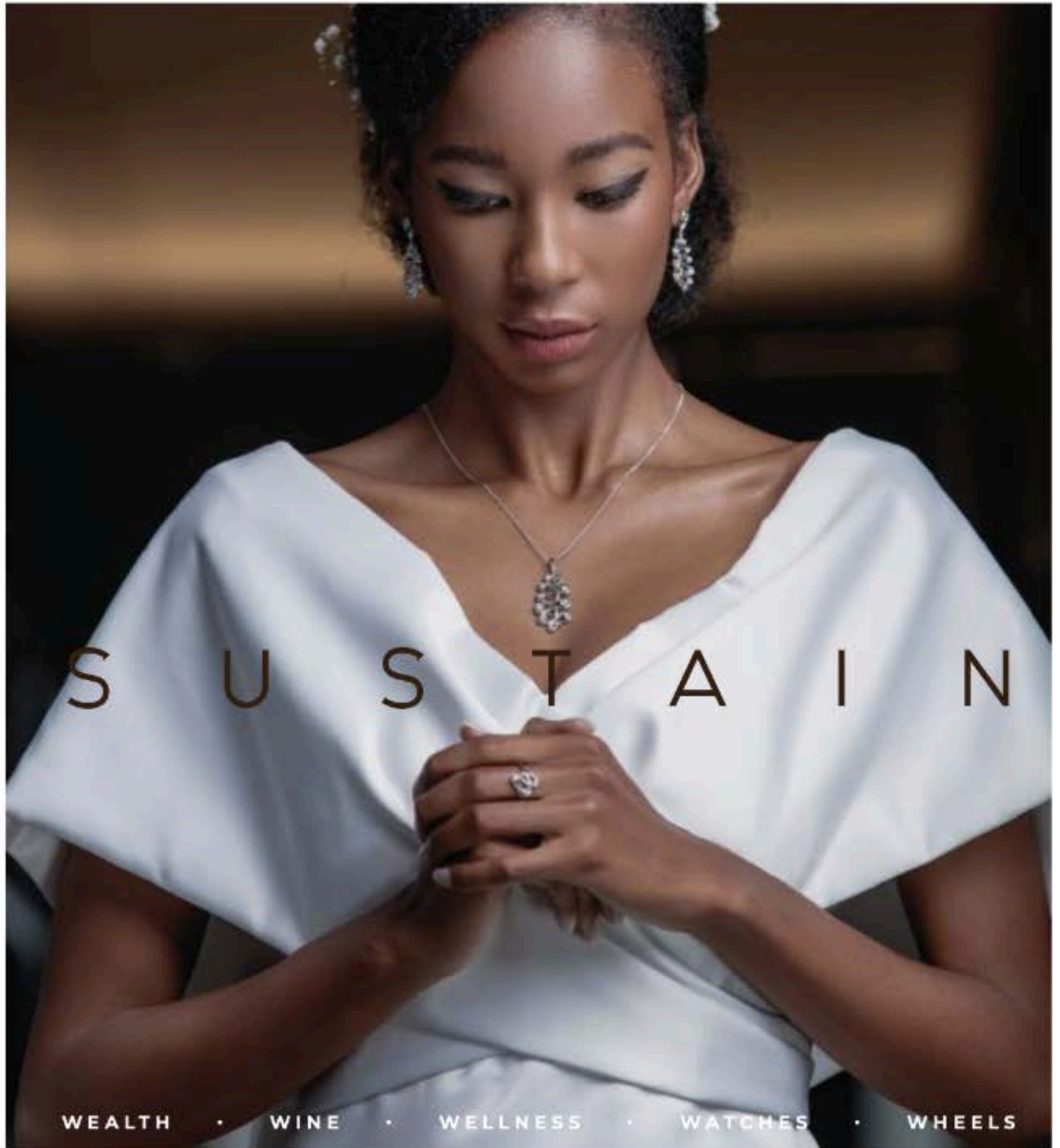


# TWENTYFOUR MAG

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WEALTH • WINE • WELLNESS • WATCHES • WHEELS

# TO EVERYTHING A SEASON

In the magical gardens of Babylonstoren, in the heart of wine country, the circle of life is meticulously maintained, **Charlotte Bauer** discovers

**A** snowy flock waddles across a wooden bridge set above the cycad circle where Dr Ernst van Jaarsveld is busy describing the ingenious mating habits of these rare and ancient plants – let's just say it involves beetles. In response to the oohs and aahs of the tour group, he interrupts himself to acknowledge the ducks.

"Ja, they're cute, and they also control the snails."

