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Platteland

SPRING 2024

The slow life is the good life

FLORA FROM THE KNERSVLAKTE

Makes magic with roosterkoek & koeksisters

Join us for a wander through **Vosburg**

Softening the grief

of losing a beloved pet

PHOTO ESSAY

Windmills of the Karoo

Soetmelksvlei

A bridge to the past

JAN MENTOOR

The broom-maker of Malmesbury

Meet the rainbow of **Niekerkshoop...**

FOOD

Errieda's spring table
Baby veg takes centre stage

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Meet the bread evangelists baking for health and happiness



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Aquaponics

Eat fresh catfish from your garden!

SPRING 2024

#44

The gouda that lays the golden egg

Woolworths' 10-month aged gouda beat more than 1 000 other entries to be crowned South Africa's Dairy Product of the Year at the biggest and oldest national dairy championship in Africa, the Agri-Expo South African Dairy Championships.

This is the fourth time that this top cheese, which Lactalis South Africa makes specially for Woolworths, has been announced as Product of the Year.

"As the cheese ages, it develops notes of caramel, nuts and even a slight sharpness. By this stage the cheese has already broken down well, which means it melts in the mouth and has a slight crunch due to the cheese crystals," says Arnold Nieuwoudt, plant manager at Lactalis.

He adds that the cheese deserves a place of honour on any cheeseboard but is also delicious with pasta or in a steak sauce.

Contact cheesesa.co.za



Woolworths' aged gouda is South Africa's Dairy Product of the Year.



Babylonstoren's new book

The *Babylonstoren* coffee-table book is a visual feast, a true showcase of this working fruit, wine and guest farm near Franschhoek, as well as the many experts, artists, and craftspeople who keep it running smoothly.

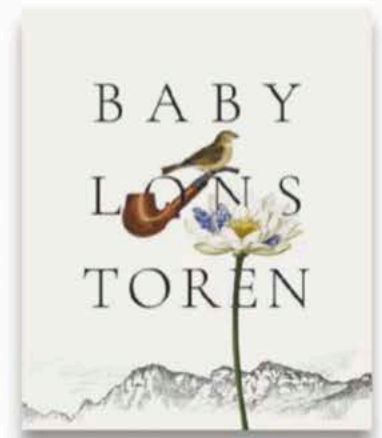
In chapters with titles such as "Soil," "Pruning," "Wild," "Taste," and "Learning", journalist Sophia van Taak explores the renowned historical garden, farm, luxurious guesthouse, spa, winery and farm-to-fork restaurants.

Its more than 250 pages present a comprehensive overview of the farm and make for a wonderful keepsake after a visit, or a lovely introduction for someone who has never been there.

Stories about the garden focus on

the soil, gardeners and main fruit cultivars, highlighting the region's vibrant food history and seasonal crops. At Babylonstoren, everything is dictated by the seasons and readers are introduced to the master pruner, soil expert and entomologist who work to maintain the delicate balance in the garden. Other stories feature the butcher, baker, and cheese and ice-cream maker who provide seasonal delights to the farm's shops and restaurants. There are also stories about the donkeys, Chianina cattle, water buffalo, chickens and insects, as well as the experts and volunteers who care for them.

Babylonstoren is priced at R790 and is available at the farm or online at shop.babylonstoren.com.



HIDDEN SECRET

Return to life in 1897



The old cellar, where wine was produced and matured in wooden vats, has been transformed into a Victorian-era exhibition room, featuring an oxwagon, a library of books dating back to before the turn of the 20th century, a display area and a life-size dollhouse for children to enjoy.

OPPOSITE The Cape Dutch homestead is spread over 3,3 ha. Front and centre is the farmhouse with its unique gable dating back to 1851, and to the left are the old sheds that now house the Ou Stal restaurant.

When you visit Soetmelksvlei museum farm on the slopes of the Simonsberg, you are transported back to the late 19th century, a time when life was much slower and simpler, but also more laborious – an era when everything was made by hand.

TEXT JOHAN VAN ZYL PHOTOS PETER VAN NOORD AND BABYLONSTOREN



LEFT A section of the farmyard as viewed from the chicken coop. Part of the main house is visible on the left, and to the right is the meat and dairy room, where workshops are held. In the middle distance is the Jonkershuis farm shop.

BELOW The dining room where the family and any visitors would have eaten and conducted their Bible studies. (The family Bible lies open on the little table to the right of the porcelain cabinet that displays period-specific pieces.) This room also houses a daybed that would give weary travellers the chance to take a nap before embarking on the half-day horse-carriage journey back to Cape Town.

OPPOSITE The new chicken coop with its traditional gable looks like it was built during the 19th century. This is where Soetmelksvlei's Naked Neck chickens, Peking ducks and a variety of other chickens lay their heads at night.

Whatever you do, do not flee to Soetmelksvlei on a day when you have totally

had it with your fast, comfortable, technologically advanced, consumer lifestyle. After spending seven blissful hours imagining that you are living in 1897 – the year that was used as the historical reference point for the restoration of the farm – you and most other visitors will disembark with heavy hearts from the safari vehicle that has returned you to the harsh realities of 2024.

