



Day's

Work



In the rolling wine country of South Africa's Western Cape, the verdant acres of hotel and farm Babylonstoren produce a panoply of edible and medicinal plants. Here, the story of this land – and the people, plants and bees that populate it – is told over the course of a single day at the height of summer.



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Babylonstoren's grounds are set against the backdrop of the Simonsberg mountains. Among the dense water lilies and waterblommetjie flowers, Mozambique tilapia fish flourish.

[Pictured Above](#)

A dish from Babel, the farm's signature restaurant with a farm-to-fork philosophy. The menu is seasonal and is always guided by what is available in the garden.

[A pear growing in a bottle in the fruit orchards.](#)

[Pictured Right](#)

The garden spans eight acres and was designed by French landscape designer Patrice Taravella.

THE MODERN HOUSE

Klaas Stoffberg, wine and olive oil maker

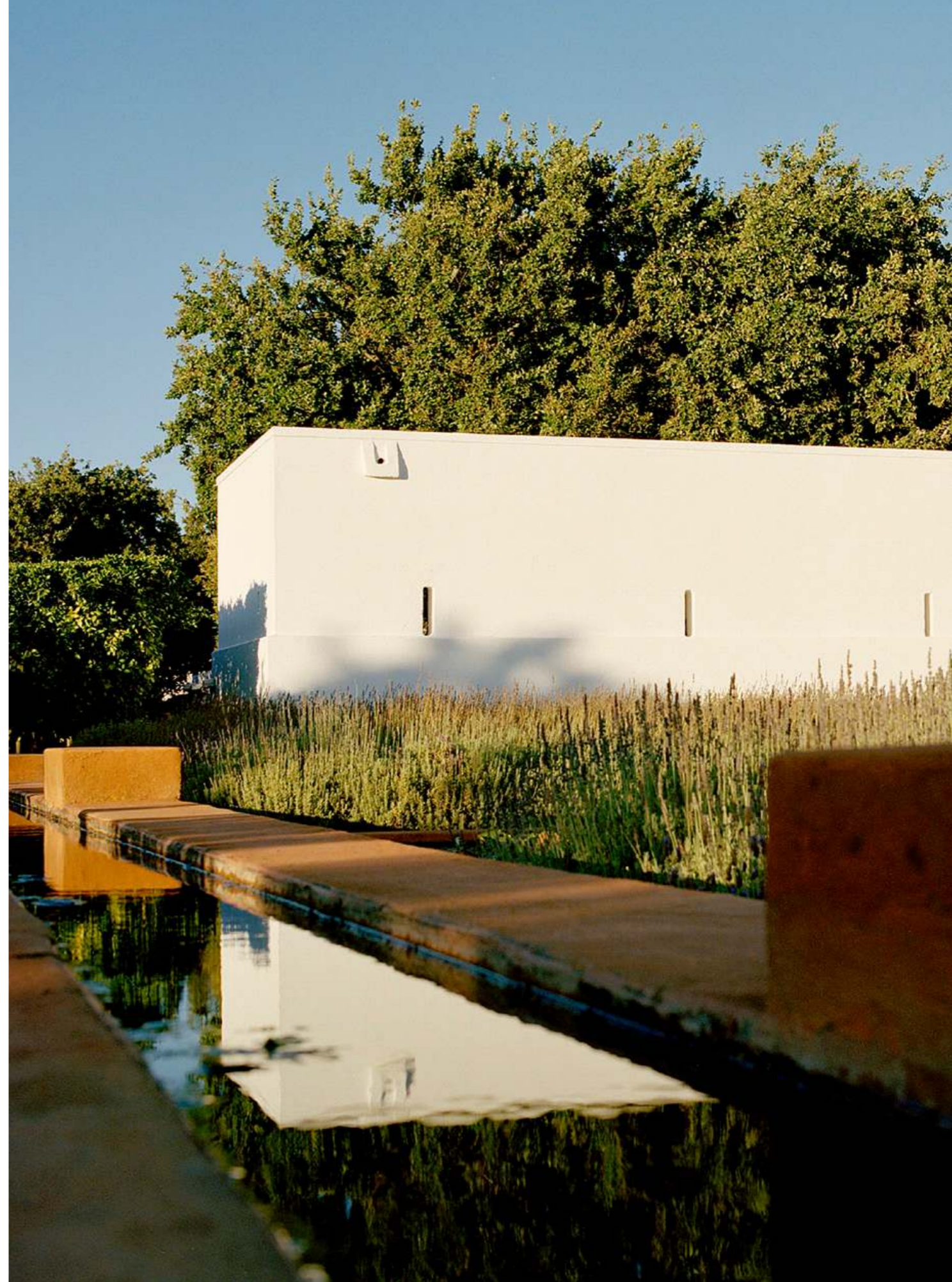
Today is a lovely day. We are in the middle of harvesting and we have a little wind blowing, cooling things down. We started picking our Chardonnay grapes for our sparkling Méthode Cap Classique last week, and it's going well.

