



# Garden variety

It's hard to *define* Babylonstoren. Part restaurant, winery, deli, shop, hotel, wedding venue and spa, but *in the centre of it all, a garden*

Words MATT ALLISON  
Photography DAVID CROOKES



Arriving at Babylonstoren one misty morning, my senses were aroused by the sights and sounds of carpenters erecting a new donkey stable of biblical proportions. Workmen greeted me from the back of a John Deere tractor, chugging alongside ornate citrus trees laden with eureka lemons and the tail end of what appeared to have been a bumper crop of naartjies and oranges.

Citrus month on the farm is quickly making way for clivia month – the farm boasts the largest collection in South Africa open to the public, more than 10 000 of them, and guests are encouraged to stroll through the snake-like wooden structure that houses them or along the secluded path by the river where they bloom in spring.

Everything at Babylonstoren hangs in the balance of function and form, each detail carefully curated. Four years ago, owner Karen Roos contracted French architect Patrice Taravella to design and Terry de Waal to implement the eight-acre garden, boasting more than 350 fruit and vegetable varieties. The design pays homage to the fruit-bearing Company's Garden in Cape Town, founded by the Dutch East India Company in 1652, and while the garden itself is in its infancy, the farm was originally awarded to Pieter van der Byl in 1690, showcasing its rich Dutch roots and making it one of the oldest commercial farms in South Africa.



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Patrice called on the expertise of specialists: with years of experience at Kirstenbosch behind her, Liesl van der Walt oversaw the creation of the indigenous fragrance garden before picking up the mantle of head gardener. The first year was all about creating the structure and form, and tackling important issues such as drainage. As you walk through the garden, you'll notice several leiwater streams that route water from a river across the farm, just as they have been doing for 300 years.



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Over coffee, F&B manager Simone Rossouw, formerly of Le Quartier Français and The Big Easy, describes herself as a co-ordinator, working alongside Liesl to ensure that each of the garden blocks are accounted for, no easy feat given that the garden itself is a living, breathing organism. 'The first two years were largely trial and error, a series of what worked, what didn't work, but over time, it's found a routine, moving into natural rhythms and cycles that have taken years to observe, develop and train.'

Seasons on the farm are expressed through monthly themes. 'The garden shows us where we are in the year,' Simone says. This year, citrus month showcased their blood oranges, which in the case of Babel, their award-winning restaurant, made their way on to the menu in a scarlet

red salad and crisp citrus sorbet; the more casual Greenhouse eatery served blood oranges in their cordial, while the Garden Spa made use of an orange blossom honey scrub. Produce is picked at its prime, the bounty shared by all, nothing wasted.

Karen Pretorius, head chef in the bakery, stocks the store not only with products from the farm, but from the local community too. I found the shelves laden with cheeses from neighbours Dalewood Fromage, and cured meats and fresh whole trout from the Franschoek Valley. Karen is also investigating the use of local pulses and grains in her baked goods.

Simone explains that while certain products are imported, they're committed to supporting local suppliers and have spent years developing close relationships with each of them.

Eating at Babel is refined dining with a rustic heart. Salads are an exhibit of colour – red, green and yellow – with the ever-changing list of ingredients a reflection of the season. Food is presented as close to its natural form as possible. 'If you touch it more than three times, it's dead!' says Simone.





*One bride declared her ecstasy upon hearing that her wedding would be taking place during cabbage season, with visions of tables laden with textured savoy*

though each of the blocks, introducing them to exotic edibles such as tamarillos and bananadillas, as well as an array of aromatic local herbs and fynbos. Along the way you are encouraged to pick and taste, inextricably linking you to the rhythmic cycles of this prolific garden. etc

BABYLONSTOREN IS OFF THE R45, LESS THAN AN HOUR'S DRIVE FROM CAPE TOWN. OPEN SEVEN DAYS A WEEK, 9 AM TO 5 PM, WITH GARDEN TOURS TAKING PLACE AT 10 AM DAILY AND CELLAR TOURS AT 12. ENTRANCE FEE R10. BOOKINGS FOR BABEL ARE ESSENTIAL. 021 863 3852, WWW.BABYLONSTOREN.COM



My pick from the menu would be the fillet on the bone served with anchovy butter, a Shiraz sauce and hand-cut French fries, finished off with a sweet and sour orange blossom honey and lime crème brûlée with winter fruits. Daily chef specials cater to those who wish to order off the menu, ensuring there's always something to entice returning guests.