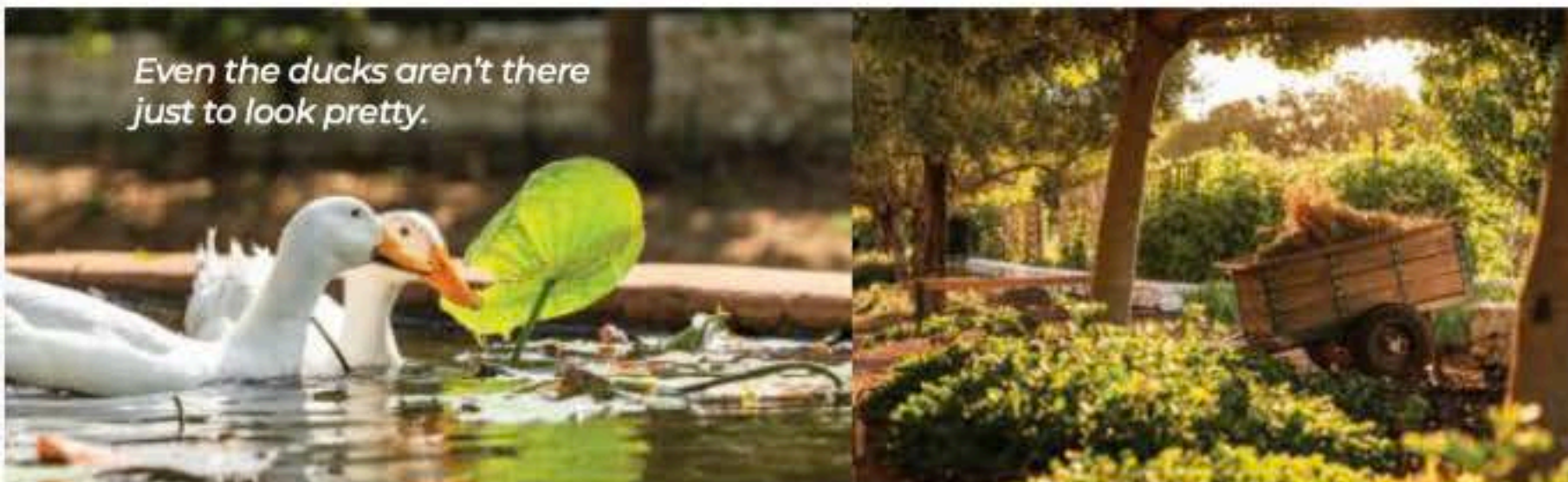
Botanist, horticulturist, collector, writer, explorer, "Oom" Ernst, as he is known by everyone round here, is practically as much of a tourist attraction at Babylonstoren as the prickly pear maze which, having recently required a severe 'haircut', is no longer quite such an adventure. Nature must take its sweet time.

With his battered vellies and unpruned eyebrows, the genial 71-year-old is a lively trove of stories and tips about the plants and animals in residence in the wilder reaches of the formal garden.

He points to an unremarkable-looking bed of ground cover and explains that if you were spending the night under the stars, you'd want to sleep on it because its smell repels parasites. (*Kooigoed* or *Helichrysum petiolare* was traditionally used as ticking in pillows).

Ernst is especially fond of rocks. "Everything starts with stone – stone makes soil, and the better the soil, the better you eat."

We stroll through the autumnal pumpkin arcade – Halloween re-imagined as a sumptuous art installation – through the heat of the glass spice house with fish darting beneath the floorboards, then through the fragrant woodshed housing the succulents containing 3 500 plants in tiny handmade pots that Ernst prefers to water himself. "Watering," he says, "is an art. You can't miss one, but too much tender loving care can be too much."



Even the ducks aren't there just to look pretty.



PHOTOGRAPHS: Babylonstoren

For more content in this vein:





*“Everything starts with stone  
– stone makes soil,  
and the better the soil,  
the better you eat.”*

*~ Dr Ernst van Jaarsveld*

# SUSTAINABILITY IN ACTION

## THE BABYLONSTOREN CODE

*“We’re committed to reuse, reduce and continually develop a more reducetarian lifestyle in all aspects of the farm. It’s an ongoing journey. We know there are constantly new developments to improve, and we remain dedicated to continue implementing these wherever possible.”*