We make four whites, four reds, a rosé and our sparkling, and we grow a mix of grapes including Chenin Blanc, Viognier, Semillon, Mourvèdre, Pinotage and Cabernet Sauvignon. We like to think of ourselves as Rhône meets Bordeaux meets South Africa. Our olive oils are a single variety, Frantoio, and a blend of five Italian cultivars.

Our wine farm is situated about a 40-minute drive from Cape Town, in the middle of South Africa's three main grape-growing regions: Franschhoek, Stellenbosch and Paarl. We are on the gentle slopes of the Simonsberg mountain, and surrounded by the Paarl and Drakenstein peaks. And we are not that far from the ocean, so we get a slight sea breeze coming in at night to cool the vineyards, which is perfect for winemaking – you want warm days and cooler evenings.

Our position means we have all these terroirs to play around with. The farm ranges from sandstone soils down at the bottom of the valley where the river is to granite and shale soils up the mountain. The thing about granite soils is that they're not that rich in nutrients, so the root systems of the vines have to dig deep. Because they suffer somewhat, they produce amazing flavour in our wines. And our north-western slope provides warm sunlight that picks up the sugar in the grapes.

The last three years we've had big droughts but this is the first year we're back to normal, which I'm very relieved about: while an olive tree will always grow, it needs water to bear fruit. The same is true of our vineyards; if we don't water them properly they may produce grapes for five or 10 years, but we want to look after them for the long run. I spent some time in Italy and there they have 300- or 400-year-old olive trees, which still produce because people look after them. That's our whole philosophy: to look after the plant and give back to the soil – only then will it reward us. ▶



“Working with this land is calming and very good for the soul. You literally see the beauty of the landscape and then taste it in the honey throughout the seasons. It feels like a very direct relationship with the whole ecosystem here.”

Arné Stander, beekeeper and entomologist

Just this morning I jumped into my bee suit to check the hives and some of them have some surplus honey, so we'll be able to harvest soon. The bees are working very hard at the moment because it's the summer season and there's lots of food available. The nectar flow is fantastic.

Ever since I was a boy I've been fascinated by insects, spiders and scorpions – all the things people are usually scared of. Bees fall into that category, too, but I didn't come to Babylonstoren to work with them – initially I worked in the gardens. Gradually I started developing the hives we have here, which now number more than 40.

Bees are a keystone species, very important to global ecosystems. We all know they play a part in pollination, especially solitary bees, but their importance goes beyond that. They are connected to other species, and relied upon by birds, for example, for food. Other insects, such as the wax moth and black hive beetle, feed on beeswax – a nightmare if you want to harvest honey, but that's what happens in nature. Bees support larger animals, like honey badgers, to smaller arthropods such as the pseudoscorpion – there's a whole co-existence going on.

I'm fascinated by the complexity of a hive. It consists of one queen, thousands and thousands of worker bees, which are actually all her daughters, and then a small number of male drones. They have a communication system which is essentially like a dance, so that when a bee finds a food source it will come back to the hive, perform the dance and let the other bees know the direction of the food and the distance to it as well.