Service staff also join in the harvesting on the farm, so they're able to share their knowledge of the food with diners – such as what a kohlrabi is (it's a cabbage with a swollen stem), how it grows and which of the 15 blocks it's from – giving real meaning to the farm-to-fork concept.

Strolling through the vegetable garden, I watched chefs harvesting foot-high fennel, spinach, spring onion, assorted salad greens and broad beans. Tatsoi was purposefully left to go to flower and seed, making it a useful accompaniment to the restaurant's decor. Cylindrical chemistry vases and vials are stuffed with whole beetroot plants and colourful bright lights Swiss chard, while fragrant herbs infused in cordials are displayed at the Green House. Simone shares how one bride declared her ecstasy upon hearing that her wedding would be taking place during cabbage season, with visions of tables laden with textured savoy.

Babylonstoren produces its own wine from no less than 11 cultivars, but they strive to support the local region by incorporating wines from fellow Simonsberg farms on the Babel menu, revealing the unique terroir of the region and further fostering a sense of community.

Planting in the garden is staggered to meet the ongoing needs of the shops, restaurants and spa. Rows of carrots are sown every two weeks, and radishes every week, to keep up with the demand for fresh produce.

To get the most out of your visit to Babylonstoren, a garden tour is highly recommended. Gundula Deutschlander, the resident guide, takes visitors



1 For a farm stay with a difference, book yourself into one of the **EXCLUSIVE GARDEN GUEST SUITES AT BABYLONSTOREN**. Thatched roofs and thick, whitewashed walls ensure the interiors are pleasantly cool in summer, while the indoor fireplaces make it a cosy winter escape. There's plenty to explore on this working farm, whether you choose to canoe on the dam, laze by the swimming pool, cycle through vineyards or treat yourself to a signature spa treatment. *Babylonstoren, R45, Franschhoek 021 863 3852 www.babylonstoren.com*

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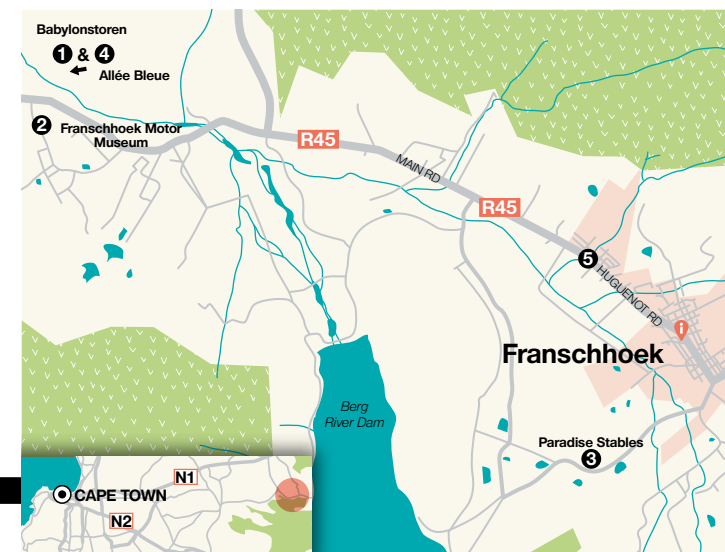
4 Make the most of a balmy summer's day with a **PICNIC ON THE EXPANSIVE LAWNS AT ALLÉE BLEUE**. Baskets (R150 pp) are freshly prepared with delicious local fare and estate wines can be purchased. Children are catered for with their own menu and fun activities. Picnics take place daily, weather dependent, and bookings are essential. *Allée Bleue, R45 and R310 Intersection, Franschhoek 021 874 1021, www.alleebleue.co.za*

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## Visit

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