But believe it or not, after having barely traversed the first bumpy farm road, a woman hauls out her mobile phone and starts quietly cursing the lack of reception: “Twelve missed calls!” She must immediately search for an old pin to send via WhatsApp to a lost courier who is

trying to find her house in the suburbs!

One wonders: Would it be a greater challenge for someone from the late 19th century to survive in the 21st century, or for someone from today to travel back to 1897 and live at a snail’s pace – without electricity, the internet, mobile phones, computers, cars, decent doctors, or a flush toilet in the house. In those days “ablutions” involved a chamber pot under the bed, a wash table with basin and pitcher, and an outhouse in the garden. All necessities were made by hand. Farms were remotely situated, and people had to be self-sufficient and resourceful if they wanted to survive. (This sounds a lot like *Platteland*, where we have always believed that the slow life is the best life.)

SOETMELKSVLEI has changed owners several times since it was granted to two Huguenots in 1694

as Bergen Henegouwen. In 1896, the farm came into the possession of the Koch family, who changed its name to Donkerhoek. The current owners renamed it Soetmelksvlei, a nod to the old Afrikaans radio soapie *Die Du Plooy van Soetmelksvlei*, and a reference to the Franschhoek Valley as the land of milk and honey. Wine, grain and meat were all produced on this 142-hectare piece of land until well into the 19th century. When the phylloxera epidemic destroyed the vineyards in the valley in the 1880s, the farmers decided to plant soft-fruit trees instead. Guests are reminded of this upon arrival, when they see the enormous glass-fibre peach designed by Josh Phillips of LEKA Design at the reception area, as well as the hand-laid peach-pip floor.

“The phylloxera crisis meant that farmers were required to put shoulder to the wheel to build a new soft-fruit industry from the ground >



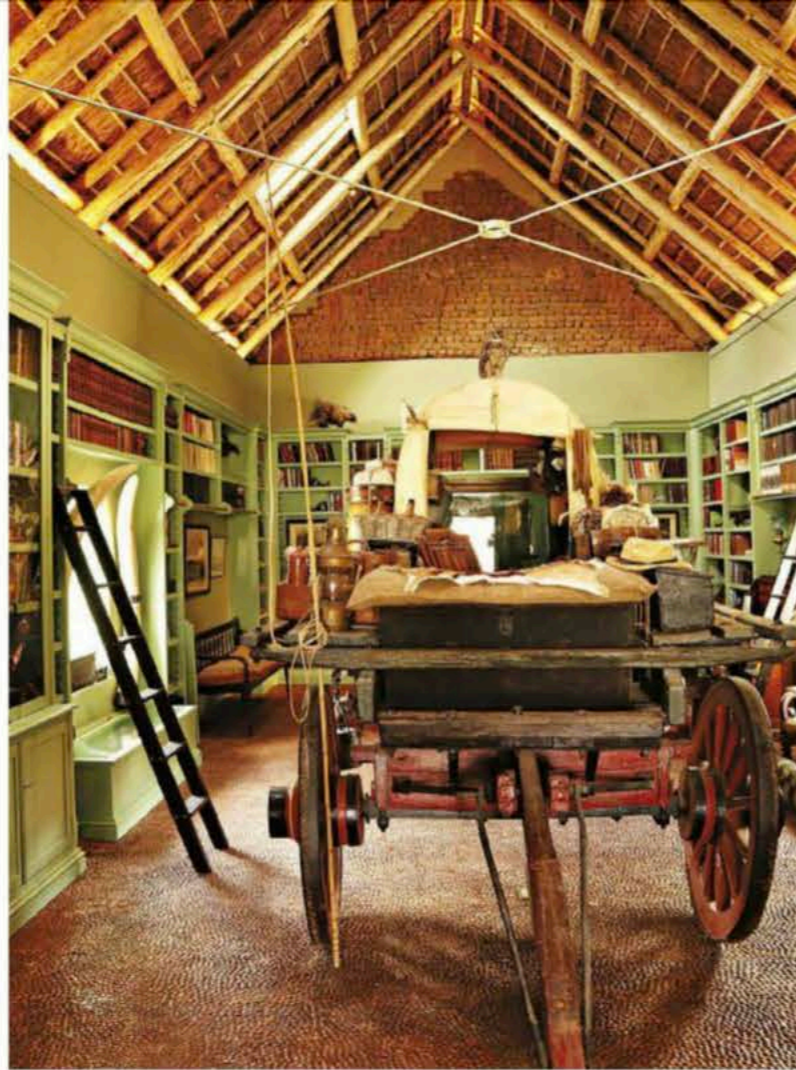
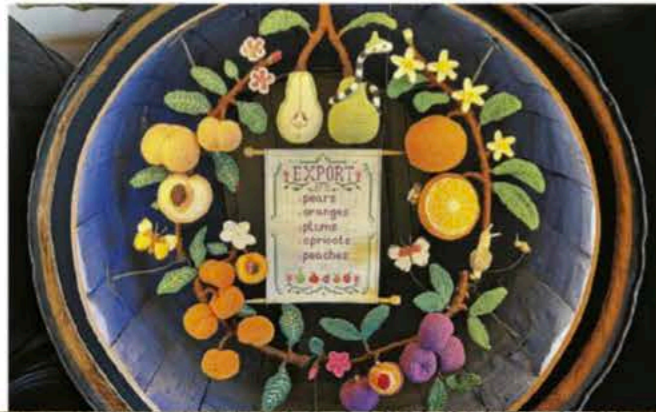
HIDDEN SECRET