### And this is how they do it . . .

- ◆ Trained **recyclers** have been contracted to sort trash by hand and in the last month (February 2024) have recycled 6,8 tons of waste that previously would have gone to landfill.
- ◆ As of 2021, the farm sterilizes and reuses a substantial percentage of its **glass bottles**. Monthly, approximately five tonnes of glass that is not fit for re-use is sent to an outside facility for recycling.
- ◆ There are 384 **solar panels** that produce enough energy to carry the farm during peak production. More are being installed in a new production facility currently being built. The goal is to be 80% off grid.
- ◆ Not everything that reaches the restaurant comes from the garden or farm but if they can't meet demand, they buy from **local producers** only.
- ◆ The garden has a large site with windrows where organic waste from their juicer, olive cellar, wine cellar and fruit and veg production areas are **composted**. Non-edible food scraps such as eggshells and coffee grounds are worked back into the soil via their compost heaps. This compost is used on the farm and in the garden, creating a full-circle composting cycle.
- ◆ The farm uses **borehole water** for drinking and production and water from the farm dam for irrigation. No municipal water is used.
- ◆ **Fruit waste** from the farm's juice factory is fed to the resident herd of water buffalo and the cattle.
- ◆ The farm's natural **renosterveld vegetation**, which forms part of South Africa's Fynbos Biome and the Cape Floral Kingdom, is actively protected as it plays a crucial role in preserving the area's natural biodiversity.

## PEOPLE

- ◆ The 750-strong staff are served a **hot lunch** – high-protein, low-carb, rich in veggies – every day. The waterblommetjebredie is a big favourite.
- ◆ The **Babylonstoren Learning Centre** provides a platform for young minds to thrive. As of 2024, 31 children of employees are supported from nursery school to matric, with expenses covered by the company, including stationary, uniforms, transport, extra-murals, daily meals, extra classes, aftercare and outings.
- ◆ A company **health programme** provides nutritional advice and fitness initiatives for those wanting to lose weight, plus a programme for employees who want to stop smoking.



## BEEES

### Beekeeper Arné Stander has the following tips:

- ◆ Don't put honey in a hot drink if you want the health benefits. Wait for it to cool down because if you overheat honey all the nutrients are killed, "so rather just put it on your toast".
- ◆ Be kind to the small visitors in your garden. It takes one bee visiting 70 000 flowers in its six-week lifetime to produce a 12th of a teaspoon of honey.
- ◆ Bees have VIP status at Babylonstoren. They protect them and other pollinating insects by removing foreign predators, installing and maintaining hives, erecting owl houses and planting insect hotels to create a safe space for them.
- ◆ You can prevent thirsty bees from drowning by adding marbles or pebbles to the birdbath where they come to quench their thirst. These help them climb out of the water.
- ◆ Make sure you have bee-friendly plants in your garden. Plant a variety of flowers so that the bees have access to flowering plants throughout the seasons.



Now we have arrived at his very own creation: the Namibian Welwitschia rockery, complete with lizards and what he calls a rock piano – “the oldest instrument known to humanity”. It is an arrangement of dolomite rocks from the Karoo mounted on a 30-ton stone base that, when gonged, apparently makes a sound like church bells. In winter the entire rockery has to be tented over to protect the desert plants from the rain.

Later, I get a chance to ask Ernst a cheeky question relating to an earlier chat about composting – basically, where he’d like to be buried.

He is not remotely offended: “We’re all recyclable, and when I die, I want my ashes – rich in bone meal – to go into the soil of the succulent bins we use to feed the indigenous plants I love so much!”

Throughout the tour Ernst has urged us to pluck, tear, crumble, sniff and even chew the plants around us.

## Touch. Smell. Taste. A riot of the senses.

There are no “keep off the grass” signs at Babylonstoren, no barriers around precious plants –

except for the cycads, the Picassos of nature, which are “branded” with company microdots in case of theft. Still, you couldn’t stuff a cycad in a handbag, which apparently some people do with the citrus fruits.

Much, though not all, of everything planted here is edible or medicinal. It was inspired, as was the layout, by the Company’s Garden in the Cape Town CBD, established by the Dutch East India Company in 1652 to supply settlers and passing ships with fresh food.

But what you can’t eat or won’t “cure” you in the Babylonstoren garden more than justifies its existence – for having historical value, for telling a story, or simply for being ravishingly beautiful, the kind of beauty that twines humans and nature together and waters the soul.

Take the modest young weeping willow at the edge of one of the farm’s dams. Wholly ornamental, if not exactly ravishing, it is remarkable because it grew from a cutting taken from the original tree that shades Napoleon Bonaparte’s grave on St Helena.

The garden rustles with such stories, and stories, I learn, are an abiding passion of the Babylonstoren owners, tech billionaire Koos Bekker and his wife, former magazine editor Karen Roos.



