

RICE TO THE OCCASION

BABYLONSTOREN in the Cape winelands is so renowned for innovation that of course it would be the first farm in SA to successfully **GROW RISOTTO RICE**. **TASTE** was present for the maiden harvest celebration of the **FIRST CROP** of Italian carnaroli rice – and to **INDULGE IN THE FEAST** that followed

PHOTOGRAPHS **DOOK** PRODUCTION **ANNEMARIE MEINTJES** TEXT **ANNETTE KLINGER** RECIPES **KAREN PRETORIUS**



A field of risotto rice is an unlikely sight etched against the background of the Simonsberg.

“Just look at this,” says Babylonstoren farmer Hannes Aucamp, fishing his cellphone from his pocket while we’re standing in the shade of an old oak. “That’s something you haven’t seen before – a rice paddy in front of the Simonsberg mountains,” he says, gesticulating at the image on the screen. The paddy, he subsequently tells me, is about a third of a hectare and planted with the Italian rice cultivar *carnaroli* – also known as the “king of rices”. “We’re always experimenting on the farm,” says Hannes, who says he took it in his stride when it was suggested that the farm try cultivating risotto rice “I’d never farmed rice before, much less risotto rice, so I called in the help of one of my Italian friends, Atillio Dalpiaz, who is also a farmer,” he explains. “He advised me that *carnaroli* is a great choice as it yields a top-quality grain. Atillio helped us to import the seeds and we planted them in October 2014. It’s a first for South Africa.”

At around noon on the penultimate harvest day, Atillio joins Hannes, me and a host of other guests for what promises to be a unique experience organised by the creative food force behind Babylonstoren, Maranda Engelbrecht. We walk over to what is now more rice field than paddy – the water having evaporated and the green tufts of grass dried to resemble (to my untrained eye, at least) sheaves of wheat. There’s a handful of workers, all sporting straw hats I’ve only ever seen in photos of rice pickers in Asia, methodically cutting bushels of the rice using sickles and then whacking them against the side of a big container to loosen the grains. “Usually, rice is harvested using a machine,” Atillio tells us. “When I spoke to the head of a large risotto-producing company in Italy, he asked me what machine we’re using to harvest the rice. I sent him a picture of me, Hannes and the workers in the field. He told us we were crazy!” Indeed, after cutting and threshing just one bushel myself, I start

looking at the workers with newfound respect.

Babylonstoren baker and chef Karen Pretorius is also present to explain that when they started researching possibilities for risotto rice, the idea of *carnaroli* really appealed to her because it has a larger grain than most risotto rice varieties, and remains firm while cooking. “It’s one of the most sought-after risotto rice varieties available in the world,” she adds. “I’m really excited about using the rice we’ve harvested at the restaurant. We’re also going to sell paper bags of it in our shop.”

To demonstrate just how delicious the rice is – and to show off some of the produce grown on the farm – Karen sets up a wood-fired stove on a boardwalk perched alongside a nearby dam and starts cooking two different risottos. The first, incorporating home-made *salsiccia fresca* (fresh pork sausage) and baby marrow from the garden; the second, starring crunchy bright green asparagus, exotic tomatoes and home-churned butter. Completing the carbo load is a side of Karen’s spring-onion bread – one of the signature loaves served at the restaurant.

Bellies full, we mosey past donkeys, chickens and a couple of madly dashing squirrels to the function room. As if we haven’t been treated enough, we’re each given a glass of Karen’s amaretto semifreddo before we settle in to watch the 1949 Oscar-nominated movie, *Riso Amaro* (*Bitter Rice*). It’s a dramatic tale following the seasonal rice workers in Italy’s Po Valley, with plenty of intrigue thrown in. When the credits roll, I emerge a bit teary-eyed (after all, *Riso Amaro* is a play on words that can mean “bitter rice” and “bitter laughter”), but also greatly inspired by the age-old tradition of cultivating this humble staple. A tradition that, judging by the success of the first harvest, is one that’s set to be perpetuated right here at Babylonstoren. **W** www.babylonstoren.com