RIGHT The oxwagon housed in the old cellar is surrounded by bookshelves heaving with literature dating back to the 19th century.

BELOW This detailed crocheted wreath is the work of Minette Vermaas and pays tribute to the history of the soft-fruit farming industry at Soetmelksvlei and its surrounds.

BOTTOM LEFT Elsa Vogts, Babylonstoren's museologist, was involved with the restoration project at Soetmelksvlei, and explains that this wallpaper was designed by the poet and textile designer William Morris in 1871 and could be ordered via post at the time.

BOTTOM RIGHT Soetmelksvlei celebrates the traditions of craftsmanship and artisanal endeavours, and visitors can attend workshops to learn, among other things, how to repair riempie chairs.



The main bedroom of the restored farmhouse honours everything hand made and the craftsmanship that went into creating each piece.



up, which started yielding results in 1897. This was the year when the Boland started flourishing again," explains Babylonstoren museologist Elsa Vogts, who was closely involved in the Soetmelksvlei project. "It is also an overall reference to the ingenuity and inventions of the expanding agricultural industry in the Cape." (The area would inevitably feel the impact of the tragedy of the Anglo-Boer War that started two years later.)

An ode to craftsmanship

Soetmelksvlei is a hybrid between a working farm (with animals, bee hives, grazing and citrus orchards), an interactive museum, and an ode to traditional crafts and trades that prevailed before far-reaching industrialisation became the norm.

Visitors are encouraged to experience for themselves how wonderful it is to work with their hands. The artisans at the farm

offer weekly workshops where you can learn old-fashioned skills such as woodwork, leatherwork and blacksmithing, or learn how to make butter and bake rusks.

A corner of the workshop building also houses a wagon-making exhibition, on loan from the Relihan family. It contains the original contents of the wagon workshop that Lefebvre Relihan operated between 1885 and 1918 on Spes Bona farm, situated on the slopes of Kasteelberg near Riebeeck-Kasteel. Here, he and a team of artisans built wagons and carts and made tools at what is believed to have been the only complete cartwright's workshop in South Africa.

Take a walk into the past

On the drive to Soetmelksvlei, the audio guide (delivered via ear-phones) informs visitors about everything they could possibly see along the route: from the crops and

noteworthy trees that grow between Babylonstoren and Soetmelksvlei, to the large Italian Chianina oxen and water buffalo that graze here. By September, audio guides should also be available for the farmhouse and old cellar to explain to visitors the context of what they are seeing. These guides will tell the (fictional) story of the Bosman family: the farmer, Wynand, his wife, Magriet, their 17-year-old son, Attie, and their six-year-old daughter, Katie.

Visitors are given a map at the Soetmelksvlei reception area to help them explore the 3,3 hectares on which the historical farmyard has been laid out. The buildings are arranged in a U-shape and no effort has been spared in restoring three of the oldest remaining buildings on the property to their former glory, true to how they would have appeared in the late 19th century: the impressive farmhouse with its unique gable dating to 1851; the old cellar with its yellowwood >



ceiling; and the old stable, now the restaurant, where the farmer kept his horses, ox-wagon and horse carts. The meat and dairy room, where workshops are held, served as accommodation in the 19th century, while the building that houses the Jonkershuis farm shop was added after the turn of the 20th century and originally served as a residence.

The architectural team from Open City Architects initially managed the research, development and design of the farmyard and buildings, but numerous archaeologists, heritage consultants and historians were involved in the process. Creative lead Etienne Hanekom worked with costume designer and stylist Sylvia van Heerden and her team, who ensured that the textural and fabric details authentically resembled those of the past. Antique furniture and other pieces were sourced from South African collectors, and new items were handmade according to the specifications of the period – from embroidery to crochet work. A fresh approach was taken with new additions to the farm (such as the reception building and bathrooms), but historical >



ABOVE On the day *Platteland* visited, apple tart, milk tart and malva pudding were on offer for tea or dessert at the *Ou Stal* restaurant. Traditional home-cooked meals are also served here. On the right, the harvest table is laden with fresh produce from the garden, together with roosteroek, a variety of cheeses, biltong and droëwors, nuts, and all manner of pickles, chutneys and jams.



