

# THE VINE HOP



The best way to get under the skin of South Africa's grapes is to go on a vineyard crawl, as **Rowena Marella-Daw** experienced while wining and dining her way through Stellenbosch

Forget the pub crawl. 'Vine hopping' is the fun, sophisticated way to indulge your wine cravings. And I don't mean schlepping down to France or Italy just for a weekend of wine tasting. Instead, head to Stellenbosch for a well-deserved holiday made more memorable by discovering exciting, award-winning wines from South Africa's Western Cape Winelands. Stellenbosch is said to have the highest concentration of quality wine producers in the world – a blend of grand and boutique producers, including more than 150 wine farms within a 30km radius. Grapes grown in the Western Cape benefit from a rich biodiversity unique to the Cape Floral Kingdom, so winemakers can hand-pick grapes with distinct character and flavour profiles.

Stellenbosch is a lifestyle rich in wine-making tradition, gastronomic delights and the great outdoors. Driving along the R310 towards its heart, I lost count of sprawling vineyards gracing the slopes of the majestic Stellenbosch, Jonkershoek and Simonsberg Mountains. This town is home to Stellenbosch University, which explains its trendy, lively vibe, particularly around Church Street, with its stretch of boutique shops, cafés, restaurants, art galleries and museums. There's a village feel about the place too, with oak-lined streets and period buildings depicting colonial Cape Dutch-style architecture.

Eating and drinking your way around Stellenbosch is the best way to capture its spirit. My initiation began with a Foodies on Foot tour of the town with Hanli of Bites and Sites – and there is much to stimulate the taste buds – from coffee and delicious desserts at M Patisserie to a bite of biltong, the South African version of beef jerky, at Eikeboom Butchery. Schoon de Companje is a rustic, hippie-style cooperative of artisan ice cream, meat, wine, coffee beans, and a place to gather for live music while

sipping the local brew.

Taking a break from the food trip, it was time for some serious wine tasting. My first pit stop was a salt and wine pairing of Fleur du Cap's Unfiltered range (Sauvignon Blanc, Chenin Blanc, Merlot and Cabernet, and the Noble Late Harvest dessert wine) at Die Bergkelder cellars. These wines are crafted with minimal intervention using a clarifying method of 'settling under gravity' without the use of filters, and experts say unfiltered wine retains more of its complexity and rich character. When paired with different types of salt from around the world (there are about 161 in total), the wine's character and mouthfeel changed. The Unfiltered Sauvignon Blanc 2014 (paired with sulphuric volcanic salt from Pakistan) had a smooth and velvety finish and the aroma of fresh cut grass, while the Unfiltered Cabernet Sauvignon 2011 (paired with red alaea mud salt from Hawaii) got top marks for its full-bodied character.

Vineyard hopping is more enjoyable and safer when you have a driver. My husband and I were driven to Stellenbosch Vineyards next for a vertical tasting involving various vintages of the same variety. The Lanner Hill Kumkani Sauvignon Blanc vintages ranging from 2006 to 2015 were already set on the table when we arrived. Kumkani means 'king' in the native Xhosa language, and while these wines came from the same variety, they certainly differed in character, influenced primarily by climate conditions. In my book, the 2008 vintage is 'king' for its distinct taste – hints of lychee and pear, lemony aroma and light gold colour. The vertical tasting was fun, and I didn't end up horizontal.

By the time we checked in at the WedgeView Country House & Spa, the braai was already on the go – rugby ☺

THIS IMAGE: Ernie Els Wines CIRCLES FROM TOP: Stellenbosch vineyards, L'Anzerac Hotel, Wedgeview Hotel room interior, Cape Grace, Wedgeview Hotel





Van Ryn's Distillery

⌚ player-size portions of marinated beef, pork kebabs, chicken and the tastiest lamb chops sizzling away. WedgeView is set within a valley of endless vineyards, its pretty gardens complemented by dreamy mountain vistas. Although just a 15-minute drive from the centre of Stellenbosch, it felt miles away from civilisation.

The Honeymoon Suite and Presidential Suite are the best rooms here, and of course, they serve a fine selection of wines.

