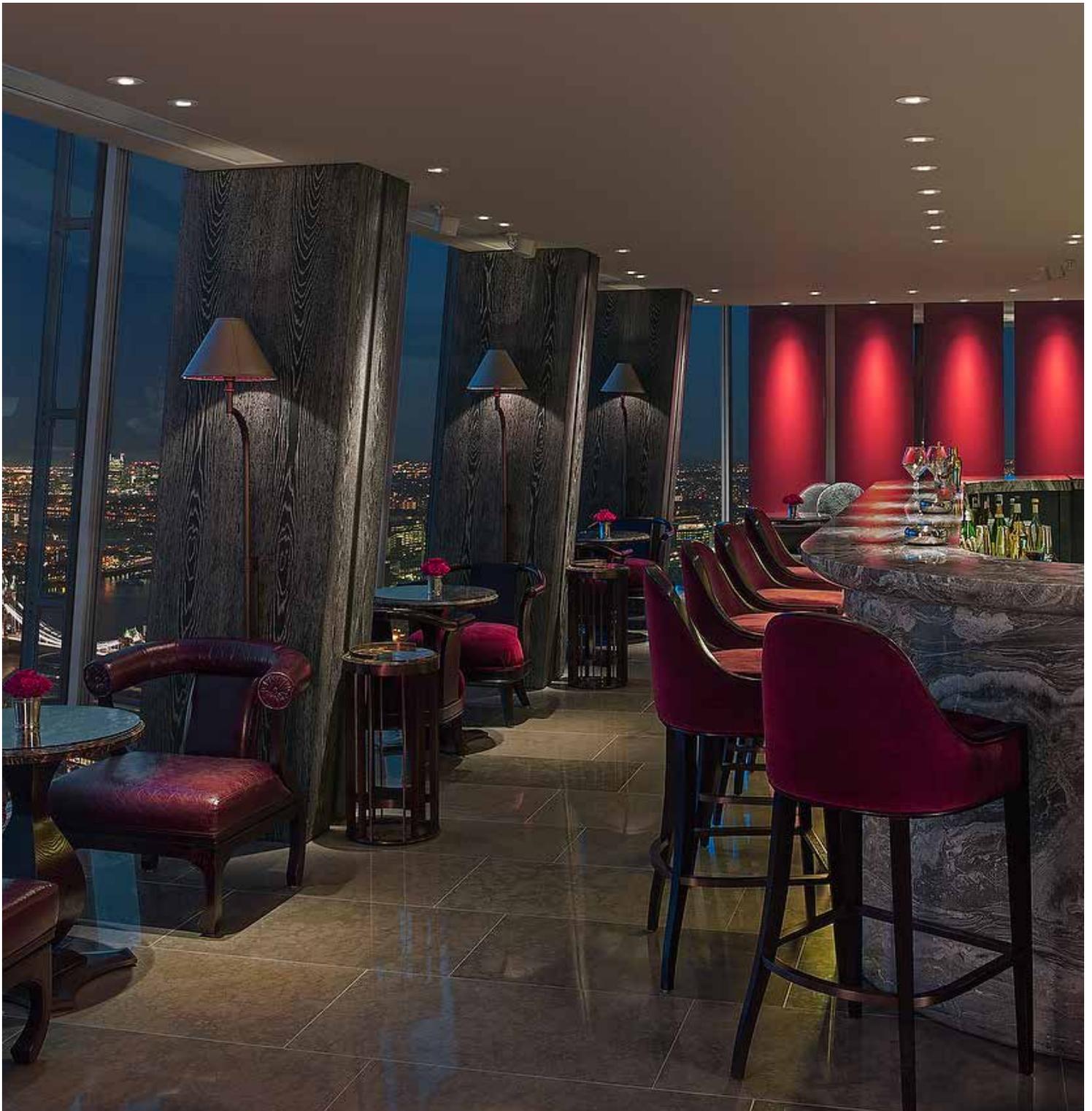


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SOUTH AFRICA'S

BABYLONSTOREN FARM HOTEL

AN AMBITIOUS PROJECT WITH A GARDEN AT
ITS HEART, THERE IS MUCH TO LEARN FROM
BABYLONSTOREN'S PICK, CLEAN AND SERVE
PHILOSOPHY