TOP The farm kitchen is where you can enjoy a comforting drink and sample a piece of farm bread that's been baked in the wooden oven by Louise Johannes (pictured) and Jacqueline Matthews. The flour used is freshly milled every day at the farm's mill. On the left of the table is an old-fashioned glass flycatcher and apple peeler.

Meet the people Adele Johnson

Head of Soetmelksvlei

When Soetmelksvlei's collies, Pippa and Tess, see the head of the farm approaching, they race to meet her, ready to jump into her arms for a kiss.

"Pippa and Tess are incredibly loyal," she says, "but the men of the kraal are always scolding them, as they don't want to leave the ducks and chickens alone. But next week they'll start attending puppy school!"

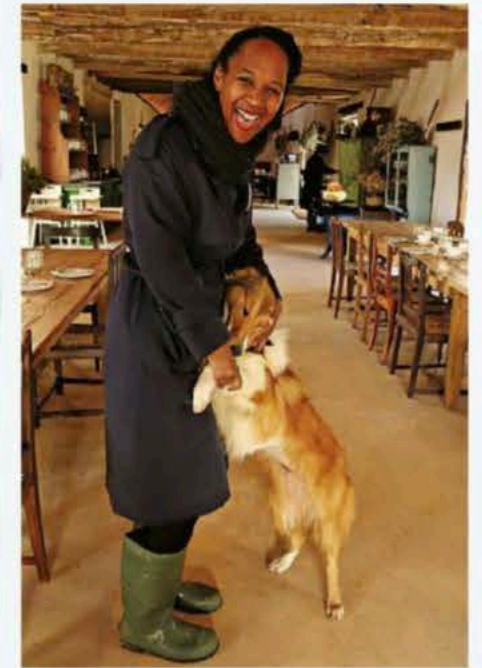
Sports-crazy Adele, a former Springbok basketball player, was born and raised in Paarl and says she is a "total animal lover" who had her own tortoise, guinea pig, dove and two dogs when she was five years old. "I adore puppy breath – it releases serotonin in my brain! And now I'm working on a farm where I am surrounded by animals every day – how lucky can a person be!"

After completing school and many Springbok basketball tours, Adele began to work as a waitress at *Le Quartier Français* in Franschhoek and later became the manager of Margot Janse's restaurant *The Tasting Room*. She was then approached to manage *Babel* restaurant at *Babylonstoren*.

But in 2014 she felt ready for a new adventure: She and her two dogs travelled to Dar es Salaam in Tanzania where she became the assistant manager of the *Golden Tulip Hotel*.

In 2017, she was lured back to *Babylonstoren* to become the food and beverages and functions manager for *Babel*. It was during this time that she married Cleve Dombas. Their son, Kai, is now five years old.

Adele says the intention at Soetmelksvlei is to offer guests a unique farm experience. "Everything tells a story that takes you back to a time long ago when things worked completely differently to the way they do today," she says. "I think people, particularly the farmers' wives, did a lot of physically hard work, in addition to cooking and making clothes, and didn't always have enough time during the day to finish everything. For example, when an animal was slaughtered, the entire beast had to be used and processed immediately. The fat was used to make soap and candles. And if the cow kicked over the milking pail, the farmer's wife had to make another plan."



ABOVE Adele Johnson, pictured here in the restaurant, with one of the beloved collies. "They're heading for puppy lessons soon," she says.

TOP Soetmelksvlei's workshop building houses, among others, a blacksmith and cabinet maker who restore and make furniture and implements.



Meet the people Jamy Sampson

Chicken house

Jamy, a native of Paarl, is at her post in the beautiful chicken coop, and ready to explain why mostly Naked Neck chickens can be seen scratching around on Soetmelksvlei. "Back when the farm was still called Donkerhoek, they were kept as pets. Their lovely large eggs were used for baking cakes or they were slaughtered for the pot."

She says that Naked Necks are regarded as indigenous because they were brought to South Africa in the 17th century and have since become reasonably hardy to cope with our hot summers and cold winters, although they originally come from Malaysia.

In France, Naked Necks are used for commercial poultry production as they have 30% fewer feathers compared with other chickens. They eat less food to reach the same body mass as chickens that have feathers because they use less energy to produce their feathers.

Jamy says that in 2021 she took up a learnership at the Elsenburg Agricultural Training Institute where she worked mostly with cattle. But because she is so small, she realised that she couldn't manage large animals. "I find chickens incredibly funny, especially when they're scratching around or taking a sand bath to get rid of fleas and lice. But they are really easy animals because they know their routine and will walk home themselves in the afternoon."

details were also incorporated into their design.

The mill grinds slowly...

The beautiful water-powered mill – a replica of a 19th-century mill – is another of the recent additions at Soetmelksvlei, although it looks like it's been standing here for several hundred years. Farm mills were common in those days because buying flour in town required travelling long distances.

This mill is known as a Vitruvian overshot mill. "Overshot" refers to the water that falls from above into the buckets on the wheel, and "Vitruvian" refers to Roman engineer Vitruvius, who popularised the first vertical water wheel.

