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● Babylonstoren, South Africa

Fourteen miles from Franschhoek village, Babylonstoren—once a gabled, whitewashed Cape Dutch homestead—is now a stunning hotel and working guest farm. Its centerpiece is a picturesque eight-acre garden designed by Patrice Taravella and modeled on the historic Company Gardens. Guests stay in one of 14 rooms in traditional cottages on the grounds, seven of which come with glassed-in kitchens fronting the garden. In the ultimate farm-to-fork experience you can pick your own produce and have chef Simone Rossouw do something magical with it in Babel, the estate's country-chic restaurant. Between meals, hike the hills, ride through the vineyards on bikes, or swim in the infinity-edge reservoir. For more Cape Winelands recommendations, turn to page 128.

Doubles from \$400, Drakenstein Valley, Franschhoek, 27/(0) 21-863-3852, babylonstoren.com

The New Taste of South Africa

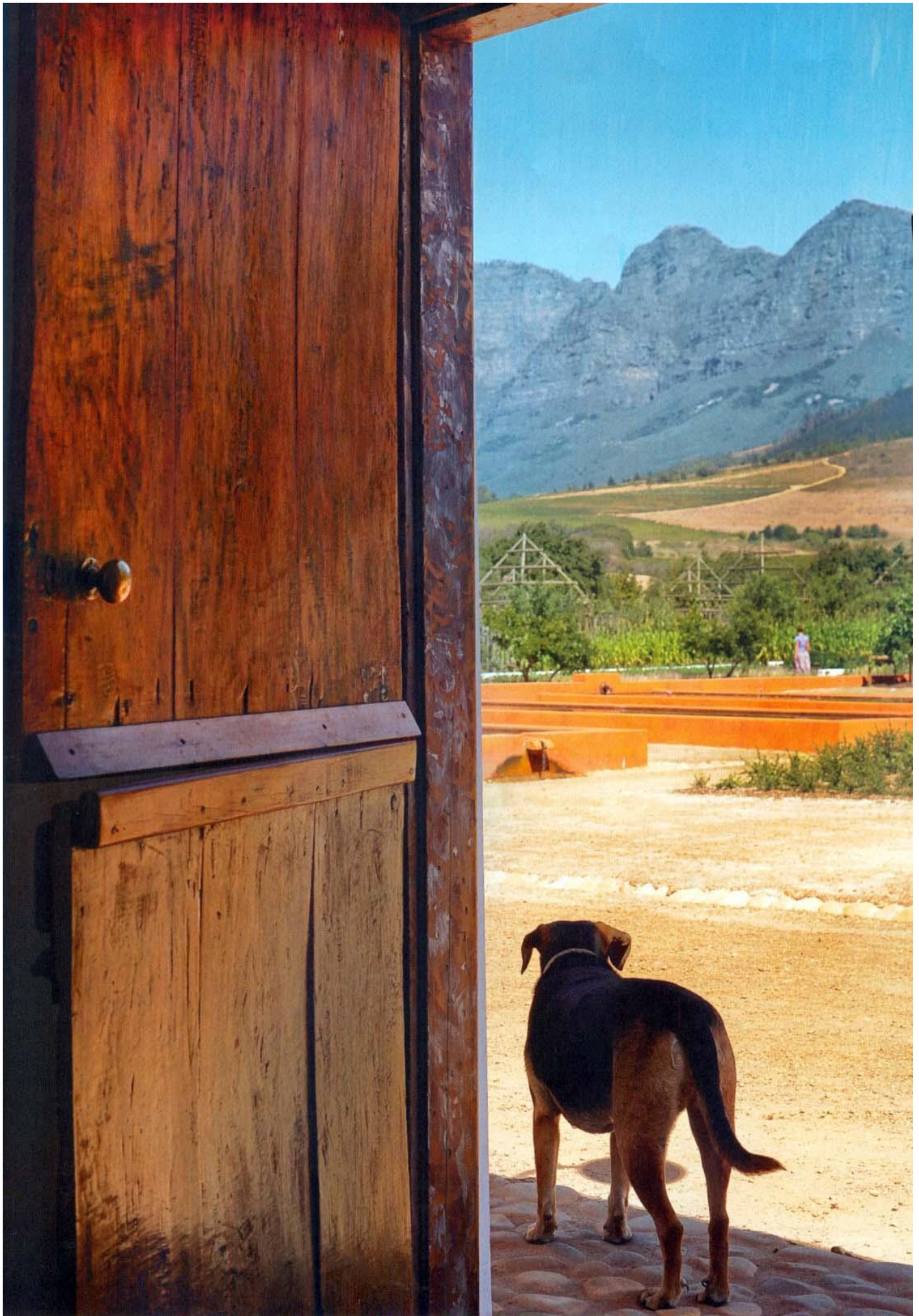
In wine country, a group of innovative chefs have ignited a culinary renaissance—and restored cultural pride

By Douglas Rogers • Photographs by Dook

AM LUNCHING WITH SOUTH AFRICA'S LEADING CELEBRITY CHEF, Reuben Riffel, at Reuben's, his country restaurant in Franschhoek, 50 miles east of Cape Town. Our al fresco table commands a view of a serene valley and the tumbling mountains of the Cape Winelands. Before us sits a plate of chili-salted squid with lemon crème, basil, coriander, and mint. "For a long time South African chefs just copied what Europeans were doing," Riffel explains. "Because of apartheid we were ashamed of our culture and history. We thought what was happening overseas must always be better. But that's changing. Now we're starting to realize we have amazing ingredients in this country and great culinary traditions. We're doing our own thing. South African food."

