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E-FRANCE

11

WINE LANDS?



VIEWS?



GREAT RESTAURANTS?



**WELCOME
TO THE
CAPE'S
NEW
CULINARY
CORNER**

WATCH OUT STELLENBOSCH AND FRANSCHHOEK, THERE'S A NEW (OLD) KID IN TOWN. THE ONCE UNREMARKABLE TOWN OF SOMERSET WEST IS NUDGING ITS WAY INTO THE GOURMET LIMELIGHT WITH FRESH FOODIE FINDS, REPORTS **JANE BROUGHTON** PHOTOGRAPHY **JAN RAS**



BRANCHING OUT

At the entrance to Waterkloof's tasting centre and restaurant is land artist Strijdom van der Merwe's bold, five-metre high tree sculpture made from weathered steel

Eateries on the Franschhoek and Stellenbosch wine routes have dominated South Africa's top restaurant awards for as long as anyone can remember. But their lesser-known sibling, Somerset West, has not been so lucky. Even though it's positioned in the 'golden triangle' of the Helderberg wine route, the town has lagged behind on the foodie front. Despite its breathtaking natural surrounds, it has never been an easy place to find a decent lunch with a view.

So what has changed? For one, local demographics have shifted dramatically. Somerset West is no longer a 'giant retirement home', but offers a desirable residential address for couples with kids, many of them big-city refugees attracted by the privileged, semi-rural lifestyle surrounded by mountains, vineyards and golf courses yet only five minutes from the beach. In summer, the population swells with the arrival of the 'swallows' – retired Europeans who follow the sun and love an alfresco lunch after a round of golf. Coming into play, too, is the inevitable trickle-down effect of the rest of the Cape's increasingly sophisticated gourmet scene, so closely tied to the wine industry. Here are the establishments leading the way.

THE RESTAURANT AT WATERKLOOF

When the spectacularly located restaurant at Waterkloof – adjoining the state-of-the-art gravitational wine cellar – opened in 2009, the dramatic contemporary architecture raised a few eyebrows. When award-winning restaurant Tokara opened in Stellenbosch almost 15 years ago, the response had been similar. It takes someone to raise the bar before others follow.

Waterkloof estate's 100 hectares are a mix of biodynamically farmed vineyards and rare and abundant fynbos. Since 2008, the farm has held Champion Status awarded by the World Wildlife Fund's Biodiversity & Wine Initiative.

A glass cube suspended between vineyards and sky, the restaurant is an airy, minimalist space in which executive chef Gregory Czarnecki echoes the farm's philosophy of sustainability by keeping everything in the sleek open-plan kitchen as home-grown as possible. Supporting small, local producers is therefore a given. Lamb, eggs and herbs come from the estate; salmon trout is delivered fresh from spring-fed dams close to the Helderberg area.

The plates that emerge from the kitchen all look like multi-textured works of art, and are usually classic pairings intelligently reworked. Healey's Cheddar, the award-winning mature artisan farmhouse cheese made on Lourensford Wine Estate, has always featured on the cheeseboard here. Waterkloof's owner, Paul Boutinot, found it so delicious he has subsequently bought the business.

Open for à la carte lunch and dinner daily (lunch only on Sundays), mains average R170; also a six-course tasting menu paired to estate wines. +27 (0)21 858 1491, waterkloofwines.co.za 🍷



FOODIE'S DELIGHT

Learn to cook

➔ Craig Cormack from Sofia's at Morgenster offers hands-on cooking classes in winter. Up to ten guests hit the kitchen running, fuelled by a glass or two of the estate's wine, and prepare, cook and plate a four-course meal from scratch. The price includes the four-course dinner and wine pairings. +27 (0)21 847 1993

➔ Lebanese-American Ghenwa Steingaszner shares her contagious passion for authentic Middle Eastern food at Ghenwa's Lebanese Cooking Club, with fun-filled, information-packed cookery demos followed by an inevitable feast matched to wines chosen by her wine fundi husband. +27 (0)21 847 1989

Liquid gold

➔ Giulio Bertrand put SA olive oil on the map when he started producing award-winning olive oils on his wine farm, Morgenster. The oil is cold pressed, contains no additives and is neither filtered nor refined. Fine table olives and the full range of extra-virgin olive oils are available for tasting. +27 (0)21 852 1738

Coffee culture

➔ The Coffee Roasting Co on Lourensford Estate was one of the first artisan roasters in SA, dealing exclusively in single-origin coffees from all over the world. The 17 single-estate coffees and six signature blends roasted on site include a sought-after CO₂ decaf. +27 (0)21 847 0536

Going organic

➔ Basic Stock, a tiny deli in Bright Street, is the spot in which to shop for organic everything – from fruit and veggies to baked goods, artisanal boerewors and nut butters. +27 (0)79 148 0831

SIPPING PRETTY

Waterkloof's sleek wine tasting lounge is integrated into the restaurant and open-plan kitchen; (opposite, from top) Francois Marais's 'Chevalier', fashioned from driftwood and repurposed steel, is a fitting centrepiece to Stables restaurant at Vergelegen; 'Death by Valrhona', a blowout dessert featuring multiple textures of chocolate and passionfruit, by Waterkloof's chef Gregory Czarnecki



SOFIA'S AT MORGENSTER

Morgenster's award-winning extra-virgin olive oils and red wine blends are the inspiration for chef Craig Cormack's deceptively simple menu at the estate's rustic farmhouse restaurant, Sofia's. Cormack utilises only the freshest, regional and seasonally available produce, including table olives, lemons, figs, berries, loquats, plums and pomegranates sourced directly from the estate. His food shows an experienced knack for modernising classic dishes with Cape flavours and fun twists.