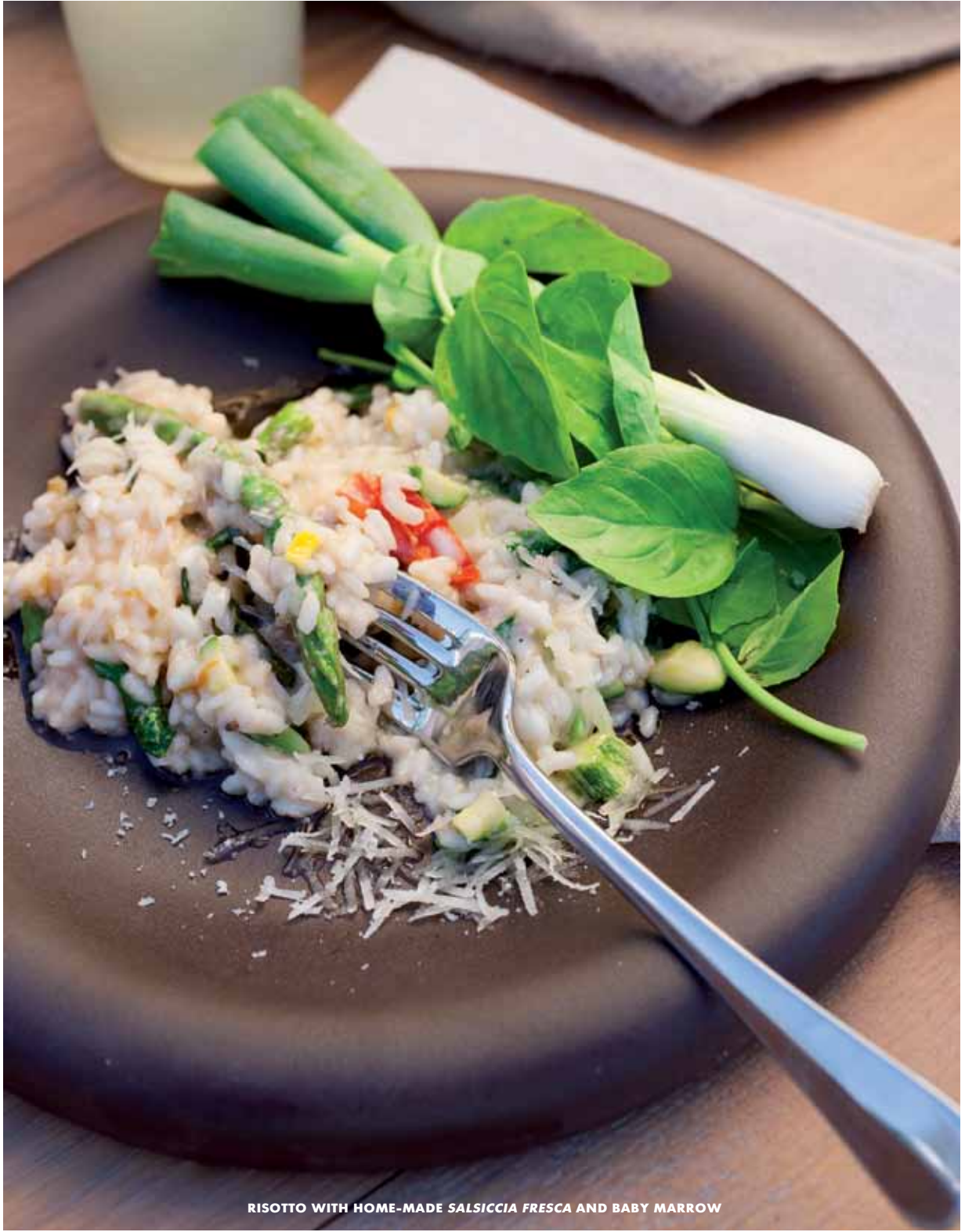


“KAREN SETS UP A GAS STOVE ON A BOARDWALK ALONGSIDE A NEARBY DAM AND STARTS COOKING TWO DIFFERENT RISOTTOS”



Opposite, top: Expertly prepared by Babylonstoren resident chef Karen Pretorius, lunch took place on a boardwalk adjacent to the rice field and consisted of two types of risotto – harvest *suppli*, or risotto balls, and one with *salsiccia fresca* (Italian sausage) and baby marrow.

“THERE’S A HANDFUL OF WORKERS, ALL SPORTING STRAW HATS I’VE ONLY EVER SEEN IN PHOTOS OF RICE PICKERS IN ASIA, METHODICALLY CUTTING BUSHELS OF RICE USING **SICKLES**”



RISOTTO WITH HOME-MADE SALSICCIA FRESCA AND BABY MARROW



TASTE writer Annette Klinger found out first-hand what back-breaking work harvesting rice by hand can be.