The promise of a hearty breakfast in a winery justified an early start, heading off to J.C. Le Roux estate in Devon Valley, where Le Venue restaurant's bright and modern style matched the dynamic cuisine – my Eggs Benedict came with tasty, healthy bread instead of the usual muffin. J.C. Le Roux employs the Méthode Cap Classique technique to produce sparkling wines with delicate, bead-like bubbles. Varying proportions of quality Chardonnay and Pinot Noir grapes are blended, fermented and matured to craft a range of styles: Vintage Pinot Noir, Pinot Noir Rosée, Brut, Scintilla and La Vallée Rosée. The award-winning Scintilla 2009 stood out for its elegant, well-balanced palate, fruity note and biscuity flavour. A fitting ending to the tasting was a demonstration of sabrage, a tradition that goes back to the Napoleonic era, when troops celebrated victory using their sabres to sever the neck of a Champagne bottle in one swift stroke. Today this tradition is still celebrated around the world to mark special occasions.

For a very different palate experience, our next port of call was Van Ryn's, the only brandy distillery in Stellenbosch. Dating back to 1845, the brand has since earned many accolades, most notably the prestigious annual title of Worldwide Best Brandy, awarded five times by the IWSC (International Wine & Spirit Competition). Learning about the process of distilling on copper pot stills, maturing and blending was like a lesson in chemistry – which went slightly over my head. Easier to take in though, was watching a craftsman make an oak barrel from scratch. There was a lot of pounding and squeezing of metal girdles, but the end result was a tightly sealed and perfectly formed barrel. Then came the brandy, Belgian chocolate and Brazilian

coffee pairing session, and according to our tasting guide, swirling your snifter can result in the loss of “volatile and precious flavours”. Age and wood maturation determine nuances in colour, note and palate, and this was evident in the 12, 15 and 20-year-old vintages, with the younger brandies having a more precocious kick, while the older veterans delivered richer flavours and a smoother, more satiny finish.

Competition among wineries is stiff, and Tokara, a premium player, stays ahead of the game with its award-winning wines and fine dining restaurant, alongside its gallery. Its location 400 metres above sea level on Helshoogte Pass benefits from panoramic views over Stellenbosch and Cape Town in the distance, and arriving just in time for the sunset adds a romantic touch to the vibrant setting.

South Africa's burgeoning culinary scene is led by talented chefs with a penchant for innovative cuisine and a love of traditional fare peppered with exotic influences. Seven of the country's top 20 restaurants are based around Stellenbosch, justifying its reputation as the country's gourmet capital. At Tokara, award-winning chef Richard Carstens brings 27 years of cooking experience to the table with dishes such as Leipoldt springbok with turmeric croquette, mangetout, butternut, salted apricots, banana ice cream and curry jus. Gracing Tokara's corridors and walls are art installations, sculptures and paintings using wine as a medium, and they too engage the senses.