If bees want to make honey they will get rid of excess moisture to seal it – we call it capping. It's almost like an extraction fan system, where they funnel air out by flapping their wings. On very hot days they've almost got their own air conditioning system: they collect water and deposit it in certain places in the hive that will then circulate cold air. And then, of course, there's the architecture of a beehive, those perfect hexagonal cells they build from their wax glands – it's mind-boggling.

If you look at our garden here, a lot of the veggies and fruiting trees, such as the plums, peaches and nectarines, are highly pollinated by the bees. At this time of year, the eucalyptus trees are in flower, so that's the main honey we are making now. It has a medium to strong earthy flavour, with a slight woody aftertaste and amber colour. In the winter our citrus trees are in flower, so we make orange-blossom honey, with a very sweet, fruity, citrus taste and a light, almost transparent colour. Throughout the year we also make a wildflower honey from everything else that grows, and that's usually sweet, mild to rich and a bit thicker than the others.

Working with this land is calming and very good for the soul. You see the beauty of the landscape and then taste it in the honey throughout the seasons. It feels like a very direct relationship with the whole ecosystem here. ▶



Pictured Clockwise From Above

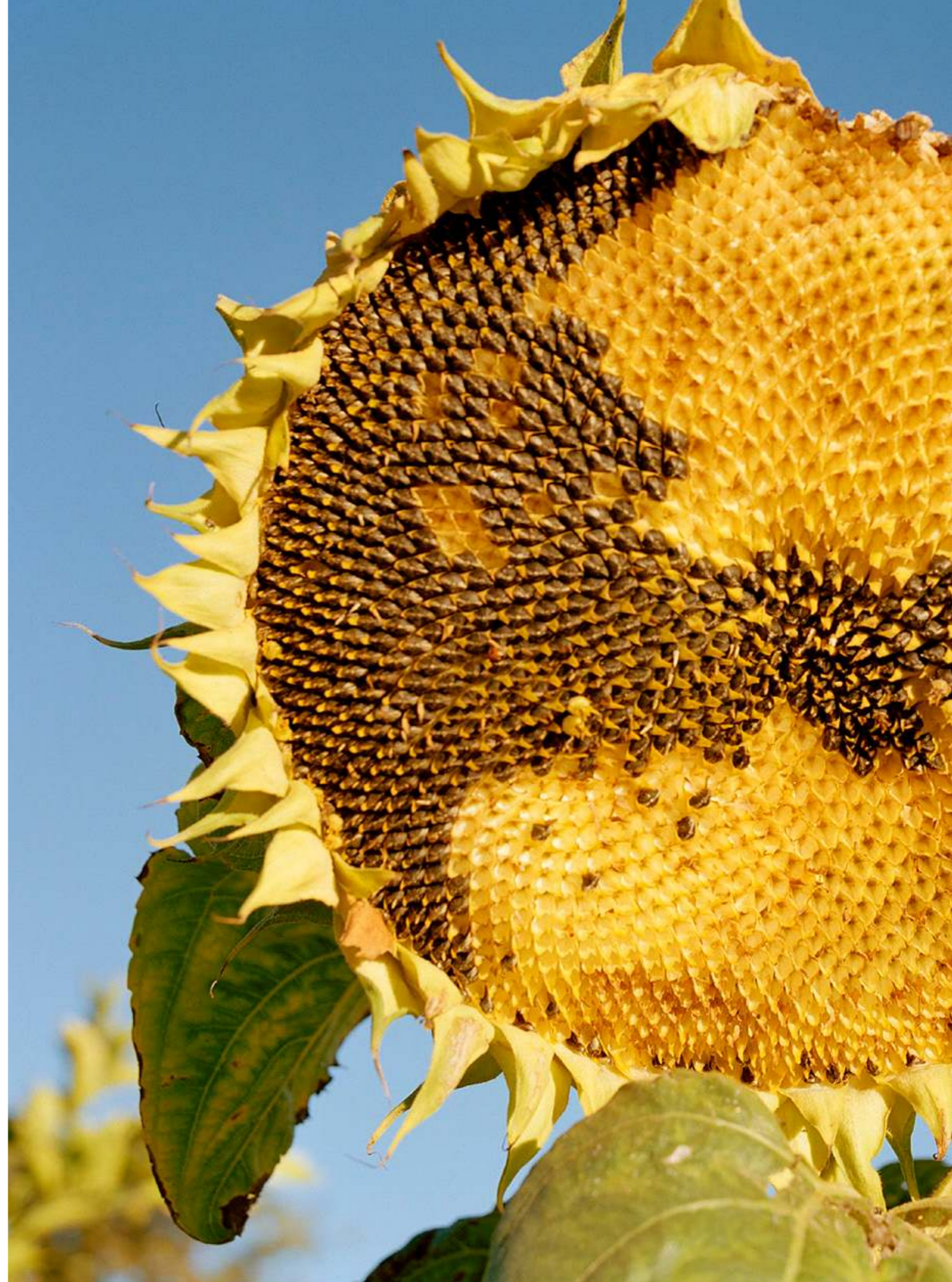
Cape honeybees are honoured workers on the Babylonstoren Farm. Not only do they produce an abundance of honey for the breakfast table at Babel, but they also play a key role in pollinating many garden fruits, herbs and vegetables.

