

PURE GENIUS

Partnering the simple joy of wine with the humblest of the culinary arts, the new tasting room at Babylonstoren confirms the old less-is-more adage and celebrates the freedom of letting go

PHOTOGRAPHS BOOK TEXT JOCELYN WARRINGTON



The voluminous interior of the new tasting room at Babylonstoren (with its cheery and characterful beyond) was meticulously restored using original building plans.



There's an old Spanish proverb that goes: "With bread and wine, you can walk your road". Fair enough, but throw in a hunk of good cheese and one or two smoked salamis and you'll not just walk your road, you'll jubilantly skip it. One of the eternal incongruities of our frenetic modern existence is that life's simplest gifts still bring the greatest joy. The irony is not lost on Karen Roos, award-winning designer, former magazine editor and co-owner of Babylonstoren, one of the winelands' oldest

Cape Dutch farms and, today, a lovingly restored guesthouse and must-do on every sybaritic bucket list. Karen introduces me to the estate's newest project – a tasting room dedicated to the purest of epicurean pursuits and one that is intentionally far removed from the formal, somewhat frosty sampling spaces that are so often the province of modern-day wineries. "It was very important to us that the tasting room not be a static, sterile environment," she says emphatically, explaining how the

addition of bread, cheese and charcuterie injects the wine-tasting experience with the warmth and spiritual community that sharing a table inevitably brings. Located in the farm's former *koornhuis* (wheat store), one of the oldest buildings on the property, the voluminous thatched and stone space was resurrected from three-centuries' worth of decay with meticulous consideration given to the structure's historical fabric. At its heart is the tasting room where visitors are able to sample –



PLUM, PEAR AND ALMOND TART



LIFESTYLE



Above: Chef de partie Niels Muller slices a haunch of beautifully marbled dry-cured prosciutto-style ham in the pristine charcuterie. Opposite, from top right: The vast glass-and-steel conservatory, where casual meals are enjoyed amid a variety of exotic seedlings; and more vulnerable saplings; armed with her trusty mazzaluna, assistant baker Maeretta Williams makes short work of a round of cheese; the humid interior of the Glasshouse is tempered by a sizeable fan, double doors and a highly effective misting system.

and purchase – not only one of the estate's own 11 cultivars, but also a hand-picked selection of wines from neighbouring vineyards situated on the lower slopes of the Simonsberg mountain.

Enhancing the oenophile's experience, the adjacent fromagerie houses an excellent choice of the area's covered Bries, Camemberts and Cambriens. Beyond this is a characteric dry-room and smokery where spotless white-tiled walls offset an extensive range of cured, predominantly South African, meats and sausages. At the opposite end of the rectangular building, in what was once the foundry, is the bakery where artisanal loaves emerge from a persistently burning wood-fired oven.

As I enter, Karen Pretorius, who oversees the business of baking and managing the tasting-room's deli-style offering, is removing a piping hot sourdough from the oven, its fragrant yeastiness instantly flooding the room. "Baking may not be as precise or predictable, but the oven's natural convection and the amazing wood-smoked flavour it gives to the bread just can't be equalled by an industrial oven," says the young self-taught chef, who hails from the

cardamom and dragon fruit. Now, too, they star – often surprisingly reincarnated – in the tasting-room's down-to-earth fare. By way of example, Karen points out a basket of rose-tinged loaves made using the farm's current abundance of beetroot and simply begging for a wedge of creamy Gorgonzola and a glass of full-bodied red.

Enjoyed at a rough-hewn wooden table on the mezzanine level of the tasting room, it is offerings such as these, all the more delectable for their candid simplicity, that are undoubtedly the reason visitors repeat the pilgrimage to Babylonstoren time and time again. I emerge from the cool confines of this ancient space into an unseasonably hot autumn day and make my way along a peach-stone path lined with heady pink sage and wild camphor. As I do so, I nibble on the contents of the small cellophane bag Karen has given me – the sweet-tart candied peel of the Kei apple harvested from the thorny indigenous hedge that envelops the sprawling property – and marvel at the unassailable logic of the Babylonstoren ethos: that the ability to simplify means, simply, to eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary can speak. **W**

of the tart base and crumble over the remaining dough. Bake for 20 minutes.

4 Slice the roast pears and arrange on top of the baked tart.

5 Place the almond essence, honey, vanilla pod and toasted almond flakes in a saucepan and warm over a low heat. Glaze the tart with the glossy syrup, dust with icing sugar and serve.

Cook's note: Bake the dough mixture as a tart base and fill with lemon or granadilla curd and any other fresh seasonal fruit.