In winter, speciality Friday evening dinners – a trio of gourmet soups or authentic curries, perhaps – are as popular as the hands-on cooking lessons and salt pairings Cormack hosts from time to time (see page 48). Pairing salt to food and wine is his passion, and he currently has a collection of 101 salts from all over the world. Raw salmon trout, slightly 'cooked' from resting on a slab of Himalayan rock salt (absorbing the delicious nuances of flavour from the salt), is a house speciality.

Launch Wednesday to Sunday (plus Mondays in summer), dinner Wednesday and Saturday, plus some Fridays; mains average R125. +27 (0)21 847 1993, morgenster.co.za

CAMPHORS AND STABLES AT VERGELEGEN

Nearby, at historic Vergelegen – which has always excelled at wine tourism – not one but two new eateries opened late last year, along with an elegant tasting centre overlooking a vast herb garden (plus, the gourmet picnics in the forest are still offered in summer). Camphors is the flagship restaurant named after the magnificent 312-year-old trees planted by the Dutch East India Company's Willem Adriaan van der Stel. Its wow factor is a combination of chef PJ Vadas's sophisticated menu paired with Vergelegen's wines, and well-known interior designer Christiaan Barnard's glamorous black interiors. Having spent time working in Michelin-starred restaurants overseas, followed by four years at The Roundhouse in Camps Bay, Vadas's presence in Somerset West is further evidence of good things to come.

Stables, the more casual restaurant, is a gorgeous contemporary bistro with bare French oak tables, modern *riempie* benches and a gunshot view of the Hottentots-Holland mountains. Gary Richardson,

a Capetonian chef happily returned home after clocking up London work experience, has put together a menu of crowd-pleasing light meals and treats, with substantial offerings suitable for a more sophisticated three-course lunch (including indulgent desserts). It's a place conducive to lingering, even though there's much to see and do at Vergelegen – don't miss out on a stroll in the award-winning gardens featuring camellias, roses and, most recently, an agapanthus garden, maze and playground. *Camphors is open for lunch Wednesday to Sunday, dinner Friday and Saturday; two courses R275, three courses R350. +27 (0)21 847 1346. Stables serves breakfasts, teas and lunches daily, around R90. +27 (0)21 847 2156, vergelegen.co.za*

MILLHOUSE KITCHEN AT LOURENSFORD

Like Stables, the Millhouse Kitchen has done its bit to revolutionise casual-chic dining in Somerset West. Chef Bjorn Dingemans has hit on a winning formula: a series of three stylish interiors, each with a different look and feel, and an interesting menu of reasonably priced food that ticks most of the boxes – from a decent burger via pork belly and risotto to thin-based pizzas, all matched to Lourensford estate wines and bubbles. Here, at last, is a spot to bring the kids for an early supper without forfeiting parental needs. ■

Open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, Tuesday to Sunday; mains average R95. +27 (0)21 847 2328, lourensford.co.za



GET GOING DESTINATION: SOMERSET WEST

Somerset West is 45km from Cape Town. British Airways flies to Cape Town from Jo'burg, Durban, PE and London Heathrow.

Visit ba.com. For more on SA food, visit bahighlife.com.

OUT AND ABOUT

Walk this way

Farms in the area are Cape Floral Kingdom biodiversity hotspots, and take conservation very seriously.

➔ Waterkloof offers two-hour guided walks through indigenous flora on the slopes of the Schapenberg, followed by a two-course meal in the restaurant. Walks start at 10am or 4.30pm; R360. +27 (0)21 858 1292

➔ Vergelegen has the largest private alien-vegetation clearing project in the country, and organises walks throughout the year with Gerald Wright, resident environmentalist. R130; +27 (0)21 847 1346, +27 (0)21 847 2156

➔ Helderberg Nature Reserve gives easy access to the mountainside for walkers and hikers. The initial climb is steep, but the panoramic views of False Bay and the Hottentots-Holland region are worth it. Entry R15. +27 (0) 21 851 4060, helderbergnaturereserve.co.za

Saddle up

➔ Waterkloof, in partnership with Orion Stables and Riding Academy, offers an easy one-hour riding trail through the

Schapenberg conservancy (think fynbos, vineyards and sea views). The price includes a two-course lunch or dinner afterwards. Rides start at 11am or 5.30pm; R530. waterkloofwines.co.za

➔ The Ride's new Winelands Day Trails are for capable riders who love adventure, good food and wine. Start at Lourensford and follow a 13km route-less-travelled through fynbos and over a pass before dropping down to De Trafford wine estate in the Blaauwklippen valley for a tasting, followed by lunch at next-door Dornier wine estate, before riding 17km on to Lanzerac in Stellenbosch. R2,200. +27 (0)83 393 5008, theride.co.za



GOOD TASTES
(clockwise from above left) Lourensford Wine Estate, established in 1700, boasts a number of historic buildings; Marissa Chandansing at her unassuming deli, Basic Stock; the warm interior of Millhouse Kitchen at Lourensford; the Greek salad at Sofia's at Morgenster; (opposite page) chef Vadas discusses the day's menu in the kitchen at Camphors, the signature restaurant at Vergelegen