The mill was designed and

built with the help of expert Andy Selfe and his team, who were also involved with the restoration of Mostert's Mill in Cape Town. Andy and the architects visited several mills in the Cape, but the mill at La Cotte Farm outside Franschhoek and the one at Elim were closest in size and design to what would serve as inspiration for the one at Soetmelksvlei.

The animals are colleagues

In the 19th century, various animals would be found in a typical Boland farmyard, including cows, sheep and chickens, which are represented on the farm logo.

"All the animals at Soetmelksvlei are working animals, but they are also 'colleagues' who form an >



The farm's Ayrshire dairy cows, Blommetjie and Bella, are milked twice a day by hand, at 10.00 and 15.00, and visitors are welcome to watch these demonstrations. Here, one of Soetmelksvlei's animal handlers, Cheslin Kana, shows how the cream is separated from the milk using a traditional cream separator.



Soetmelksvlei's mill is a 19th-century replica. It was designed and built by Andy Selfe and his team. Flour is milled every day and used either in the farm kitchen or restaurant and is available to buy in 500 g and 1 kg packs at Jonkershuis farm shop.

Meet the people Benjy Pienaar

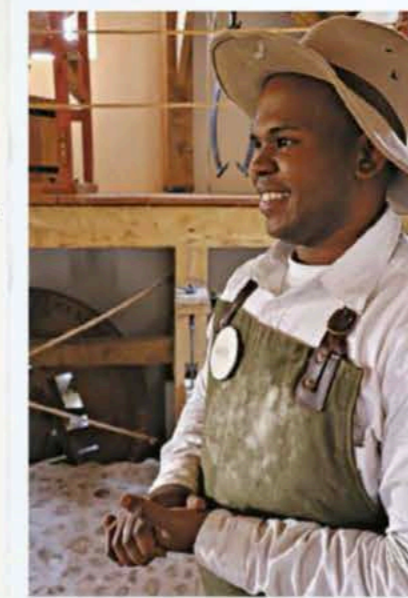
Miller

Benjy, who lives in Wellington, listens intently when he opens the sluice and the first water falls into the buckets of the farm's overshot mill. Every day, fresh wheat flour is ground here for the bakers on the farm as well as for visitors who can buy a voucher at the farm shop.

"This is not a modern system, so it is important to always pay attention, listen to whether the wheel has the correct rhythm, and ensure that there is sufficient wheat between the granite millstones, otherwise the flour will smell burnt," he says as the first white snowfall slowly sifts into a wooden bucket.

"The grains of wheat we use come from Lowerland near Prieska, because the local weather is too wet for wheat." (As an experiment in collaboration with Oakdale, the farm has now planted its own wheat in Riversdale.)

Benjy, who comes from Lambert's Bay and played rugby for the under-19 Boland team, says that, as a junior sommelier, he applied for a position as a waiter in May this year. But his love for wine and the wine industry clearly



shone through strongly and he was offered a position at the distillery and mill under the supervision of 27-year-old head miller Marten van Staden, who was tragically killed in a motorbike accident in June. "Marten gave me notes on how the mill operated and explained

that there are only a handful of people who still know how to do this. He also shared all his knowledge with me. I'm a very curious guy and started reading more, including the book *Grain by Grain: A Quest to Revive Ancient Wheat, Rural Jobs, and Healthy Food* by Bob Quinn and Liz Carlisle. Now I want to learn as much as possible and treat every visitor to Soetmelksvlei like a VIP!"



Soetmelksvlei's organic wheat flour is milled fresh every day – its shorter shelf life means it's only available in the Jonkershuis farm shop. A 500 g package costs R60 and 1 kg costs R100.

HIDDEN SECRET

integral part of the farm family," says farm head Adele Johnson. At the kraal, built on the foundations of the original kraal dating from the 18th century, the two Ayrshire dairy cows, Bella and Blommetjie, are milked twice a day during milking demonstrations. Their milk and cream are used in the restaurant and in baking and butter-making workshops. The two Italian Chianina oxen, Astro and Ilios, belong to one of the largest and oldest cattle breeds in the world and have been trained to plough and pull the wagon that transports guests around the farmyard.

The other kraal residents include two miniature donkeys, Faf and Tjokkie, two Percheron horses from France, Simson and Delilah, and Welsh pony cross Blikkies, who was rescued as a carthorse in Macassar.

There is also a herd of Blackhead Persian sheep, chosen for their impressive history in South Africa. After a ram and three ewes survived a shipwreck along the Cape coast in 1869, the breed became the dominant one in South Africa.

On the other side of the farmyard stands the lovely chicken house with its traditional gable. It is home to 10 Naked Neck chickens, a few Boschveld chickens and five white Peking ducks that supply farm-fresh eggs for use in the kitchen, restaurant and workshops. They also manage the insect and snail populations around the farmyard.

The team is completed by collies Pippa and Tess, along with Gemmer, the young cat who keeps unwelcome rodents away.

This is a tight-knit community where humans and animals depend

on each other. And in an era where technology rules, Soetmelksvlei reminds us to slow down for a while, to take in the world through all our senses and make something with our hands, precisely the way it was done 127 years ago.