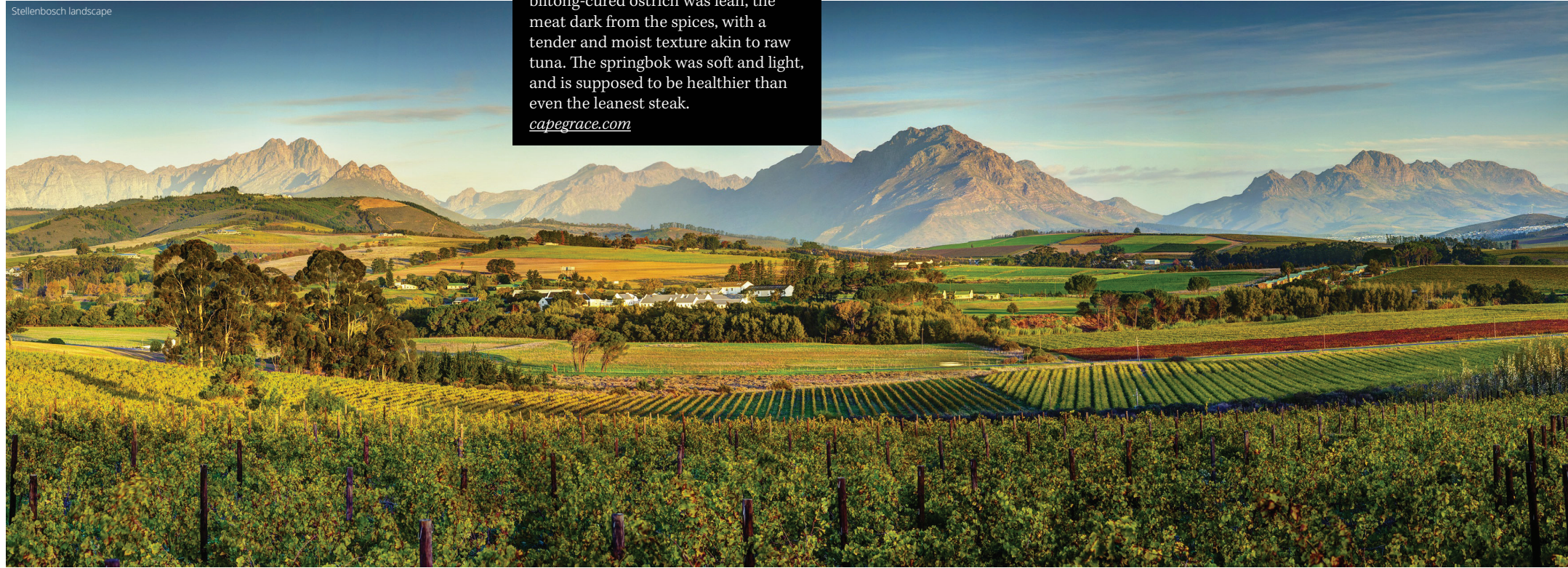
Stellenbosch has no shortage of luxury hotels, many of which are steeped in history. Driving through the leafy residential enclaves of Jonkershoek Valley led us to Lanzerac Hotel & Spa, set on a working wine estate dating back to 1692. And as one would expect, the buildings reflect the iconic white-washed Dutch architecture. There are only 48 luxury rooms, some with patios overlooking the gardens, but my favourite features have to be the Delft blue-inspired wallpaper and exquisite bathroom decked with period pieces. One of the more popular tastings is pairing premium wines with chocolate, made especially by Lanzerac's chocolatier to complement each variety. The Mrs English Chardonnay 2013 vintage stood out, and I couldn't get enough of the Merlot & Pinotage with Dark Cherry Cigar chocolate.

Other wine tasting experiences not to be missed include the Jordan wine safari and tasting on board a Land Rover, stopping at viewpoints overlooking False and Table Bays. To experience them all would require a 365-day holiday, which sounds very tempting. Our sojourn in Stellenbosch ended with a memorable dinner at Makaron restaurant at

## Age and wood maturation determine nuances in colour, note and palate



Stellenbosch landscape



Majeka House, a quirky boutique retreat with a chic private club setting. A menu of bold dishes are prepared and presented with panache.

Stellenbosch is one of those places that get under your skin even if you're not a wine lover. Perhaps it's the openness and warmth of the locals, the winemakers' passion for their craft, and the sheer beauty of the place. The soul of Stellenbosch intoxicates. 📍

*Bites and Sites, [bitesandsites.co.za](http://bitesandsites.co.za); Fleur du Cap, [fleurducap.co.za](http://fleurducap.co.za); Stellenbosch Vineyards, [stellenboschvineyards.co.za](http://stellenboschvineyards.co.za); J.C. Le Roux, [jcleroux.co.za](http://jcleroux.co.za); Lanzerac Hotel & Spa, [lanzerac.co.za](http://lanzerac.co.za); Majeka House, [majekahouse.co.za](http://majekahouse.co.za); Tokara Restaurant, [tokararestaurant.co.za](http://tokararestaurant.co.za); Van Ryn's Distillery, [vanryn.co.za](http://vanryn.co.za); WedgeView Country House & Spa, [wedgeview.co.za](http://wedgeview.co.za)*

## DETOUR TO CAPE TOWN

Cape Town makes an ideal base from which to explore the Winelands and the glorious Garden Route. Staying at Cape Grace hotel in the heart of Cape Town's buzzing V&A Waterfront meant we could resume the fine dining food trip at the hotel's Signal Restaurant. Elegant decor comes in a mix of aged yellowwood furniture, hand-crafted chandeliers, and a tapestry depicting Table Bay in the 16th century. Our seven-course tasting menu came with wine pairings from boutique vineyards, and when in South Africa, do as South Africans do – eat ostrich and springbok. The biltong-cured ostrich was lean, the meat dark from the spices, with a tender and moist texture akin to raw tuna. The springbok was soft and light, and is supposed to be healthier than even the leanest steak.

[capegrace.com](http://capegrace.com)



Tokara Restaurant



Van Ryn's Distillery tasting room

### Stellenbosch is one of those places that get under your skin

