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THE MAGIC OF THE MODERN FARM

IN HER INSPIRED RESTORATION OF ONE OF THE OLDEST ESTATES IN THE CAPE WINELANDS, KAREN ROOS HAS CREATED A NEW KIND OF COUNTRY GETAWAY: A WORKING FARM THAT IS ALSO A LUXURY HOTEL WHERE GUESTS CAN ENJOY THE ULTIMATE PLEASURE OF PICKING THEIR OWN FRUIT AND VEGETABLES.

Karen Roos has a rare gift for creating a world in a picture. Her style celebrates both antique and modern, timeless and trendy, via a unique visual arithmetic: discreet, often ruthless, subtraction and subtle, surprising addition. It's this arithmetic that she applied so effectively in her career as a fashion and décor magazine editor, in her Cape Town home and garden, and now at Babylonstoren.

This lovely old estate with its many layers of history remains a working farm, but it has also been transformed into a unique country getaway. There are cottage suites that provide five-star comfort and an innovative restaurant supplied by a magnificent garden, where guests can also enjoy the luxury of picking their own fruit and vegetables.

Babylonstoren has a rare integrity about it. The historic *werf*, with its handsome buildings and pleasing spatial geometry, is among the best preserved in the Cape. Around the H-form house, storerooms, gabled henhouse and pigeon loft, wine cellar, stables and workshops provide an insight into a self-sufficient rural past. There are wild olives and oaks that may be nearly as old as the farm itself. Below the encircling *ringmuur* flows a stream from the Simonsberg, the lifeblood of the farm for more than 300 years.

Time spent in Holland has sharpened Karen's already keen eye and her appreciation of craftsmanship. "Dutch artisans still do their work *ambachtelijk*, i.e. meticulously – I admire that. The Dutch also have an aversion to bling; a love of the honest essence of things."

The house and farm buildings have been renovated in that spirit. This is not a slavish recreation of time past, but rather an evocation: skillful preservation and restoration of the original fabric and feel, combined with an infusion of 21st-century life. Simple, modern furnishings and an unerring choice of detail – antique, modern, whimsical – make each space a timeless world, but one to be used and enjoyed.

The interior of a gabled barn in the forecourt has been transformed into an all-white multipurpose studio with a sprung floor – for photography, dancing or yoga.

Among the old oaks and olives, a series of *landhuisies* have been built to accommodate guests. There are 14 suites, seven of which have their own kitchens. In these cottages 18th-century exteriors boldly yet seamlessly marry with the 21st century. Slotted into one wall of each suite, a spacious glass box contains a dining and cooking area, with views over the garden or into the trees.

The interiors are appropriately plain, yet utterly luxurious – a mix of modern basics with antique pieces and stylish touches: a Magis Puppy Dog, a canvas wardrobe, a Xavier hatstand.

These touches are clearly Karen's, but she is at pains to stress that the revitalisation of the farm is the result of a team effort, in which many people have been involved – most of all, Babylonstoren's dedicated staff.

Karen's time in Holland inspired another passion. "It was there that we started to garden seriously. Extremely long summer days combine with fertile soil and you feel you have to make the most of land."

As a working farm, Babylonstoren's acreage is divided between fruit orchards and vineyards. The Simonsberg mountains are possibly the finest *terroir* in the Cape and a new wine cellar stands ready for the 2011 harvest. But the magnificent new heart of the farm is a formal fruit and vegetable garden, eight acres of abundance that are also a history book and a manual of gardening practice. Inspired by Van Riebeeck's great supply garden (the prime reason for Dutch settlement in the Cape in the first place), it also makes a playful nod to the fabled Hanging Gardens of Babylon. Patrice Tarravella, who recreated the celebrated medieval monastery garden at Le Prieuré d'Orsan in France, was another important inspiration.

This is where staying guests will be able to come down to earth in the pleasantest possible way, not only by exploring the garden's riches, but also by picking whatever they fancy for preparation in the superbly equipped kitchens of their suites.

There is another tempting option; the old cowshed has been converted into a

Q&A

HAD YOU ALWAYS DREAMED OF OWNING AN OLD CAPE FARM?

The wish came with the opportunity.

WHICH ARE KEY ELEMENTS IN YOUR APPROACH: LIGHT, FORM, TEXTURE, HISTORY, CONNECTION, HUMOUR?

All, and in that order!

HOW DO YOU STRIP BACK AN INTERIOR AND DECIDE WHAT TO ADD – AND WHEN TO STOP?

With discretion.

FAVOURITE HUNTING GROUNDS?

I love junk shops and the simpler type of antique dealers. I go to Gregor Jenkins, Tonic, Willowlamp and LIM for local designs; Limeline for the best of international designs; Weylandts for good basics; Paarden Eiland for the rest. Patience is a virtue, and I have a limited store of that.

FINDS THAT PLEASED YOU MOST?

Shards of blue and white antique Chinese porcelain, found when we started digging up the garden – evidence of more than three centuries of family living.

cool, milk-white restaurant, Babel, where Maranda Engelbrecht (award-winning stylist and food consultant to Woolworths) has created a menu that focuses on fresh produce from the garden and the region. Like so much else at Babylonstoren, a meal at Babel promises to be both an adventure and a rediscovery of "the honest essence of things".

"Above all," says Karen, "we would like visitors to ground themselves again. We hope they'll enjoy the mountains all round as much as our team does, pick their own biologically grown fruit and veg, play *pétanque*, swim in the *plaasdam*, enjoy an hour in the spa, eat a simple fresh dish at the restaurant, walk up the conical Babylonstoren hill, enjoy sundowners of wine from around the Simonsberg, slip in between sheets of crisp linen and drift away ... More or less."

• 021 863 3852, www.babylonstoren.com