"I think that a 19th-century farm boy or girl would quickly adjust to and master the gadgets of the 20th and 21st centuries that are sometimes even incomprehensible to us!" laughs Elsa. "On the other hand, going back in time to 1897 successfully will depend on your mindset. If you are prepared to put your phone away and rely on effort, muscle power and patience, you might enjoy life."

Contact babylonstoren.com
enquiries@babylonstoren.com
Babylonstoren 021 863 3852 >

Meet the people Medwin Dombas

Kraal

Medwin is Adele Johnson's brother-in-law. He has spent his life working with the "lost youth" in the Magnolia area of Paarl, where he runs his own basketball academy called Hoop Squad. As an excellent player and coach, he was involved in establishing the town's first basketball club in 1992, and in 1996 he achieved provincial colours in the sport.

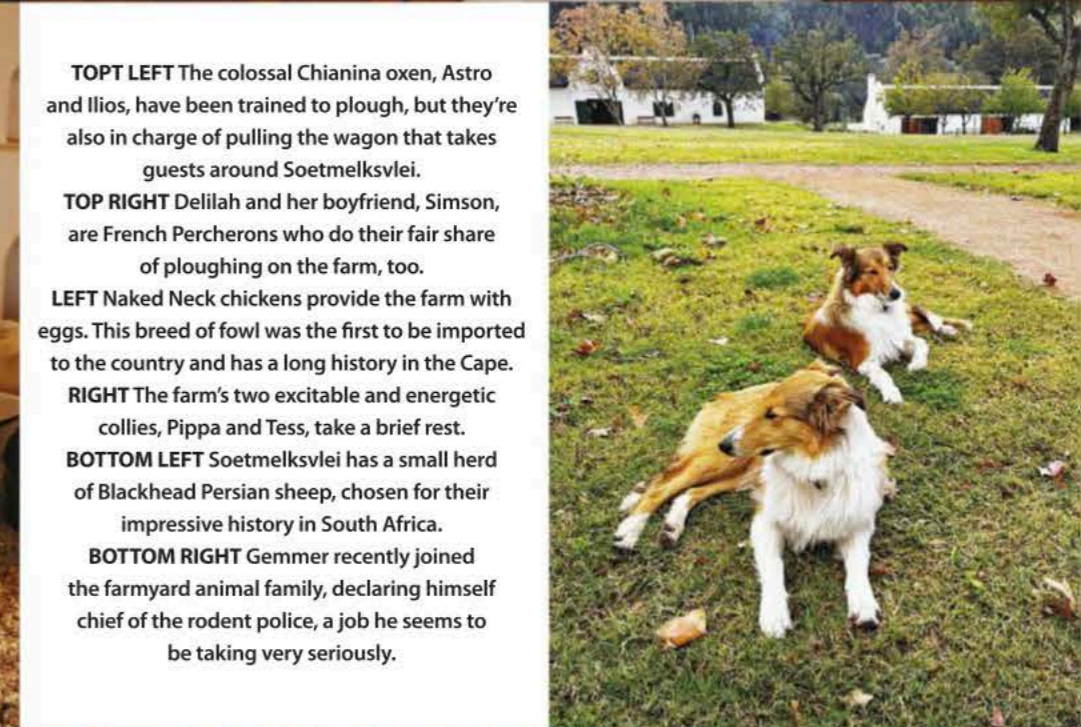
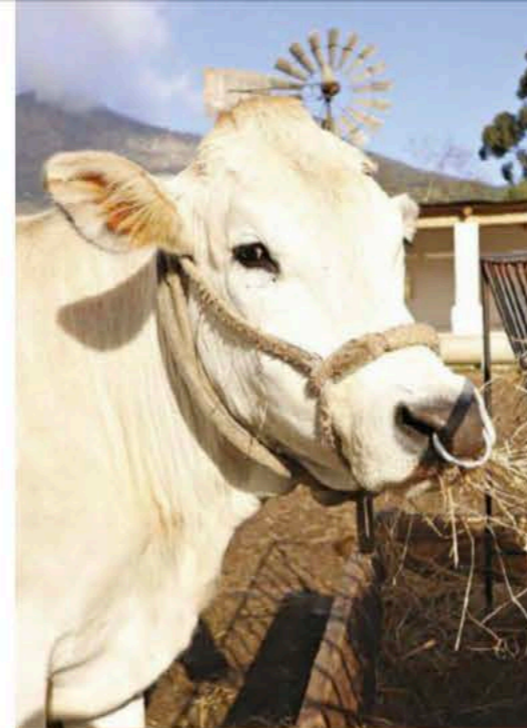
"This is why I really enjoy it when school groups visit Soetmelksvlei, because although you are just showing them where milk and cream come from, you are also helping to establish their value system," he says. "Passion is important at Soetmelksvlei and Babylonstoren, because if you enjoy what you do, it doesn't feel as if you are working."