BY: **NICK DALL**



Dating back to 1692, the Babylonstoren farm is one of the oldest and most majestic in the Paarl valley near Cape Town. In 2007 the farm was acquired by new owners who – inspired by the Cape’s historic role as a supplier of fresh produce for sailors headed to the East – planted an 8-acre formal fruit and vegetable garden where all 300 species are edible. To wander the gravel paths of the garden is to experience the farm-to-fork philosophy on a grand scale, and it is almost impossible to believe that the garden is only 7 years old. Visitors are encouraged to

pick and taste whatever is ripe.

Once the garden had taken root, the farm opened its doors to the public. That was in November 2010, the same month that the signature restaurant Babel was born.

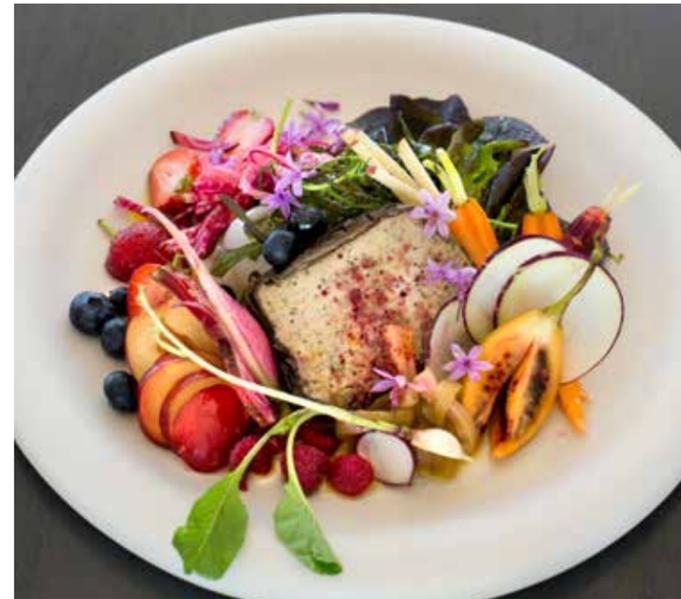
“The idea was that it would be a small restaurant that only served lunch,” explains Food and Beverage Manager Simoné Rossouw, who was the founder chef at Babel. “But when the hotel opened we decided to add breakfast and dinner for our guests.”

Babel’s food philosophy has always been very simple. “When you’ve spent months

growing something,” says Rossouw, “You want to do it justice. We do this by keeping it as recognizable as possible and celebrating the ingredient as nature intended.”

The menu echoes this simplicity. Regardless of the time of year there will always be three starters – a red, a green and a yellow salad – but what goes into these salads will vary depending on what’s in season. Or as lead horticulturalist Liesl van der Walt puts it, “the early morning harvest is woven through the menu...no two days are the same.”

“Dealing with an abundance of one



thing forces you to look at alternative ways of using it,” laughs Rossouw, “And never is this truer than in plum season, when we use plums in our starters, mains and desserts!”

Because the farm does not produce any of its own meat or dairy they rely on local suppliers for this. They also get fruit and vegetables from outside when required. Fortunately their location in one of the most fertile valleys in Africa means they have little trouble sourcing high-quality natural produce that is in keeping with the farm’s ethos. Rossouw mentions the neighbouring

cheesery and a supplier of ocean-fresh fish in especially glowing terms.

Much like the garden itself, Babylonstoren’s growth has been rapid. To cater for the influx of day visitors there are now several eateries on the premises as well as a spa, winery, farm shop, and a ‘scented room’ which sells all manner of fragrant goodies. There are daily garden and winery tours and regular full-day workshops for gardening enthusiasts on topics as diverse as pruning, mushrooms and cycads.

Trying to ensure that hotel guests

receive a relaxing farm experience in spite of Babylonstoren’s popularity among visitors is a challenge which the management have tackled with creativity and honesty. Breakfast, for example, is served from 8 – 10am, but the gates only open to day visitors at 9am – giving hotel guests a tranquil hour to savour the experience. Hotel guests are also guaranteed a dinner reservation at Babel.

