

A CONSTANT GARDENER

TAKE AN OLD WINE MAKING TRADITION, THROW IN PASSION, VISION, RESTORATION, SUSTAINABILITY AND ONE HELL OF A GARDEN AND YOU'LL FIND BABYLONSTOREN. **CHIS BUCHANAN** SPENT SOME TIME REPLENISHING MIND AND SPIRIT.



K now ye in ages past that tower
By human hands built strong and high?
Arch over arch, with magic power,

*Rose proudly each successive hour,
To reach the happy sky.*

There is a hill, shaped like that tower, not built with human hands, but which looks down upon a particular farm in the Drakenstein Valley, dwarfed by the Simonsberg and Groot Drakenstein mountains, defiant in its stance and never intimidated by the dragons above, because it's Babel Hill and it stands guardian over this ancient werf steeped in winelands history, emerging as a torch bearer for excellence and a return to the history of the Cape.

Babylonstoren is of the oldest and best preserved properties of the Cape, established only fifty years after the refreshment station and gardens were set up by Jan Van Riebeeck, granted to Pieter van der Byl by Simon van der Stel. It's been through many owners and families – de Villiers, Marais, Ponty, Terwinkel and a string of Louws until Karen Roos and Koos Bekker took ownership with an incredible vision to maintain the fabric and traditions of an old wine farm and to borrow on the traditions of the Cape gardens as a means of replenishment and sustenance to be enjoyed by all who visit here.

A visit to Babylonstoren turns out to be a bit more than a wine tour, dinner, sleep, breakfast and leave. Here you are immersed into the processes of a working farm within a renovated fabric that has maintained the integrity of the old buildings and added contemporary elements that keep you exposed to your surroundings while within the built environment. Glass is a major component, from the glass extensions to the cottages that keep you in touch with the vines or the garden depending on your aspect, to the conservatory-like structure off the old cattle kraal



that houses Babel restaurant (under renovation when I visited), the old conservatory where you take afternoon tea and which served as the temporary breakfast room, and the current extensions to the wine cellar which will put the new tasting facility in a glass environment among the vines.

Winemaker Charl Coetzee came to the farm in the November of 2010 at the same time the wine cellar was finished and developed the portfolio of wines with the owners, from a low base of no recent wine history on a farm that was selling its grapes off to other makers. They now grow 13 varieties and make seven wines – two red blends, Babel and Nebukadnesar, a Shiraz, Rosé, a Chenin Blanc, Chardonnay and Vigonier. A Blanc de Blanc bubbly has also just been bottled but we'll have to wait until 2019 before that's ready for market. The motto here is, "to make the best wine with what we have".

But when you cross an honours in viticulture and an MBA you get a winemaker who looks for a unique business opportunity and who understands markets and those best for selling his product. Charl's MBA concentrated on e-commerce and the wine trade is a great place to set up a platform to sell your goods, rather than rely on the myriad other online wine emporiums to do the job for you.

The result is an e-commerce platform



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on which you can order wine and other non-perishables like tea and olive oil with a 24-hour delivery time if you live in CT or Gauteng (you choose the time slot) and fulfilment by their own Babylonstoren personnel instead of an arbitrary courier. If you live in Germany, you'll get 12 bottles or more delivered in the same time frame. Charl told me it takes half the amount of clicks to make the online purchase and you never leave the Babylonstoren platform. I tried it and it was a lot easier than other wine platforms and it was a delight to be greeted by someone with the farm's logo on his shirt and who called me by my name and who represented the wonderful hospitality synonymous with the farm.

Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's 'half the garden soup' is a recipe that suits any decent sized vegetable garden and when you have 350 edible plant species (granted some won't be suited to soup) across eight acres, your vegetable soup options are endless. This one didn't disappoint and included risotto rice which was a new addition to the garden and which gave the soup a creamy, full-bodied Italian minestrone character. The pizzas out of the Bakery – the temporary evening meal venue while Babel restaurant is being refurbished – had beautifully thin, crisp bases with anchovy and capers or bacon as toppings. All was washed

down with tastings of the Nebukadnesar, the Shiraz, the Chenin Blanc and the delightful Mourvèdre Rosé.

I realised very quickly during my stay that the garden has become the backbone to this property in the sense that it's a beacon of what can be achieved if you use plants, insects and birds to interact with each other in a carefully structured layout for the purposes of providing sustainable produce to the farm and to hark back to the reason why the Cape was established as a replenishment station in the first place.

The old days of many of the properties in this area saw an element of wine production but also grain production that was sent to Cape Town for passing ships. The Chinese were big traders then as they are now and original Delft China has been found on the farm and many of the old fruit trees on the farm are from the Chinese. I recommend you book the guided tour of the garden to get acquainted with the plants and their roles as food or medicinal remedies, as well as to meet Gundula, a free-spirited artist and natural gardener who introduces you to the vast collection of plants as though she were introducing



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The original design of the garden was the work of French architect Patrice Taravella who took inspiration from the Cape gardens, the medieval monastery garden at Prieure d'Orsan in France and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. Its north-south axis runs in line from the Babel Hill to the vineyards and the east-west axis from the farmstead to the conservatory, forming a grid with rows of fruit trees, herb and vegetable patches, and hedges. His philosophy is that both plants and the structure make the garden in a combination that places the emphasis on relationships between species and how best they thrive in certain environments.

Gundula speaks the language of plants and all that create them, feed off them and contribute to their welfare, to the extent that an insect hotel has been designed to accommodate those creatures that ensure the continuation of plant species and that keep the plants clean and in an organic state. This is a garden that of which Mr van Riebeeck would be proud purely because of its scale and diversity and example of what can be achieved in a comparatively short time.

Accommodation in old 18th century style landhuisies (cottages) runs in a parallel axis to the garden under old oak and olive trees. Only the facades are reminiscent of the old werf with modern and contemporary furnishings and finishes creating luxurious spaces within the old fabric of the farm. After the meal, wine and an introduction to the Green Room – a library of sorts with a warm fire on a winter evening – by my host Anelle van Tonder who looks after the wine marketing at the farm, I made my way through the garden to this row of cottages to reflect on an extraordinary piece of diversity in the winelands maintained by people who understand exactly what you need to replenish your soul.

And so Babylonstoren stands as a bastion for all that the Cape owes its existence to and for what it has become – a garden, a haven, and a place of people and all that makes them who they are and all that makes them compassionate and love the place – under the happy sky.

*Then cometh ours; and better theirs
Of stranger tongues together brought,
Than that in which we all have shares,
A Babel in a world of cares,
Of feeling and of thought.*

*Extracts from the poem Babel by
Caroline Elizabeth Sarah Norton*

