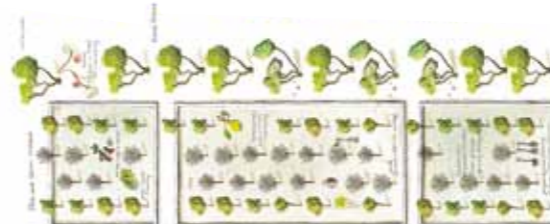




Refreshment station An astonishing glass conservatory that doubles up as a teahouse is the latest addition to the bountiful Babylonstoren outside Franschhoek.

Photos **Dook** Production **Annemarie Meintjes** Words **Johan van Zyl**





recycled paper to be used again in making compost. herworme papeler wat weer gebruik word om kompos te maak.



At Babylonstoren varieties are the spice of life.

“This is what makes us tick, what really interests us,” explains ever-elegant, ever-humble co-owner Karen Roos, apparently unfazed by a bout of post-Holland flu and the temperature hovering in the mid thirties. “We love plants that have a sense of history, plants that tell a story ... the more the merrier, we say.”

Cue Babylonstoren’s new conservatory, a 26m-long eye-opener made of dark green steel and 4mm hardened glass that will allow them to experiment with varieties that have struggled or flopped – largely due to the Western Cape’s winter rainfall and lack of humidity in summer – in the farm’s breathtaking formal fruit and vegetable garden. Exotic granadillas, ginger, cardamom, pineapples, dragonfruit, vanilla, guavadelles and much more – even a baobab tree – now have a new and happier home.

Garden curator at Babylonstoren, Liesl van der Walt, is also chuffed about the possibility that they can already start sowing fresh fare in winter, which means the gardening team will be able to transplant the seedlings in early spring to ensure an earlier and longer harvesting season.

To reach the greenhouse you follow a peach-pip path through the eight-acre vegetable, fruit and herb garden, a nod to the 17th and 18th-century Company’s Garden of the Dutch East India Company. The former was designed by French architect Patrice Taravella, who owns the medieval monastic garden Prieuré Notre-Dame d’Orsan, and along the way you will pass an astounding 350-plus edible species.

Positioned under recently planted medium-sized oak trees, with a collection of tables and colourful Luxembourg chairs – the classic park chair design (both inside and outside the conservatory) – the greenhouse-cum-tearoom is a surprising though perfectly logical refreshment station for guests who have completed one of the garden tours, starting at 10:00.

It is precisely this surprise bit that bothers Karen at the moment. “These oak trees better get a move on,” she jokes, “and so should the granadillas and other varieties inside ... right now there is still something too imposing, too surprising, about the structure, and the point of departure at Babylonstoren has always been to keep things even, balanced, calm and harmonious. Timeless. Nothing should ever be too dominating except, of course, for Simonsberg mountain itself.”

According to Karen, the conservatory’s standard doors and other finer details, as well as the removable bamboo roof screens, were imported from Serres d’Antan in France, while the final design was a collaboration between her and Babylonstoren’s general manager Terry de Waal, who happens to be a trained industrial engineer. Kleinoed’s Gerard de Villiers, renowned for his involvement in more than 150 winery designs (including Babylonstoren’s), made the conservatory happen on a civil and structural engineering level.

Although a large fan, windows and doors, and a misting system from Mister Twister help to regulate the temperature and humidity inside, they have now learnt that the few indoor tables are best avoided in the hottest months if you’re not an exotic pineapple.

Can you imagine the beauty of a bright orange persimmon that lands – poof! – on the blue? I think I might faint!

