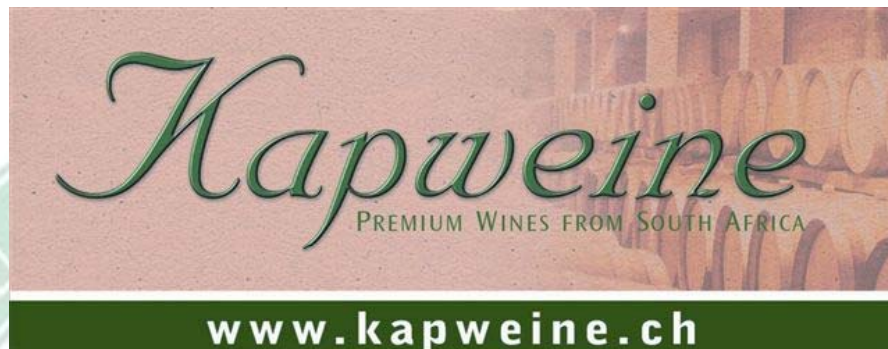


## Great Food and Top Wines

Für Weinliebhaber ist es keine Neuigkeit, dass sich gute Weine bei einem feinem Essen noch besser präsentieren. Anbei ein interessanter Bericht zu diesem Thema und vielen Infos zu den TopWeinen und den Top-Restaurants in den Winelands.



### Parallels between top South African chefs and flagship wines



Friday, November 28, 2008 by Kim Maxwell

After eating at four top Cape restaurants and tasting South African *uber* wines, **Kim Maxwell** reckons that while skill and consistency are integral to a top eating or wine experience, the personalities of the chef or winemaker surely play a role.

An invitation to the annual wine launch of Vergelegen's V is never one to be scoffed at. The average punter doesn't have the opportunity to chat over Champagne and canapés in the rose garden, and then dine at a long, elegant table in the Vergelegen manor house, shelves lined with historical books and first editions (I know this after being politely scolded once for trying to handle one). But being presented with four courses, featuring costly scallops, langoustines and foie gras in perfect trios on rectangular plates each seemingly fiddlier than the last, seems over the top for the numbers being fed. A hefty duo of meats in a main course also seems unnecessary (and not particularly succulent after hours in caterers' equipment) when you want the prized red wine to shine. Yet Andre van Rensburg explained that Vergelen's food and wine rationale is to only deliver the best, presenting his 2005 vintage with Bordeaux's Pichon Lalande 2005 and Ridge Monte Bello 2004 during the 2008 launch, to indicate the company he expects his wine to keep.



Kanonkop takes the opposite approach, creating a simple event where a vertical tasting of old plus current vintages is the focus. A *lekker* snoek braai is thrown in for those who can stick around (Johan Krige cleans the grid himself). Previous winemakers attending this year included the ever-talkative Beyers Truter and the preferring-not-to-talk-unnecessarily Jan Boland Coetzee, all asked to add input alongside current winemaker Abrie Beeslaar. Questions debated included whether the style has changed much over the years or how experiments with older vines or different oak percentages affected the results. Tasters were left in no doubt that Kanonkop's wines are world



class. While most lauded the older Pinotage and Paul Sauer vintages, I was impressed by the underrated Cabernet Sauvignon category in vintages 1991 to 2003. But then Truter noted that on joining Kanonkop their Cabernet was the variety that stood out.



Waterford launched their second vintage of The Jem (2005) alongside a casual opportunity to taste similar R200-plus gems in the 2004, 2005 and 2006 vintages of Columella, Rust & Vrede, Ernie Els, Kanonkop, Paul Sauer, Hartenberg The Mackenzie, and Rustenberg Peter Barlow. Kevin Arnold said it wasn't about comparisons, but rather to say that the Jem can stand proud with other great South African wines, as great wines are about pursuing a footprint over the years. Ironically The Jem's heavy bottle means their carbon footprint might need a rethink!

Sampling new menus from four of South Africa's top restaurants (some a result of personal chef invitations; others meals with friends), I started thinking. With wine, increasingly the winemaker's role is downplayed in favour of isolating a good site, ensuring the best raw materials - fruit - are kept aside, and not messing up the equation with the wrong blend or too much oak from vintage to vintage. Similarly with a good chef, consistency of quality and style keeps customers returning. It's also about exceptional skill and not messing too much with the raw materials - ingredients. But what defines a great chef is when their personality shines confidently through the food.

Margot Janse of Le Quartier Français has been lauded for her culinary prowess since The Tasting Room opened in 2004. Although she dabbled in other interests before becoming a chef, it's hard to imagine her passion and culinary curiosity being applied to anything else. Thankfully her Dutch pragmatism means there are no airs and graces about what she is, and the food on her plates do not suffer from meaningless frivolity either.

The Tasting Room offers four (R440) or six courses (R560) where you can select any combination of savoury and sweet options from approximately 20 dishes in five categories. Three of us signed up for six courses but couldn't eat beyond a fifth shared course of three crumbed Ganzvlei *vastrap* cheddar fritters with pickled apple, honey, cumin and brandy. Compared to a previous meal six months back, I was disappointed that portions seemed too big (and this is a restaurant specialising in tasting menus), and options often a little rich and heavy for summer. But then Janse says some dishes are tweaked daily. More waitress direction with selecting complementary weights of dishes could be useful - one of our group tried a starter of salt-cured *foie gras* and ham hock lovely terrine with cherry and yoghurt panna cotta with brioche French toast and banana and almond gel. Two courses later, the creamy denseness of apple and porcini cheesecake accompanying pork loin and crisp belly sent the richness factor past tipping point.



