



Gardeners
AND
Gourmets

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*In the heart
of the Cape Winelands,
Babylonstoren is South Africa's
newest and most acclaimed food
destination. HAND/EYE
Deputy Editor Marcella Echavarría
sampled the fare on offer at this
restored 18th century Cape
Dutch farm.*

Below: Chef Simone Rossouw



It is a beautiful Sunday morning in March and I am sitting under an umbrella outside Babel Restaurant, expecting Karen Ross, the visionary behind Babylonstoren. Her brainchild, a magnificent garden, restaurant and hotel located in the valley between Franschoek and Paarl, is beautiful almost to the point of heartache.

Surrounded by the Simonsberg, Du Toitskloof and Franschoek mountains, gardeners and chefs resting huge baskets on their hips comb the garden for herbs, all manner of greens, zucchini, beets, and super ripe pears. The herbs will flavor herbal infusions and freshly baked breads – whose tantalizing smell fills the morning air. The jewel-like vegetables will beautify salads. And the pears both adorn the restaurant and appear in all kinds of creative transformations including preserves, pear and red wine compotes, pastries, and raw appetizers.

Karen arrives exactly as I imagined her: regal, tall, beautiful, elegant in a little black dress and red lipstick. “Everything about Babylonstoren has come about organically,” she admits, telling the story about her husband wanting a garden in the Winelands, and her desire for a perfect white studio for photo shoots. These modest goals grew into something far more elaborate and beautiful. Which is not a surprise when you learn that Karen is former editor of *House and Leisure*, *Elle Decoration* and *Vivi* magazines. “At Babylonstoren everything has been falling into place like a magazine where pages are added and edited as stories are woven together,” she observes.

Chefs Simone Rossouw joins us. When I compliment her on the gorgeous combinations of fresh food, she admits that “thinking like a farmer has been my main challenge, because not everything is ripe at the same time. We work with what the garden gives so it is both fun and tricky to come up with, for example, fifteen ways to prepare figs when their time comes.” Because of the garden-centric menu at Babylonstoren, meat dishes appear as complements to vegetable entrees, not the other way around.

Babylonstoren is the name of both the farm and the mountain behind it. The main house was built in 1785 in the Cape Dutch style, replete with whitewashed walls and ornate gables, thatched roofs and a distinctly unadorned simplicity. Babylonstoren is one of the best preserved *werfs* (farmsteads) in the Cape Dutch tradition. Some of the inspiration for the newly restored Babylonstoren was drawn from the bits and pieces of old Delft pottery found in the property, much of which is placed at the garden's entrance below a glass floor, used as mosaics around a Persimmon tree in the garden, and adapted as graphic elements for the placemats and the cups and saucers used at the restaurant.

These Delft shards are evidence of the trade conducted with China by the Dutch East India Company, and precursors of South Africa's rich contemporary ceramics scene. Indeed, part of economy of the old farm was linked to the Dutch East India Company, where for centuries ships would replenish with vegetables, fruit and water for their long journeys between Europe and Asia.

There is also the reference to the hanging gardens of Babylon, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. French designer Patrice Taravella incorporated the ancient Moorish cruciform pattern into the layout of the garden, which instills a serene sense of order into the patchwork of vegetable beds, flowers, occasional ponds, benches, a three hundred year-old irrigation system, and a bird garden where designer Porky Hefer of Animal Farm created nests for pairs of sky-watching humans that can be accessed with a short climb upwards.

Historic trees, heritage seeds, indigenous species, and more than 300 edible and medicinal plants complete the garden. Which furnishes the table. Which nourishes guests in both body and soul. There's something uniquely alive here at Babylonstoren, and I am happy to linger awhile before the hour's drive back to Cape Town. 🍷

*For more information please visit:
www.babylonstoren.com*



Babylonstoren's garden is at the heart of a refreshing sensual experience.

