

Stellenbosch

From Xhosa fatcake and chewy beef biltong to world-famous wines, there are no end of ways to please your palate amid the vineyards, restaurants and townships of Stellenbosch in South Africa's Western Cape province

WORDS: Audrey Gillan



The air is laden with the sweet smell of *fynbos*, shrubland vegetation found here on South Africa's Western Cape. It includes proteas, ericas, pincushions and blombos and all kinds of fragrant wild herbs. This is a fertile terroir, surrounded by mountains — Simonsberg, Papegaaiberg, Groot Drakenstein, Jonkershoek and Die Twee Pieke — and the Bottelaraai hills. It's here you'll find the Cape Winelands and, at its heart, the glorious town of Stellenbosch. I'm in a 4WD being driven by Kevin Arnold, the winemaker who established the Waterford Estate; the man whose name is on its award-winning Kevin Arnold Shiraz. He wants me to get a sense of these 296 acres in the Blaauwklippen Valley and how they inform the vines and soils responsible for his wine.

"There's something in our wines that comes from the soil — which is the oldest soil in the world because, as we know, everything started in Africa," he explains. "Our soil is very rich; we have 9,000 plant species growing on our vineyard — the whole of the UK has 1,800 species. And that's the story of the soul and the wines grown in the Cape. We have a very

particular climate: there's the Atlantic on one side of the peninsula, and on the other the Indian Ocean, known as the Cape of Storms. And then there's our proximity to the South Pole and the two oceans."

Back at the Waterford Estate's main house, we try wines paired with chocolate custom-made for the estate by chocolatier Richard von Geusau — from Overberg, a two-hour drive away. There's a *masala chai* chocolate that complements the spice of the Kevin Arnold Shiraz and a sea salt one that brings out the savoury notes of the Waterford Estate Cabernet Sauvignon. "We take a long time trying to match the flavours with the wine," explains Kevin. "If the vintage is very dry and tannic, we'll go up with the cocoa to match the tannins."

Stellenbosch takes its name from Simon van der Stel, the former governor of Cape Town, who described it as 'a beautiful valley with lovely trees'. Its streets are lined with charming, Cape Dutch-style gabled buildings, most with porches decorated with cast-iron *broekie* ('knicker') lace underhangs. A mill stream runs alongside the kerb.



IMAGES: GETTY; AUDREY GILLAN; MIDDELVEI; EIGHT

I meet Hanli Fourie, founder of Bites and Sites, which offers food tours of the town and winelands with a bit of history thrown in. We visit Schoon de Companje, an indoor market where Fritz Schoon produces bread using heirloom wheat varieties and his wife Channelle makes her own ice cream. At the traditional, time-warpy Eikeboom Slagtery butcher's shop, the ceiling is hung with biltong drying in the air (the chewy beef is flavoured with salt, pepper, crushed coriander seeds and vinegar). I taste that same coriander in the *droëwors*, a thin, dried sausage that Hanli assures me is "*lekker*" ('good'). It is.

The Stellenbosch area has some of South Africa's best restaurants — many located on the vineyards, all a short taxi ride from the main town. Over dinner at Terroir, on the Kleine Zalze vineyard, cellar master Alastair Rimmer is ecstatic about the growing conditions: "I've worked in vineyards across the world, but now I'm in Stellenbosch I can't imagine ever leaving — we have the most beautiful vineyards I've ever seen."

We try a fresh and vibrant unoaked Chenin Blanc, with notes of passionfruit and lime. "This is South Africa in a ➤

Opposite: Stellenbosch vineyards.

Clockwise from top: Meat on the *braai* at the Middelvrei Wine Estate; Eikeboom Slagtery; chef Charl Coetzee at Eight Restaurant

FOUR PLACES FOR A TASTE OF STELLENBOSCH

Terroir

Chef Michael Broughton adopts a 'less is more' philosophy at this restaurant on the Kleine Zalze wine estate. The menu changes daily — although the signature prawn risotto stays put. Ingredients are seasonal and local. My visit showcased a cracking confit pork belly with mustard sauce, roasted cauliflower and fennel and apple salad. Try winemaker Alastair Rimmer's award-winning Family Reserve Sur Lie Sauvignon Blanc 2015 or his vintage Brut 2009.

How much: Three courses, around R550 (£24) per person. kleinezalze.co.za

Eight Restaurant

In the midst of the vast Spier Wine Farm, Eight Restaurant offers casual farm-to-table eating using produce grown on the farm or sourced locally. The menu changes seasonally but fixtures include fillet, sirloin and sausages from the estate's grass-fed cattle. Vineyard picnics are recommended, after stocking up at the on-site Eight to Go Deli with handmade pies, cold cuts, cheeses and, of course, a bottle of Spier wine. Picnic gear is available to hire.

