

BLOWN AWAY

On a wind-blown visit to THE RESTAURANT AT WATERKLOOF, Kerneels Breytenbach is convinced that award-winning chef Gregory Czarnecki has earned every one of his stripes.



IN MANY RESPECTS, Stellenbosch and Somerset West are quite similar. Both towns have a vested interest in the local wine culture. Both attract wealth from up north and abroad. And both thrive on local industries and commerce that set the scene for greater South Africa.

While Stellenbosch can justifiably be proud of the abundance of internationally renowned restaurants in its district, Somerset West has its own pride and joy in The Restaurant at Waterkloof. Rated one of the foremost eateries in our country, it has steadily held its place

high on the list of the best restaurants in South Africa.

Our visit to Waterkloof Estate was well timed. Two of the guests were going to take part in Cape Town's bicycle extravaganza four days later and one of them had flown in all the way from London for the race. We were ready to be dazzled ...

A gale was blowing at full force when we arrived, but we soon realised that the wind doesn't faze the folks at Waterkloof at all. "The wind speed is anything from blowing to blown away," boasts their brochure, while the estate's logo shows Van Hunks puffing up a mighty storm.

It quickly became clear, too, that the austerity of the building, striking as it is, also serves a great purpose. Although the structure takes a mighty battering from the elements, the restaurant's elevation ensures that the views are phenomenal, justifying that the dining area is encased in glass. With the sun setting and the wind raging in from Gordon's Bay and the Strand, a strange, somewhat unsettling show of light and wind played over formal and informal settlements alike.

The sheer size of the windows enhanced the feeling that we were part of the storm, yet at the same time we felt safe inside. Apart from

two gigantic tapestries, the interior is simple, and yet stylish. Adding to our comfort was the eagerness with which the staff made us feel at home in this giant glass promontory and how, on the way to our table, we were able to observe the activity in chef Gregory Czarnecki's kitchen. In line with Waterkloof's avowed transparency, we could see the kitchen staff bent over the counter tops, concentrating on their tasks.

We ordered wine and soon the amuse-bouche arrived: three little sensory bombs that convinced me that the 2016 Eat Out S. Pellegrino & Acqua Panna Chef of the Year Award went to Gregory Czarnecki for a very specific reason: he is a great chef. Gregory is a Frenchman who believes that one should exploit the gifts that each season brings. I shall definitely be visiting Waterkloof again in each of the seasons.

Every guest at our table fell under Gregory's sway. And every one of the dishes was a master class in plating. Among the entrées, the three forms of asparagus vied with the cured scallops with porcini crémeux but I felt that, their aesthetic and culinary excellence notwithstanding, my egg 63 was better than either of them: an egg yolk enveloped in petals of Tête de Moine cheese and onion velouté. Around me the guests were tasting one another's entrées – yellowtail ceviche with Smiling Valley marron (a mini-lobster), the asparagus and the scallops – but I guarded my egg 63 jealously. It's not often that one gets to feast on Tête de Moine cheese ...

The main course brought a huge surprise. Four of the seven guests opted for the chef's take on Mauritius sea bass, served with confit of leek, Saldanha mussels and Cape gooseberries. Cries of wonderment and joy were heard around the table as the fish arrived, served skin side up.



ABOVE: Chef Gregory Czarnecki conjures up inventive, seasonal dishes. BELOW: The elegant dining area.

Those who ordered quail (with a juniper berry jus and cabbage gâteau), duck breasts (with saffron apple and glazed turnip) or springbok loin (with smoked mascarpone and mostarda de Cremona) weren't disappointed, but they gratefully accepted the morsels of sea bass we shared with them. By now it was clear to us that anybody in the Western Cape who claims to have a discerning palate should seriously consider an evening at Waterkloof.

How to enthuse about the desserts? I can describe them in a formal way: a selection of local cheeses; manjari collant;ivoire and jasmine mousse; apricot and fennel; and matcha tea cheesecake. They sounded great, and were plated with the touch of a master painter. The thing is, they tasted even better



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: 48° poached Saldanha Bay oysters; Waterkloof's wines come from biodynamic vineyards; the restaurant is on the list of top South African eateries; raspberry mousse with martini and elderflower sorbet; the restaurant offers spectacular views.



MYSTERY SOLVED

My partner in eating and drinking, Kerneels, has extolled the merits of this restaurant and I fully agree. Which is why its wine list was something of a mystery.

We started proceedings with an exceptionally fine MCC sparkling wine called Astraeus Brut, served by the glass. We probably should have had the bottle.

Then the fun started with a list of wines of unclear origin, until our waiter/sommelier, Ishmael, came to our aid. It transpired that all the wines listed are in fact from Waterkloof. We had the light and pleasant Circumstance Chenin Blanc 2016 followed by an outstanding Circumstance Chardonnay 2015 that blended well with the sea bass.

We also had a go at the Seriously Cool Chenin Blanc 2016, purely because of the name. One of the guests tasted the Circumstance Cabernet Sauvignon 2014, which could perhaps do with some more ageing.

The highlight of the evening was the Circle of Light 2013, which turned out to be a blend of Sauvignon Blanc, Chenin Blanc and Chardonnay, with the former dominant but discreetly so. We easily finished the bottle.

Both the red and the white wines were decanted. The latter was covered with crushed ice in the decanter, a technique that worked well.

The service was outstanding and the stemware was up to the standards expected of such an establishment. There is no BYO.

– Chris Otto

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than they looked and were a sensory delight in every way. Absolutely outstanding.

When all was done and we strolled outside to find that the wind had quietened, I thought back to how one of the guests had described the Mauritius sea bass: in a league of its own. Yes, that's The Restaurant at Waterkloof.

Driving down the valley towards Somerset West, we looked back and saw a beacon of light against the dark backdrop of the Hottentots Holland Mountains. The Restaurant is a beacon in other respects, too. It's at the next level as far as restaurants in the Western Cape go. ▽

• The Restaurant at Waterkloof, Sir Lowry's Pass Road, Somerset West. 021 858 1292.