Soft-natured but quietly firm, Medwin says he is in his element among the farm animals. "Since starting to work here, I have experienced a feeling of déjà vu a few times and, of course, it's a bonus to work with people who are just as great.

"My background is in animal husbandry. Before joining Soetmelksvlei in October 2023, I took care of the lions at the Drakenstein Lion Park. It was also a great privilege to work with the clever chimpanzees after they were transferred there from the Tygerberg Zoo.

"Things are a little different at Soetmelksvlei because the farm animals become very tame, although they are working for us," he says as we watch the two Chianina oxen, Astro and Ilios, who both weigh more than the entire Bok scrum that trounced the Scots in their first 2023 Rugby World Cup match, tuck into their oat hay.

"We cover their ears when we tell visitors how delicious Chianina meat and biltong tastes!"



TOPT LEFT The colossal Chianina oxen, Astro and Ilios, have been trained to plough, but they're also in charge of pulling the wagon that takes guests around Soetmelksvlei.

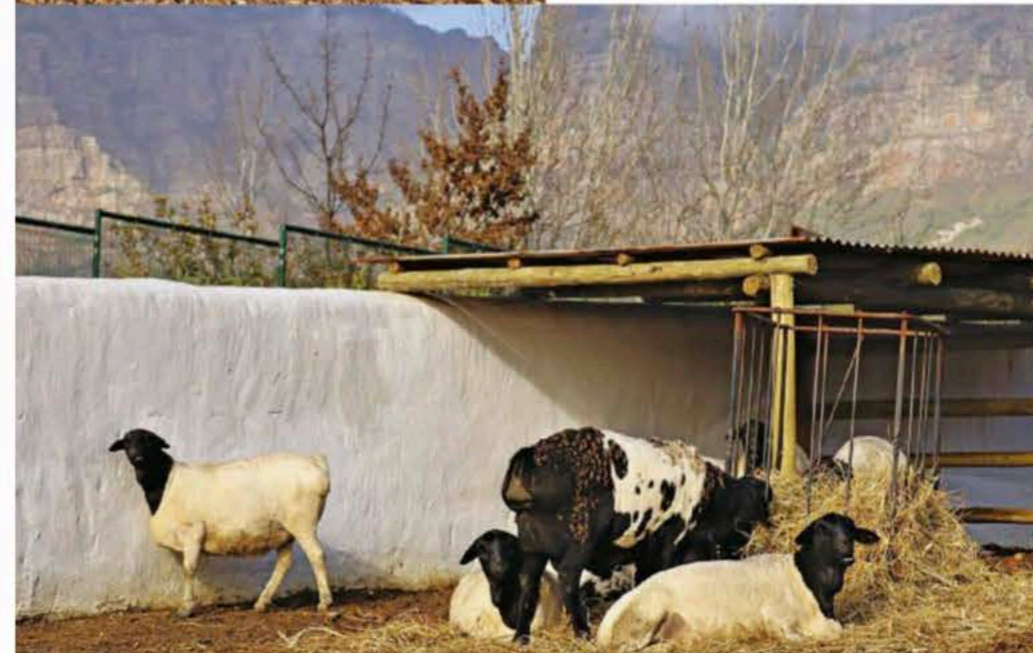
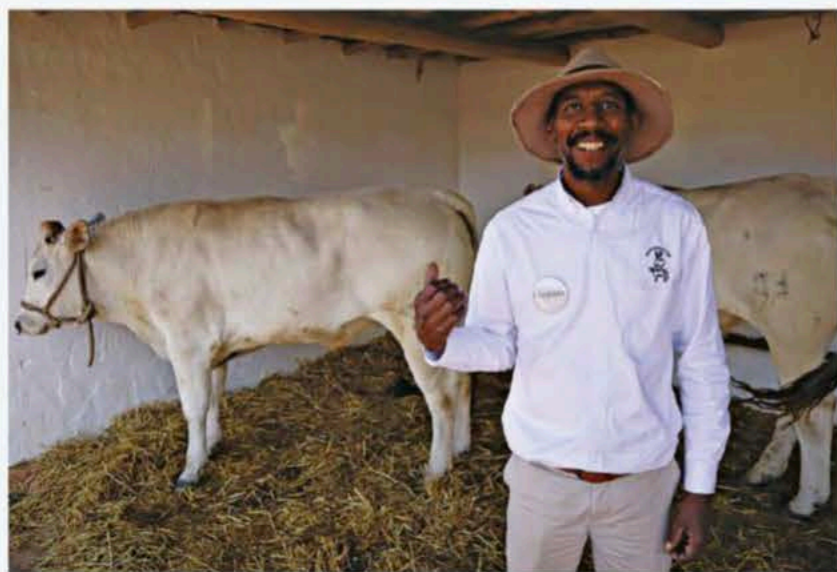
TOP RIGHT Delilah and her boyfriend, Simson, are French Percherons who do their fair share of ploughing on the farm, too.

LEFT Naked Neck chickens provide the farm with eggs. This breed of fowl was the first to be imported to the country and has a long history in the Cape.