How much: Three-course meal costs around R300 (£13) each. spier.co.za/food/eight-restaurant

Makaron Restaurant

Chef Tanja Kruger presides over the Makaron, at the five-star Majeka House hotel, offering a six-course tasting menu or an à la carte four courses. Two guests at a time can sit at the Kitchen Table, by request. Dishes use herbs and edible flowers grown in the gardens. Main courses can include crispy pork belly, apples and cabbage and 'coffee ostrich, dates, celeriac and pickled roses'. Each course can be paired with a Stellenbosch wine.

How much: Six course tasting menu, R620 (£27) per person. majekahouse.co.za

Middelvrei Wine Estate

Come here for the *braai* (barbecue) experience on the Middelvrei estate after first blending Merlot, Shiraz and Pinotage to create your own wine. The Momberg family will introduce you to pot bread, *snoek* (queen mackerel) pate, *braai broodjie* (a *braai*-ed toastie filled with cheese, tomato, onion, chutney and mayonnaise), as well as pumpkin fritters, lamb chops and *boerewors* (sausages) and *malva* pudding (sponge filled with apricot jam).

How much: *Braai* meal, R165 (£7) per person, including coffee. middelvrei.co.za

HOW TO DO IT

South African Airways flies from London to Johannesburg twice daily, with 19 connections to Cape Town from £515 return. Rooms at Majeka House from £100 for two sharing. Suites on the Jordan Wine Estate from £83 per night. flysaa.com majekahouse.co.za jordanwines.com



glass,” says Alastair, before offering me his 2015 Sauvignon Blanc. “I think this is one of the finest Sauvignons ever produced in this country,” he says. “Think broad beans and fresh peas with the texture of a Sancerre.”

Stellenbosch is not all vineyards and chic restaurants. Like most places in South Africa, poverty lives cheek by jowl with affluence. We visit the township of Kayamandi — to get an understanding of life in a shanty town that emerged in the 1920s when men from rural villages began migrating to the towns for work. “It was only men at first, 10 of them sleeping in one small room. Then the women started to come to live with them,” explains Thembe Koli, a local guide. “Then they began to build small houses, which soon grew to become an informal settlement. Houses were put together with what could be found — corrugated iron, plywood. Most have no running water and share communal toilets and washing facilities.”

We walk through narrow alleys, seeing how tiny huts seem to grow out of each other. Nocawe Piedt is dressed in a traditional Zulu outfit as she welcomes guests into her bungalow — local

kids gather in the driveway to sing and dance. In her living room, she introduces us to Xhosa food. There’s *vetkoek* (‘fatcake’), a savoury doughnut; *chakalaka*, a vegetable relish made from cabbage, carrots and red peppers; baked beans spiced with curry powder, onions and chutney; grilled chicken; and *pap*, a polenta made from *mealie-meal* (coarse flour).

The next day I clamber into another 4WD, at the Jordan Estate, and climb over 1,300ft above sea level. Here among the Sauvignon vines, you can see over False Bay and out to Cape Town’s Table Mountain. Eben, my young guide, pours a glass of Sauvignon Blanc before explaining, “this is the highest block on the estate. You plant either very high up — the higher you go, the clearer the air — or you plant on a cooler slope. Because it’s so high, you get the breeze from the False Bay area and Cape Town. It cools the vineyards during the harvest but adds different characteristics into the soil. This wine has the freshest fermentation flavours — green pepper and the cut grass of a normal Sauvignon Blanc, but there’s also a red pepper in a Jordan, with a nice acidity.”

By opening up estates, the winemakers of Stellenbosch have made the area special. There’s no better place to taste the region’s wines and to take in the smell of the *fynbos*. The terroir is in your glass and all around you. ▣

Clockwise from top: Young resident of Kayamandi township; Terroir, Kleine Zalze; biltong

FIVE STELLENBOSCH FOOD FINDS

WINE

There are over 200 wine and grape producers in Stellenbosch. wineroute.co.za

BILTONG AND DROEWORS

Traditional dried, aged, spiced

South African sausages, harking back to the days before domestic fridges.

ICE CREAM & BREAD

Come to Schoon de Companje for funky retro decor plus artisan ice cream and bread,

made by a husband and wife team. decompanje.co.za

BARBECUE

No visit to Stellenbosch would be complete without sampling meat cooked on a *braai* (traditional barbecue).

TRADITIONAL XHOSA COOKING

Try hand-cooked *vetkoek*, *chakalaka*, beef, grilled chicken, baked beans and *pap* in a local home in Kayamandi township. bitesandsites.co.za/xhosa-cooking



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