Arné Stander, entomologist and beekeeper, in his beekeeping suit.

Over The Page

Babylonstoren is not only a garden, hotel, restaurant, bakery, cellar and spa – it is also a working farm.

Seasons may change, but the authentic beauty and simplicity of Babylonstoren's garden remain a constant.





Liesl van der Walt, head gardener

The original farm dates back to the late 17th century when a Dutchman, Pieter van der Byl, started growing produce to feed ships passing the Cape on the spice route to and from Java. In 2007, French architect Patrice Taravella designed the gardens and we opened its doors to the public in 2010.

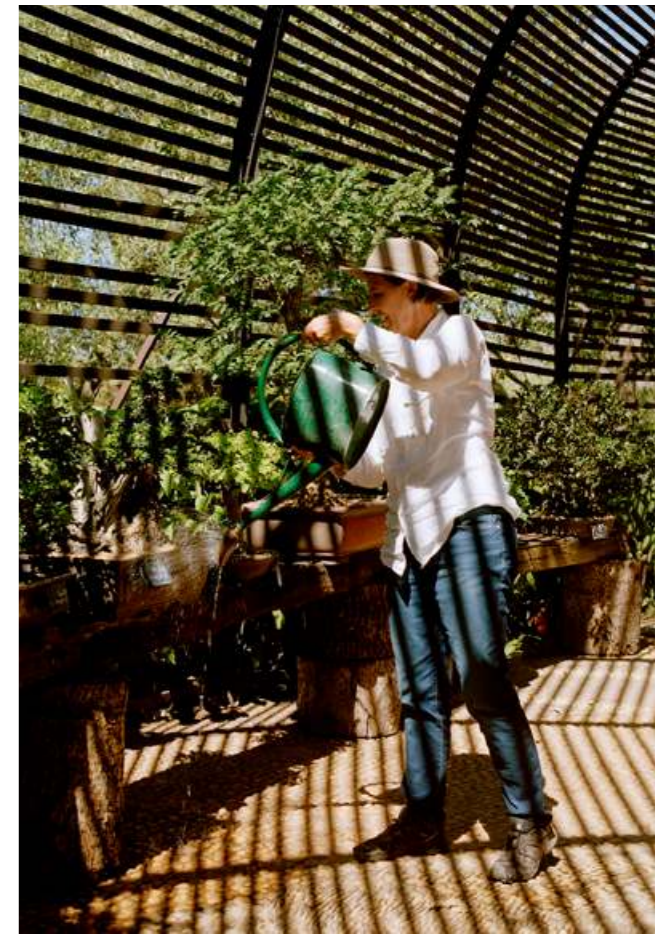
Our garden is at the heart of the farm and inspires most of the activity at Babylonstoren. The historical fruit and vegetable garden is at the core, with over 300 varieties of plants. To complement the fruit and vegetables, we have a healing garden filled with medicinal herbs from all over the world and a tropical spice house where we grow spices such as ginger, turmeric, black pepper, coffee, cardamom, nutmeg and cinnamon. Then there are indigenous areas, bonsai displays, carnivorous plants, pumpkin fields... eight acres in total.

