stalls of the adjacent gourmet Old Biscuit Mill market on weekend days.

Although La Colombe's tables remain full, young replacement chef Scot Kirton is still building his name in local chef circles as he develops his own style. At night, foodies descend on The Test Kitchen restaurant for Dale Roberts' elegant fine dining menus. A meal there could grab your attention with signature Franschoek trout tartare, green apple, lime and a crème fraiche drizzle, with miso-cured aubergine cubes and creamy miso dressing.

Lunchtimes are for absorbing the kitchen action at the L-shaped counter while sampling the tasty yet casual bar menu. Dale Roberts' experience in top Korean and Japanese hotels is evident in his subtle Asian-inspired dishes, but his classic roots stem from an upbringing in England. His food is complex, masterful flavourings and textures converging in a delicate fusion. "I try to take a flavour and get it to shine as much as possible. But it's got to have balance, with crunch in every dish," he explains. The kitchen team's freedom to create exquisite food is boosted by an industrial atmosphere and décor created by furniture artisans.

Naturally the Cape restaurants featured here all shun imported ingredients in favour of quality South African ones—game such as springbok, gemsbok and ostrich, free-range chickens and quality vegetables, herbs and fruit. Seafood options include local kingklip and yellowtail fish to crayfish. Jordan Restaurant with George Jardine offers a walk-in cheese room with 50 local cheeses.

BLAST FROM THE PAST

But if you're after a more direct interpretation of South Africa's food heritage, reserve a lunch table at chef Chris Erasmus' kitchen at Pierneef à La Motte restaurant in Franschoek. The glass-enclosed restaurant at La Motte winery offers tranquil garden views or works from the owners' extensive collection by South African artist Jacob Hendrik Pierneef. Erasmus

CHEF MICHAEL
BROUGHTON



CHEF LUKE
DALE ROBERTS



DALE ROBERTS' SIGNATURE
TROUT TARTARE

worked with Margot Janse at The Tasting Room previously so his style has fine dining leanings, but his Pierneef menu is based on extensively researched recipes from early 17th and 18th century Cape

culinary history. Erasmus labels his technically complex interpretations "Cape Winelands cuisine".

A hearty king's bread soup uses a rich, meaty bone marrow broth as the base for miniature bread topped with a veal knuckle 'karmenaatjie' ball. There are nods towards early-day preserved meats in a signature lacquered smoked and pickled lamb's rib dish served with pickled tongue and dried pear dumplings, verjuice-poached pear and crispy lamb's liver dried meat 'biltong'. The chef serves a tuna dish seared with spices reminiscent of a piquant cameline sauce from 17th century Holland.

"We do old Winelands cuisine, the ingredients and style of food brought into South Africa by the early European settlers, before the French introduced cream. We've had a lot of Netherlands visitors to the restaurant who say they can see where old Dutch elements fit in," >

says Erasmus.

Erasmus' cooking is an interesting interpretation of the Cape's historical past. Try it if time allows. But bypassing the menus of his innovative chef peers would be a disservice. Their tasting menus offer a delicious contemporary taste of where Cape cuisine is headed. e



Pierneef à La Motte restaurant's exterior Courtyard

Where to dine

- **Jordan Restaurant with George Jardine**, Stellenbosch. Lunch. Dinner on Thurs and Fri only. Tel: +27 021 881 3612, www.jordanrestaurant.co.za. Two or three-course lunch at R225 (\$\$41) or R250 respectively. Six or seven-course tasting dinner at R300.
- **La Colombe**, Constantia. Lunch and dinner. Tel: +27 021 794 2390, www.constantia-uitsig.com. Six-course dinner tasting R595.
- **Overture at Hidden Valley**, Stellenbosch. Lunch and dinner. Tel: +27 021 880 2721, www.dineatoverture.co.za. Four, five or eight courses at R340, R400 and R600 respectively.
- **Pierneef à La Motte**, R45, Main Road, Franschhoek. Lunch. Dinner on Thurs to Sat only. Tel: +27 021 876 8800, www.la-motte.com. A la carte menu, from R260 for three courses.
- **Rust en Vrede restaurant**, Stellenbosch. Dinner only. Tel: +27 021 881 3757, www.rustenvrede.com. Four-course at R440. Six-course tasting menu at R585.
- **Terroir restaurant at Kleine Zalze**, Stellenbosch. Lunch and dinner. Tel: +27 021 880 8167, www.kleinezalze.com. A la carte menu, from R315 for three courses.
- **The Tasting Room at Le Quartier Français**, Franschhoek. Dinner only. Tel: +27 021 876 2151, www.lequartier.co.za. Five courses at R620. Nine-course surprise tasting menu at R770.
- **The Test Kitchen**, The Old Biscuit Mill, Woodstock, Cape Town. Lunch and dinner. Tel: +27 021 447 2337, www.thetestkitchen.co.za. Three, five or eight-course dinner menu at R345, R440 or R550 respectively.

Additional fees apply for wine pairings with tasting menus.



ERASMUS' PUMPKIN, GINGER AND WALNUT CHEESECAKE STARTER

Chris Erasmus in his kitchen



CHEF MARGOT JANSE



CHEF CHRIS ERASMUS