Margot Janse

I prefer Janse's simpler combinations when there aren't too many contrasting flavour elements on a plate: a delicious truffled white bean soup with chopped beans and other bits; a roasted wildebeest loin with the likes of black pudding, atjar and sweetbread and broad bean salad, and one of the best fish dishes ever, panfried Cape salmon fillet with an intense stock reduction over bacon and prawn risotto, with crispy calamari and bisque foam.

When Englishman Luke Dale-Roberts arrived at La Colombe a couple





Luke Dale-Roberts of La Colombe launched his transcending seasons menu at Constantia Uitsig

of years back after a stint in Asia, he told me his focus was on subtler spice flavours that don't knock diners flat, while building on a classic French base. It seems to fit his personality because Dale-Roberts wouldn't be the loudest guy in the local pub, but would make his point heard if he wanted to.

Dale-Roberts' 'transcending seasons' seven-course menu (R800 with wines) has a wonderful way of merging ingredients into others in seamless fashion as he follows 'seasons' surrounding the Constantia Uitsig vineyards. Delicate rolls or wafers of an ingredient have the addition of subtle dabs of herb pestos or purees to create additional flavour depth. The cured, smoked ox tongue starter with Jerusalem artichoke and a smear of lentil puree, is an expert example, sweet/vinegar sensations of pickled shimeji mushrooms bringing in the rear. Part two was a separate wooden box containing tiny rectangles of tongue slivers layered with redcurrant-flavoured jelly to refresh the palate, reminding me of those Indonesian striated sponge cakes. Despite being a pricy gourmand menu, it's intriguing without being too heavy. Beware of the truffle and *foie gras* egg (a very clever *foie gras* yolk with the 'white' recreated) in a broth of celeriac *velouté* though - a waitress misunderstood my question and said the vine log served alongside was edible!



Richard Carstens isolates ingredients to encapsulate flavour at Nova Restaurant



Richard Carstens has found a Cape Town home at new restaurant Nova. Diners can opt for 'safer' *a la carte* options such as pork belly or fillet fondant mushrooms with béarnaise - they're technically skilled, honour ingredients and are quite delicious. But for anybody keen to experience Carstens' personality on a plate, his seven-course degustation menu (R325, or R625 including wine) is the business. It incorporates Franco-Japanese elements of design and subtle flavouring, along with some of the more extreme Avante Garde techniques popularised by cutting edge chefs in Spain.

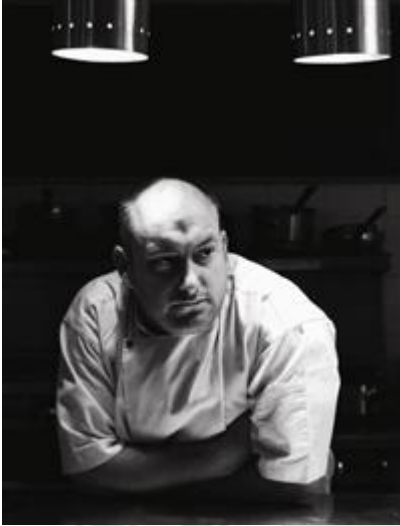
It's these techniques and elements you'll often find him pondering with foodies with the sort of severity others might devote to planning their will. A dish might have an assortment of tiny details - dehydrated tomato skins, micro herbs, tomato sorbet and emulsions of lettuce and microspheres. Carstens calls it isolating an ingredient by encapsulation of flavour and separating the parts, and it's effective on the palate, even if confusing for the eyes and head. The upside is you'll leave the restaurant without feeling weighed down by food, despite eating seven courses. So consider that before you write off a menu beginning with a nitrogen-frozen citric dome with melon seed milk and caramelised caviar, and finishing with an apple snowball.



The degustation menu at Nova starts with a citric dome and finishes with an apple snowball

Then there is Jardine restaurant in Cape Town where options include two (R240) or three (R280) courses. Scottish chef George Jardine limits the chatter but you'll pick up his dry wit if you're quick on your





George Jardine

feet. He'll save for kitchen equipment but doesn't spend unnecessarily on décor details (an international chef I know rates Jardine's food but reckons the experience detracts because of an open kitchen being hard on the eye). Jardine's food takes a similar cut-the-nonsense approach. Exceptional skill hones flavours to bare essentials, and the resulting plates never have too many elements. He favours purees of herbs or root vegetables for instance, but combines them with rich stock-infused meat or fish dishes so they always seem light. The steamed white asparagus with sweetcorn, basil puree and crispy pancetta or the twice-cooked crispy duck with honeyed parsnip puree being a case in point. On that note, his time spent in Malaysia means he crisps a duck to Asian standards!



Three fellow dining accomplices joined me in failing to appreciate how sweet tones of vanilla pod lift fish - Jardine's vanilla-roasted John Dory fillets, and The Tasting Room's Franschoek trout with a vanilla pasta with liquorice salsa drawing equal thumbs down - so I hope this vanilla savoury 'trend' will be short-lived. But George Jardine successfully pays homage to a few flavours without much aplomb. A springbok shank basted in rich stock, its flesh stacked to look like a giant poached pear on the bone, tastes as impressive as it looks. Jardine is no slack in the clean lines and uncluttered flavours of the dessert department either.

Perhaps the point then is that personality does come into it, when dealing with top wines or the country's better restaurants. With wine, more than food, if you can taste a winemaker's 'personality' too obviously, there was probably too much of a heavy hand. It's with maturity and experience that craftsmen and women at this level realise when so much is enough.