OPPOSITE The main entrance to the conservatory at Babylonstoren. **PREVIOUS SPREAD, LEFT** One of the persimmon trees surrounded by a magnificent Delft mosaic circle, a copy of a design Karen Roos found on a Delft plate. Here, bay leaves are used as border plants while kiwis ramble up the pillars of the walkway. **PREVIOUS SPREAD, RIGHT** Fresh lemon verbena tea and a slice of tree-melon tarte tatin with roasted almonds and vanilla-and-lemon-verbena ice cream served on Delft crockery. Karen designed the paper table cover featuring an artisanal pig drawing. **OPENING SPREAD, LEFT** The conservatory in a misting moment. In the foreground (on the right) is a jarrahwood and iron table and bench from Hope Garden Furniture. All the other tables and chairs are by French outdoor furniture company Fermob, available at The Modern Garden Company. The chairs are Frédéric Sofia’s reinterpretation of the legendary Luxembourg chair that was initially produced for the Jardin du Luxembourg in Paris. **OPENING SPREAD, RIGHT** Sketch of the garden by Mieke Wertschnig.

It is just one of those things, Karen says, because, like everything else on the impeccably and creatively restored farm, the birth of the conservatory was a “very organic” process where “the bigger picture was always kept in mind – and stays intact – while you add and edit... exactly the way in which you approach a magazine”.

Only much later in the creative process, for instance, did they realise that more space for people was urgently needed. Babel, the farm’s much-lauded concept restaurant under the creative auspices of food and creative consultant Maranda Engelbrecht and chef Simone Rossouw, is often fully booked weeks in advance and too many visitors have had to leave disappointed without having something to eat or drink.

“But,” Karen adds, “you also expect a tea room in a park-type environment, don’t you? A place where you just want to sit and drink tea and enjoy the breeze and sit some more and be happy – a place you don’t want to leave.”

And, believe me, this is it.

EATING STYLE

“Delft ware connects us to 300 years ago,” Karen says as she unfolds the tearoom’s new collection of table coverings and placemats printed on recycled paper (to be used again in making compost). She created the designs that feature a combination of grey artisanal drawings of farm animals and produce, as well as beautiful blue Delft plates.

The Delft theme is introduced at the garden entrance next to Babel, where the centuries-old remnants that were found on the grounds during renovations are kept under glass, and continues in the magnificent garden where the persimmon trees will soon be surrounded by Delft mosaic circles. “Can you imagine the beauty of a bright orange persimmon that lands – poof! – on the blue?” Maranda Engelbrecht later gushes over a cup of tea. “I think I might faint!”

As at Babel, the teahouse’s light menu focuses on seasonal produce from the garden. Visitors design their own lunch by choosing between four different bread rolls, four cheeses and four charcuterie items, which are wrapped in one of the Delft placemats and delivered to the table with three beautiful fireproof Weck glass jars containing fresh salad, a chutney or relish and mixed herb oil.

“We carefully considered the presentation,” Maranda says. “Plates and cutlery bring certain expectations. We chose an informal approach with beautiful Perspex cutlery and guests use their placemats or table coverings as a plate. But the cups and saucers are Delft, as it should be!”

- Babylonstoren Teahouse 021 863 3852, www.babylonstoren.com, Wednesday to Sunday 10:00-16:00
- A R10 entrance fee, donated to the Babylonstoren Trust, is charged.



KAREN ROOS PHOTO MICKY HOYLE

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Karen Roos with one of the ducks; Greek origanum country loaves; The conservatory's removable bamboo screens are permanent fixtures in summer to help keep the heat under control; In high summer an outdoor table is the best choice. **OPPOSITE** One of the teahouse staff, Jonathan van Rooyen, gathers fresh herbs and flowers for guests to make their own blend.