Most hotel guests go on excursions during the day, but those who stay on the premises can still find a way to have the farm to themselves. Hotel guests can make



use of the exclusive hiking, mountain biking and canoeing facilities, or they can go on the 'guests only' farm tour. Rossouw admits that during the peak Christmas season the farm is busy, but this is true of every tourist attraction in South Africa.

In spite of the rapid growth, Babylonstoren has stayed true to its roots. A large percentage of the staff have been there since inception, and many of them have worked in various different capacities.

"We have waiters who used to be gardeners and managers who used to be waiters, and everyone who works here is a passionate ambassador for the farm." Because all of the employees understand

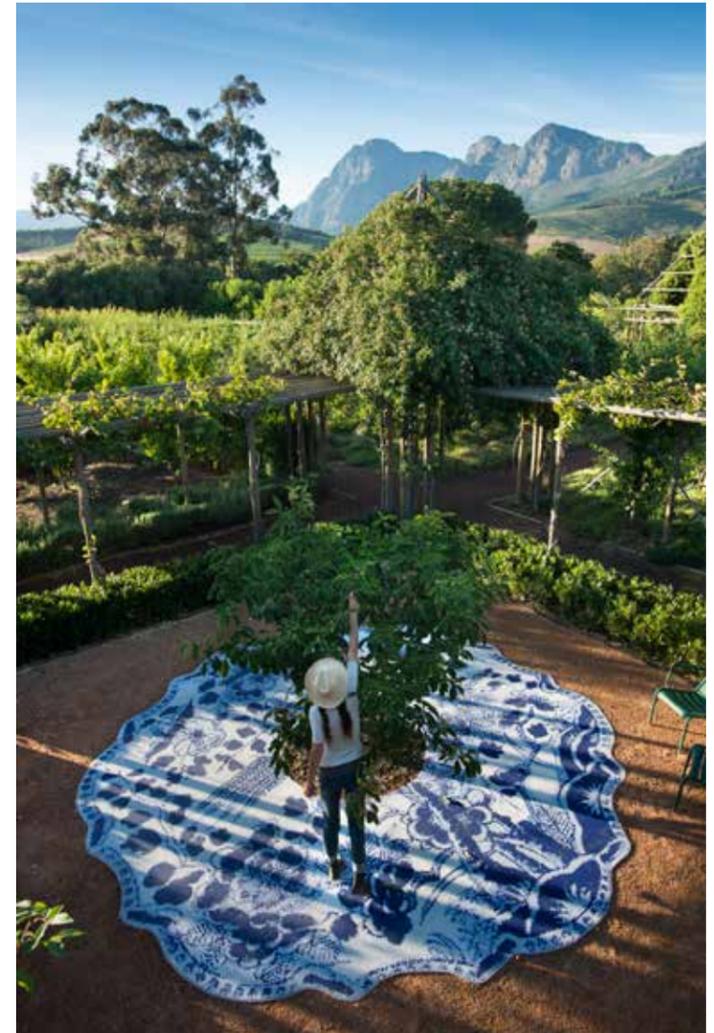
the bigger picture, there is very little conflict between the hotel, the restaurants and the garden.

This symbiosis carries through to the business plan. While the eateries and the gardens gather most of the plaudits, the sumptuous 22-room hotel sits in the background delighting discerning guests from all over the world. The hotel is a vital revenue source for the business, but at the same time it wouldn't enjoy such excellent occupancy were it not for the restaurants, winery and gardens.

When asked about the highlights of her tenure at Babylonstoren, Rossouw has plenty to say, but eventually she settles on

one thing. "Sowing, tending and harvesting your own Arborio rice in Africa and then serving it to guests is pretty special." That was last year's project; the team is currently working on producing their own balsamic vinegar...a process which may take years to perfect.

Author Bio: Nick Dall is a freelance journalist based in Cape Town. Most of his work is travel-related and has been published extensively both locally and abroad. www.nickdall.co.za



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BABYLONSTOREN

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