RIGHT The farm's two excitable and energetic collies, Pippa and Tess, take a brief rest.

BOTTOM LEFT Soetmelksvlei has a small herd of Blackhead Persian sheep, chosen for their impressive history in South Africa.

BOTTOM RIGHT Gemmer recently joined the farmyard animal family, declaring himself chief of the rodent police, a job he seems to be taking very seriously.





Dan Devonshire

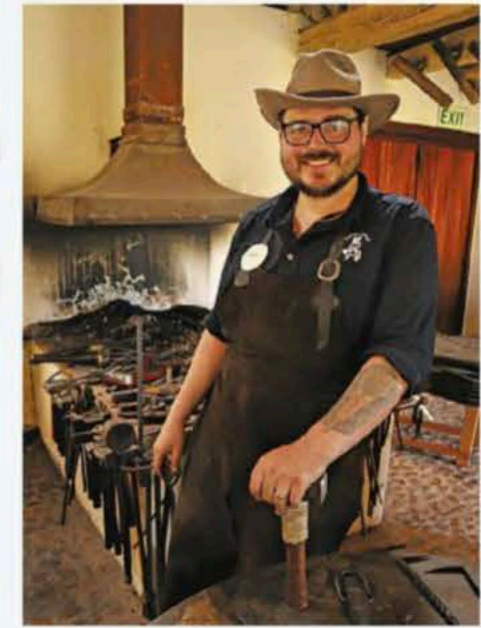
Blacksmith and toolmaker

"Excuse me, sometimes when it's just me with my anvil, I become completely lost in thought and don't realise I have visitors," laughs Dan, who is surrounded by hammers, tongs, chisels, axes and bottle openers, each one made by hand. Today, his main job is to make a hole in a hammerhead, which is likely to keep him busy until late afternoon.

He smiles: "It takes much longer to do something by hand, the old-fashioned way. But luckily, patience is my best character trait."

Dan and his wife, Roxanne, live in Wellington, but he grew up in Orkney and worked in a pharmacy in Ventersdorp before they moved to the Cape following the death of his father-in-law. It was here that he had the chance to explore his love for metalwork as an apprentice to artist and blacksmith Conrad Hicks. Last December, he was offered the opportunity to work at Soetmelksvlei, where he makes and restores everything from nails, chains and farm implements, to pans for the kitchen and ox-wagon yokes.

He points to a steel-and-wood wheelbarrow he made with Danie Cronjé. "This is Riaan Cruywagen," he laughs, a play on *kruywa*, the Afrikaans word for 'wheelbarrow'. We'll be making more of these for the farm and shop."



Meet the people

Danie Grové

Historical artisan

Danie Grové, a former crop, cattle and sheep farmer, as well as joiner, has been responsible for all the wood and leather restoration work at Soetmelksvlei for the past six months. He uses only traditional hand tools, unless there really is no alternative, and he also sharpens his chisels himself by hand.

Danie says that his father, a Namibian farmer, also loved crafts and was always carving something, even while sitting quietly.

"He made real catapults that used ball bearings." Danie's own hands have mastered many things, including knitting, spool knitting and crocheting, "but I have a very loose hand when I crochet".

"If you are quick-tempered, this work calms you down. And as there is no electricity, there is usually not much noise, which gives you a chance to think. Long ago, I completed a joinery course and learnt how to make wagons and wagon wheels from Erik Holm of Hartbeespoort. There are only a handful of people who can still do this kind of work."

This is why he enjoys helping people who attend the Soetmelksvlei workshops to make lovely wooden stools by hand. "It's important to share these old, basic skills so that we can ensure their continuity."



ABOVE In the far corner of the workshop are the original contents of the wagon workshop that Lefebre Relihan operated between 1885 and 1918 on a farm near Riebeeck-Kasteel.

Visit the farm

Soetmelksvlei is open daily between September and March from 09:00 to 17:00 and in winter (April to August) from Thursdays to Sundays (09:00 to 16:00). The same hours apply to the Jonkershuis farm shop and the Ou Stal family restaurant, which is open for tea and lunch.

Departure times Safari vehicles depart from Babylonstoren every 30 minutes between 08:30 and 13:00 and return every hour on the hour from 11:00.

Bookings It is essential to buy tickets online or at the Babylonstoren ticket office. The number of visitors to Soetmelksvlei is limited and transport (from Babylonstoren and back) is provided.

Price Entrance costs R300 p.p. (if you have an annual Babylonstoren membership, the cost is R200 p.p.). The cost for children aged four to 17 is R100, and children three years of age or younger enter for free

(as long as they sit on an adult's lap on the drive between Babylonstoren and Soetmelksvlei).

Restaurant The Ou Stal restaurant serves hearty home-style food prepared over a fire: from soft pap and Chianina boerewors to bean, tomato and waterblommetjebredie. The daily harvest table offers a spread of fruit, roosterkoek, local cheese, droëwors and biltong, as well as pickles, chutneys and jams.