WINE: Niñola Sémillon 2010

SOUROUDH BREAD

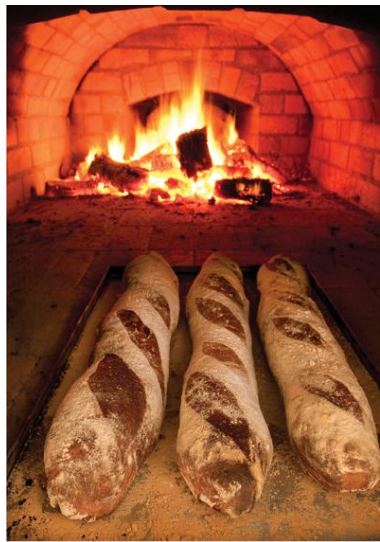
Serves 8 ■ A LITTLE EFFORT

GREAT VALUE

Preparation: 20 minutes, plus resting time

Baking: 40 minutes

- sea salt 2 t
- sugar 1 t
- rye flour 100 g
- white bread flour 350 g
- baker's yeast 1 t
- water 1½ cups
- olive oil 2 T
- whole red onion (leaves intact) 1



SOUROUDH BREAD

"IT WAS IMPORTANT THAT THE TASTING ROOM NOT BE STERILE"

farmlands of the Northern Province.

She beckons me into the adjacent kitchen where assistant Anemarie Nortje is preparing an amethyst-hued Shiraz jam. "Our daily menu is dictated entirely by what's in season," says Karen, referring to the harvest of the eight-acre garden that, essentially, forms the heart of this working farm.

Inspired by the original Company Gardens of the Cape and landscaped by Patrice Taravella who designed the famous Oran gardens of central France, Babylonstoren's garden features over 300 varieties of edible plants and guests who stroll its three kilometres of crisscrossing pathways will find everything from plums and persimmons to prickly pears, each one impossibly rotund and obviously thriving in the fertile red soil that is peculiar to the region. These corpulent pickings, sun-ripened, intensely flavoured and not unduly tempered with, make their way onto diner's plates at the estate's main restaurant, Babel, as well as onto the lunch and tea menu at the newly opened Glasshouse, a 26 metre-long steel and glass conservatory where casual meals are taken amid the tangled foliage of exotic granadilla, ginger,

PLUM, PEAR AND ALMOND TART

Serves 8 ■ A LITTLE EFFORT

Preparation: 20 minutes

Baking: 20 minutes

flour 240 g

raw, unpeeled almonds 50 g, toasted

and chopped

ground almonds 500 g

light brown sugar 150 g

cold, unsalted butter 180 g, diced, plus extra

to grease

free-range egg yolk 1

plums 5, quartered

pears 3, halved and roasted with honey

and thyme

almond essence 1 t

honey 4 T

vanilla pod 1, split

toasted flaked almonds 50 g

- 1 Preheat the oven to 200°C. In a large bowl, mix together the flour, raw and ground almonds and sugar, then add the butter and egg yolk and mix to form a crumbly dough.
- 2 Grease a 28 cm springform tart case and press half the dough into it to line the bottom and sides.
- 3 Arrange the plum quarters onto the bottom

parsley a small bunch

oregano a few sprigs, leaves picked

Parmesan 100 g, grated

For the starter dough:

white bread flour 250 g

rye flour 100 g

salt 1 t

sugar 1 t

baker's yeast 1 t

water 1 cup

1 Preheat the oven to 200°C. Mix all the ingredients (except the onion, herbs and cheese) with 100 g of the starter dough (see recipe below) and knead for 10 minutes.

2 Set aside for 1 hour to rise, then shape into a "rope" and layer with the whole onion, herbs and grated cheese. Wind the dough around the onion and set aside to rise for a further 30 minutes.

3 Bake for 40 minutes or until golden.

4 To make the starter dough, mix together all the ingredients and set aside to rest for 1 hour before using.

Cook's note: You can keep the starter in the fridge for up to four days.

DAIRY-FREE

WINE: La Motte Sauvignon Blanc 2011



This page, clockwise from top left: A trio of hot baguettes emerges from the persistently burning wood-smoked oven in the bakery; chef Karen Pretorius is in charge of the baking operations and tasting room's deli-style offering; freshly baked Greek yoghurt loaf topped with flowering oregano is among the rustic, unfussy fare available for nibbling while sampling the unique wines for which the Simonsberg is lauded.

Babylonstoren, R45 to Franschhoek; tel: (021) 863-3852, www.babylonstoren.com