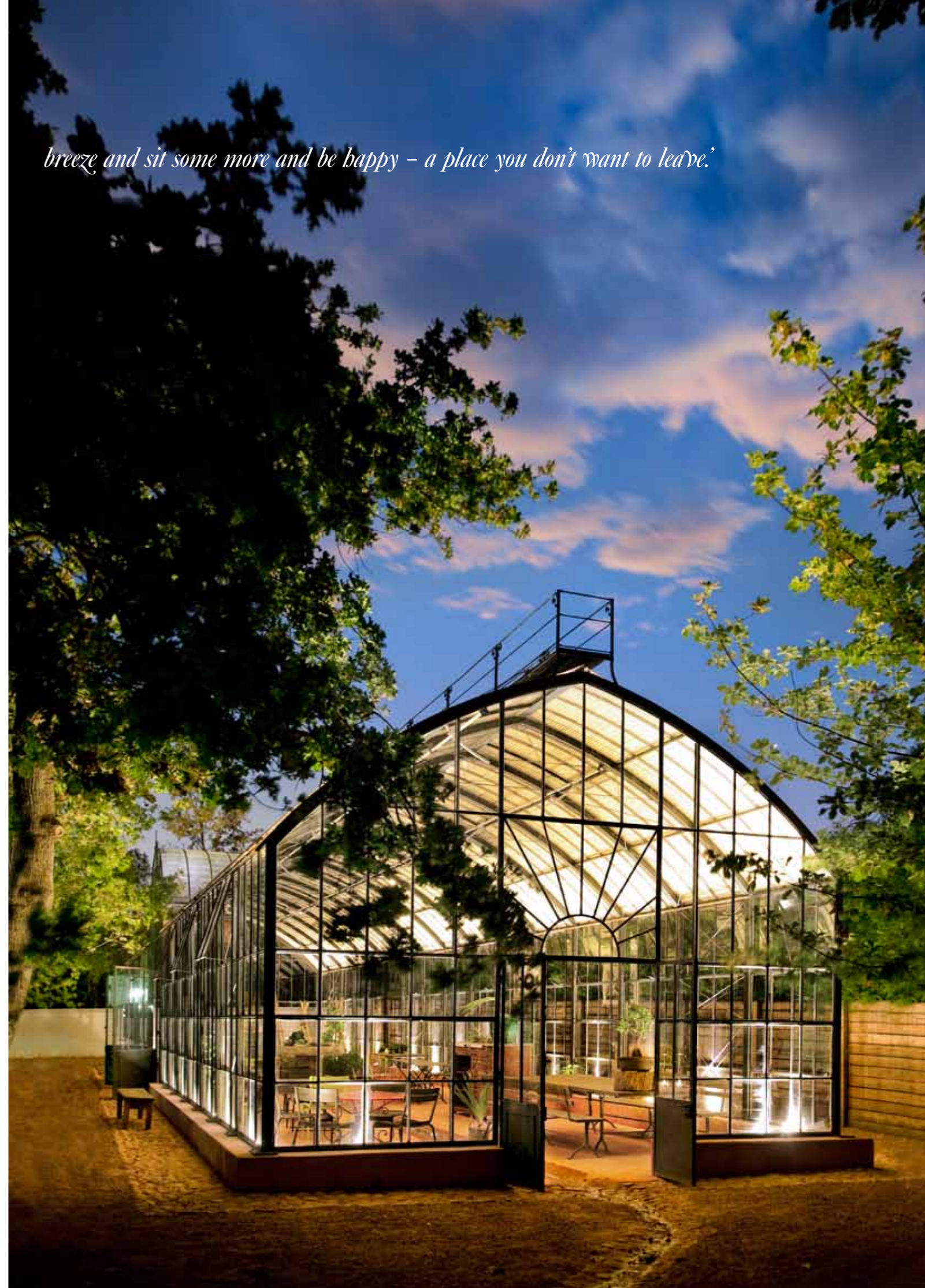


'A place where you just want to sit and drink tea and enjoy the

breeze and sit some more and be happy – a place you don't want to leave.'



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Pumpkins, cabbage and onions from the garden; A few small pears were covered with glass bottles in November to make pear wine or brandy; Babylonstoren's beekeeper, Voytek Modrzewski, seen through the door of the beehive; Lunch for one: a fresh salmon and yoghurt cheese sandwich wrapped in a paper placemat, with imported Weck glass containers filled with garden salad and baby vegetables, yellow plum chutney and herb oil. **OPPOSITE** The conservatory was erected between massive existing English oaks. Additional medium-sized turkey oaks and Algerian oaks were planted to provide extra shade in summer.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT A seat under the granadilla “tree”; Filtered light falls through the conservatory; Nests by Animal Farm’s Porky Hefer provide a quiet place to hide away; Exotic granadillas, pineapples and vanilla are amongst the species being tested out in the conservatory; OPPOSITE The blue Delft motif is repeated throughout Babylonstoren.