Our approach to gardening here is hands-on, with generosity and intention to share. Our garden offers many different experiences, from just strolling through, picking a berry, eating a ripe peach, sitting in the shade of a citrus tree next to a bubbling fountain, climbing into a giant "weaver nest" or observing bees in their hive – we want the gardens to inspire and delight.

Visitors to the garden can pick and eat as they walk through. We provide different experiences, and seasonal changes make this easy. In summer – December, January and February – many fruits ripen, such as plums, grapes, prickly pears and figs, as well as the exotic lotus lilies, lavender and turmeric flowers. In the vegetable garden we harvest basil, aubergine and beans; marrows and funny-shaped calabash cover the tunnel structure.

In autumn – March and April – we harvest quince, persimmon, pumpkins and olives. In winter – June, July, August – the citrus trees offer lemons, limes, oranges, grapefruits, mandarins and kumquats. We prune and enjoy the beautiful structure of our formal gardens' hedges and espaliered trees. Spring and early summer we celebrate with an abundance of blossoms. Roses cover 6m-high towers and thousands of clivias flower along the stream in the shade of old oaks and wild olive trees.

I love the sweet persimmon fruit that ripens as the leaves of the trees turns into rich autumn colour. And the scent of the ripening figs in mid-summer is delicious. The sound of the bees when we open the hives to collect honey made from the spring nectar flow is always a treat, as is harvesting waterblommetjies from our ponds and cutting the new shoots of asparagus in spring. There's always something to look forward to in the garden. ▶



Pictured Left

Banana tree leaves being picked in the spice house.

Constance Stuurman, seasoned gardener and flower artist on the farm.

Pictured Above

Head gardener, Liesl van der Walt, watering age-old bonsai trees in the sun-dappled wooden structure known as the Puff Adder.



Pictured Below

A seasonal fish dish with figs and grapes.

Schalk Vlok, executive chef at Babel restaurant.



Schalk Vlok, executive chef

We let the seasons guide us here – what comes in is what we use. We stay true to our ingredients, and try not to manipulate them beyond a certain point – it’s about giving guests a clear impression of where their food comes from. We call it a “pick, clean and serve” approach.

It’s also about showcasing the local artisan producers, whether that’s the farmer, the cheesemaker or the charcuterie guys rearing the animals. What we want to do is bring all these together to tell the story of this land.

We plan our menu about two months ahead. But instead of asking “What do we want to cook?”, we go to the garden and listen to the gardeners. We ask them what’s growing, what’s doing well, and in what quantities, and go from there. It’s a very direct relationship we have with the gardeners, and they’ll sometimes tell us off with things like, “Listen guys, we have kale coming out of our ears and you’re not using enough of it!” – so we’re constantly responding to what’s growing.

The figs are going crazy at the moment. They’re going in everything, from breads to ice creams, sorbets and desserts. Pumpkins, a personal seasonal favourite of mine, are starting to appear in the kitchen now too, and the mulberry season is a big one.

It’s probably every chef’s dream to work in this way, to be able to cook in an area where your larder, your vegetables, meat, dairy, cheese and fruit are all produced right in front of you. Just this morning on my way in I passed by the blood orange trees to check on how they’re doing – it’s quite amazing.

It’s somewhat scary too, as the kitchen is what links everything together here and turns the fruits of everyone’s labour into an eating experience. But it’s collaborative: I often go and see Klaas to talk about how bitter the olive oil is tasting, or Arné about the honey, and last year when we closed during lockdown we all worked in the gardens together. There’s not a sense of “I work in the kitchen and you’re the beekeeper” – we all work at Babylonstoren, and we try to create something together. ■

Photography
Kent Andreasen

Location
Simondium, Western Cape, South Africa



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