HARVEST SUPPLI

"Suppli is a popular Roman street food comprising risotto that's rolled into balls and covered in crumbs, quite similar to arancini. It's a great solution for leftover risotto."

– Karen Pretorius

Makes 30

A LITTLE EFFORT

Preparation: 45 minutes, plus chilling time

Cooking: 45 minutes

onion 1, chopped
extra virgin olive oil 2 T
carnaroli rice 250 g
white wine ¼ cup
vegetable stock ¾ cups
salt ½ t

Napolitana sauce 4 T

Parmigiano Reggiano, grated, to taste

free-range egg 1

free-range egg yolk 1

basil 100 g chopped

wild garlic flowers a handful, chopped

mozzarella 150 g, cubed

vegetable oil, for deep-frying

dried breadcrumbs mixed with salt, pepper and chopped sage, parsley and thyme 500 g

1 Sauté the onion in a saucepan in the oil until soft, then add the rice. When you hear the rice popping, add the wine and cook until absorbed, then add the stock.

2 Bring the liquid back to the boil, then reduce the heat to medium and simmer, stirring often, until the stock has been absorbed and the rice is cooked but still *al dente*. **3** Stir in the Napolitana sauce, Parmigiano Reggiano and eggs and allow to cool completely, preferably in the fridge. **4** When cool, add the basil and



garlic flowers. Working with wet hands, roll 1 T of the mixture to form a ball of your chosen size. Poke a hole in the middle and place a cube of mozzarella inside each *suppli*, then cover the hole with extra rice. Repeat until all the rice is used up. Heat the oil in a deep saucepan. **5** Roll the *suppli* in the breadcrumbs and deep-fry until golden brown. Serve hot or cold.

MEAT-FREE

WINE: Babylonstoren Babel 2014

RISOTTO WITH HOME-MADE SALSICCIA FRESCA AND BABY MARROW

"At the bakery we not only bake bread, but also make our own boerewors, so making a *salsiccia* for the risotto was a natural choice." – Karen Pretorius

Serves 4 to 6

EASY

Preparation: 40 minutes, plus 4 hours' chilling time

Cooking: 50 minutes

For the *salsiccia fresca* sausage meat:

minced pork 1 kg

fennel seeds 1 T

wild garlic seeds 1 T

chilli 1, chopped

white wine a dash

salt 1 T

pepper 1 T

For the risotto:

olive oil 2 T

small onion 1, peeled and finely chopped

***salsiccia fresca* sausage meat** 250 g

(see left)

baby marrows 4, chopped

carnaroli or other risotto rice 400 g

white wine ¼ cup

home-made vegetable-and-porcini stock 1.5 litres, heated

butter, a knob

Grana Padano, grated, to taste

1 To make the *salsiccia fresca* sausage meat, mix all the ingredients and chill for 4 hours. **2** To make the risotto, heat the olive oil in a large pan and add the onion. Slowly fry without colouring for at least 5 minutes, then add the sausage meat and baby marrow. Increase the heat, cook for 5 minutes, then add the rice and stir. **3** Stir in the wine. Keep stirring until the liquid has cooked into the rice. Add a ladleful of hot stock. Reduce the heat to a simmer and keep adding ladlefuls of stock, stirring and massaging the starch out of the rice, allowing each ladleful to be absorbed before adding the next. **4** Continue adding stock until the rice is soft but still has a slight bite. Remove from the heat, then add the butter and Grana Padano and stir through.

Cook's note: The leftover *salsiccia fresca* sausage meat makes delicious meatballs.

WHEAT- AND GLUTEN-FREE

WINE: Babylonstoren Chenin Blanc 2014

Opposite, clockwise from top left: Chef Karen Pretorius tending to the risottos she made on an open fire; amaretto semifreddo was served during the screening of the Italian film *Riso Amaro*; the grains of carnaroli are larger than other risotto varieties and retain their shape when cooked; one of Karen's legendary loaves.



"**CARNAROLI** IS ONE OF THE MOST SOUGHT-AFTER RISOTTO VARIETIES. I'M REALLY EXCITED ABOUT USING THE RICE WE'VE HARVESTED AT THE RESTAURANT; WE'RE ALSO GOING TO SELL IT IN OUR SHOP" – Karen Pretorius