Let me declare an interest here. I loved South African food *before* this turn of events. I come from Zimbabwe, to the north, but I grew up on the traditional home cooking of my South African grandmother: sweet, slow-cooked vegetables such as pumpkin and butternut squash; fatty lamb chops and *boerewors* (farmer sausage); heaped mounds of mashed green beans and potatoes, usually sprinkled with sugar. This rich, hearty fare is known in Afrikaans as *Ma se kos* (mother's cooking), and it's eaten in millions of South African homes. It's not exactly sophisticated, and as a tourist you'd be hard-pressed to find it in any restaurant. Now, though, nouveau variations on traditional South African cuisine are everywhere, and they are like nothing I've taken a fork to before.

Riffel is one of several chefs reshaping the way South Africans think about their indigenous food, and by extension, their history. These chefs use fresh seafood, mountain herbs, and game meat from the country's interior. For their menus, they reinterpret centuries-old Dutch, French, German, and East Indian recipes. The most creative practitioners of the new cuisine, including Riffel, Margot Janse, and Bertus Basson, work in the Western Cape region at luxury resorts, boutique inns, and intimate bistros. As they reimagine the possibilities of the country's food, they exude a vibrant cultural confidence in South Africa that would have been inconceivable only a few years ago.



YOU MUST TRY MY OSTRICH,” says Riffel. “I grill it quickly like tuna, with a mustard-seed crust, and serve it on cinnamon-butternut puree. Sweet vegetables—that’s *very* South African. My mother made it the best.”

Riffel makes these pronouncements in the elegant Cape Town resort hotel One&Only, at his newest restaurant, where ostrich fillet appears on the menu alongside crisp pork belly with chili, ginger caramel, and pickled cabbage. And these are only two of the fresh variations on traditional South African cuisine that emerge from Riffel’s kitchens.

Twenty or so years ago Riffel would not have been allowed to eat in these restaurants, let alone operate them. Riffel is black, or rather Cape Colored, a distinct mixed-race South African ethnic category under the apartheid bureaucracy’s designations. During apartheid, places such as these were reserved for whites. Today, though, the dashing 36-year-old is the toast of his tony wine-producing hometown, and his tables are among the most sought-after in the country.

Born in 1974, Riffel grew up in a Colored-designated area outside Franschoek at the height of apartheid. The Franschoek high school was for whites only, so he had to take a bus to another school an hour away. “I didn’t mind,” he says, laughing. “My mother used to make me packed lunches. Sweet potato sandwiches on home-baked bread and lamb curry.” Riffel was a popular kid: His friends liked to share his lunch.

By the time he graduated apartheid was ending, and in 1997, after working as a waiter and tending bar, Riffel was hired as a sous chef in a local restaurant, Monneaux. Franschoek (Afrikaans for “French corner”) had started to refashion itself as an upscale food and wine destination. Like most local restaurants, Monneaux made French-influenced continental cuisine, and Riffel was good at it. One evening, the chef couldn’t make it in, and Riffel was put in charge. He was soon promoted to head chef, and by 2000 he had a following.

The next year, Lee Browne, an American woman impressed with her meal, offered Riffel the chance to head a restaurant she was opening in Cambridge, England. He went there with his girlfriend, Maryke Swanepoel, a white Afrikaner who is now his wife, and in a matter of months they turned Bruno’s Brasserie into a cult upscale eatery. It was especially popular with white South African immigrants.

Vintner Marc Kent, whose Boekenhoutskloof Estate is one of the top boutique wineries in South Africa, invited Riffel to form a partnership and open a restaurant back in Franschoek. “I didn’t want it to have a French name or serve French food,” Riffel says. So he called it Reuben’s and set out to cook what he calls “Cape Colored cuisine, the food my mother made.”

The year it opened, 2004, Reuben’s was named South Africa’s Restaurant of the Year. In 2009, he and Swanepoel opened a second restaurant in a luxury hotel in Robertson, a wine-growing town to the east. Last year, Alan Leibman, a director of Kerzner International, which owns One&Only, watched a TV cooking show during a flight to Cape Town. Leibman, who was born in South Africa, couldn’t believe his eyes. “Here’s this handsome black guy being called the top chef in South Africa,” Leibman recalls, “and he’s making the kind of food I recognize from my own childhood, only better!”

Last October, Riffel opened his third restaurant in the lobby of One&Only—alongside a branch of Nobuyuki Matsuhisa’s Nobu empire, in the space previously occupied by a venture of TV celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay. Riffel is often at the tables, greeting customers, recommending a dish, asking his regulars how their kids are. In return, it’s clear that his multiracial clientele adores him. “It’s strange,” he says. “Often, white customers will invite Maryke and me to their homes, or to go away with them for a weekend, and I have to stop and think, really? Have we come that far?”



Riffs on Tradition

At three restaurants bearing his name **Reuben Riffel** turns home cooking into haute cuisine