Like all avid collectors, whether of art or matchboxes, provenance is one of the factors that drives desire. Budget, of course, is another one. By all accounts, no expense has been spared, no leaf left unturned, in bringing the four seasons symphony that is Babylonstoren together.

“There is a story in every branch,” says Gundula Deutschländer, keeper of the Healing Garden. “The owners wanted a visitor to be able to pick a book from a tree.”

Master gardener Deutschländer is wearing a swirly yellow gypsy skirt, purple vest and sandals, not the khaki shirt and cargo pants I imagined at all – she could be off to AfrikaBurn. It seems that human individuality is also encouraged to thrive here.

Deutschländer joined the team 16 years ago, three years before Babylonstoren opened to the public, when “the land was still barren and dead and stinky”. Taking the brief to evoke the Dutch East India’s produce-rich Company’s Garden and grow useful plants, Deutschländer worked with the French garden architect Patrice Taravella and got digging.

The result is a magical potager, a natural pharmacy, that deftly mixes form, function and whimsy. Each boxed bed identifies a part of the body, and which plants are believed to be good muti for it: heart, head, blood, lungs, liver. There are plants to nourish convalescents, a cancer bush for all-round immunity,

remedies for asthmatics, diabetics, arthritics and even, according to the label on the lucerne, “enthusiastic sports people”. There is a plant for every mood and ailment, including belching and flatulence (anise hyssop, in case you’re afflicted).

It is the only part of the garden where visitors are advised not to consume anything “unsupervised”.

“All my male plants are toxic,” Deutschländer grins. “Except for the fenugreek, which is male but not toxic and is pretty.” She sighs. “But it has no staying power.”

If Deutschländer had to pick one from her copious basket of healing plants, she wouldn’t hesitate. “Rosemary. It’s top-to-toe amazing – mood, memory, hair strength, arteries, concentration . . . If I’m giving a workshop, I always drink rosemary tea beforehand. Settles the nerves.”

Presenting me with a bunch of basil leaves, she waves goodbye and twirls off into the garden in her yellow skirt, darting from bed to bed, talking, touching, brushing bushy tops, lifting up a frond and tutting. I hope the fenugreek makes more of an effort for her.

The sun is dipping as I head for the exit. Most visitors have left but up ahead a young couple strolls through the citrus grove, arms wrapped around each other, heads touching.

You could hardly ask for a more romantic setting. **T**

# FANCY FOOD WITH A CONSCIENCE

The constant insecurity of the national power grid has forced many of South Africa's high-end restaurants to look at alternative energy sources to keep food flowing to tables, and most are embracing sustainable sources. Here are a few worth mentioning



FYN restaurant



Babel restaurant



Babel restaurant

## FYN RESTAURANT, CAPE TOWN

This eatery won the Flor de Caña Sustainable Award at the World's 50 Best Restaurants Awards in June last year for achieving the highest environmental and social responsibility rating as determined by the Sustainable Restaurant Association. Already known for ethical and local sourcing of South African ingredients, they are now expanding that ethos to energy efficiency.

Culinary director Ashley Moss says the restaurant is always looking to make things more efficient. FYN uses a binchotan (white charcoal) grill sourced from Namibia which burns super-hot and lasts a long time. At the end of service, the coals are extinguished and reused for the next service.

## AVONDALE WINE ESTATE AND FABER RESTAURANT, PAARL

A solar power installation will ensure the farm, restaurant, the cellar and all the houses on the estate benefit from the generation of solar power.

## MARBLE RESTAURANT, JOHANNESBURG

A wood-fired grill is used as an alternative to cooking with electricity and meat, fish, poultry, vegetables, and breads are prepared on coals.

## GALJOEN, CAPE TOWN

The restaurant uses induction plates that can heat a pan in seconds. It's much faster and more efficient than a normal stove that uses an electric element.

They also have charcoal ovens and gas stoves.

## BABYLONSTOREN, FRANSCHHOEK

Solar panels have been installed since 2020 and this has meant a seamless power supply to its restaurants, as well as energy savings and a lower carbon footprint.

Babel restaurant also has a farm-to-fork philosophy which means seasonal produce is served, sometimes fresh from their own garden, significantly cutting down on the establishment's carbon footprint. If food has to be ordered in, they source locally.

## THE LIVINGROOM AT SUMMERHILL GUEST ESTATE, DURBAN

This site is off grid and relies completely on solar energy. Additionally, the estate's entire parking lot will be covered with over 100 photovoltaic panels which feed into a three-phase grid. This is aimed at creating awareness among patrons about how the estate is going to great lengths to harvest energy and putting it to good use. [F](#)