

Eg-Kaapse eatery food for thought



DECOR: The sparse interior highlights the magnificence of the exposed foundations.

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BIRTHDAYS should be about cake, candles and presents, but for me it has always been a time for contemplation. When I was younger, I dwelt on my career and relationships, but now I worry about what lies ahead for my children and the country I am raising them in.

In an effort to set these heavy thoughts aside, my husband and I headed in the direction of Franschhoek to celebrate my birthday. He had booked a table at Fyndraai – a restaurant on the 320-year-old wine estate Solms-Delta just 15 minutes from this quaint town.

The description on the restaurant's website read: "Dishes explore the diverse culinary heritage of the Cape, uniting European, Asian and African flavours in a fusion of tradition and creativity."

Hence, I was expecting a good meal, but I left there with so much more – hope for our country's future.

My mood started to take a turn for the better after a visit to the estate's wine tasting room. Our plan was to first pop in there before going to the restaurant.

We found that both were in the same building (the estate's original wine cellar dating back to 1740) and that the tasting area formed part of Museum van de Caab, which explores the slave heritage of the area.

A friendly guy named Derick Adonis attended to us and he began the tasting by telling us a bit about the estate. The company that produces the estate's wines under the Solms Astor label brings together human assets and historic lands owned by the Solms and Astor families and the Wijn de Caab Trust (representing the previously disadvantaged residents and employees of Solms-Delta) as three equal partners in a joint venture. Together they are spearheading initiatives to uplift the farm workers' community.

As the wine was poured and tasted, he also told us about the various cultivars, the farm's methods of winemaking and the stories behind the names of the Solms Astor wine range. For example, he explained how two of the wines were named after local dances, Vastrap and Langarm, in honour of the British-born Richard Astor's love for this South African pastime. What stood out was Derick's knowledge of the farm and its wines, and the enthusiasm with which he presented the tasting – two aspects which, sadly in my experience, are often lacking in staff who man tasting rooms.

Impressed with the quality of the wine and the service, we said our goodbyes and left for the restaurant. As we entered Fyndraai's glass sliding doors, I was a bit taken aback at the sparseness of its interior – two rows of simple wooden tables and chairs flanked the rectangular shaped restaurant's walls. My disappointment soon turned to admiration, however, when I looked down.

Underneath my feet, covered by thick glass, I could see the original foundations of the wine cellar, uncovered during extensive archaeological diggings some years ago. Tablecloths and

FYNDRAAI

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STARTER: Snoek fish cakes.



TASTY: Smoked ostrich.



TENDER: Karoo lamb loin.



SWEETS: Cape brandy pudding.

extravagant place settings would only have detracted from the magnificence of these foundations.

A panel, cleverly named "Floor of Origin", which identifies and explains the construction of the exposed foundations, doubled as a wall decoration along with 19th-century photographs of the people of the region. These were blended with portrait shots of everyone, including children, who lived or worked on the farm in 2007 – the first year the estate participated in Franschhoek's annual Bastille Festival. A lit fireplace, crackling just behind the reception area, completed the picture.

Tabloid-size menus, devised by talented chef Shaun Schoeman, were brought to our table. Paging through the menu, we were confronted by two problems. First, how to choose from such a delectable selection of dishes, and second, how to turn the pages without accidentally knocking over a wine glass.

Besides the winter menu options, there is an inserted Special of the Day leaflet and picnic baskets at R135 a person, which can be enjoyed on the banks of the Dwars River. On the back of the menu, a glossary gives the translations for the local dialect used to describe the ingredients of the *eg Kaapse* dishes. Each dish is also paired

with a wine suggestion. The kiddies' menu includes favourites such as beef hamburgers, calamari nuggets and chicken drumsticks, each priced at R45.

After serious deliberation, I chose the snoek fish cakes (R42) served with butter, garlic rice and mango chutney from the specials menu. My husband selected the West Coast mussel *potjie* (R40) cooked with *vinkelblaar*, coconut milk and sweet chilli. The portions were surprisingly large for starters and beautifully presented. The two fish cakes were soft on the palate and went very well with the sweetness of the chutney. My husband's mussels were to die for (I mean the seashell variety!) and of impressive size (again, see previous aside). When I placed one in my mouth, it simply melted away.

Next, I went for the lightly smoked ostrich fan fillet (R115) served with *waterblommetjie* tart, honey-roasted *patat* emulsion, buttermilk *suringous* and *spekboomslaai*. With the ostrich almost on the rare side, it tasted even better than it sounded. Except for the *spekboomslaai*. Its sour taste was a bit too sharp, so, even though it grows in my garden, I won't be adding it to my recipes any time soon. My husband's Karoo lamb loin (R108) stuffed with fynbos herb paste, *wilde knoffel* and rosemary-flavoured braised onions and *vinkelknol* served with crisp fried baby potatoes enhanced with a Cape Jazz Shiraz reduction was an explosion of flavours.

For dessert, I ordered caramelised baked custard (R40) served with a traditional *koeksister* and vanilla ice cream. The custard was especially delicious and although the *koeksister* was much drier than the golden-syrup drenched kind I am used to, it was still good. My husband picked the Cape brandy pudding (R42) served with nutty ice cream and a creamy brandy sauce. He said it tasted just like his late mom's – probably the greatest compliment a man can give.

But what I find most appetising at Fyndraai is the ideology behind the enterprise. As we were enjoying our starters, neuroscientist Professor Mark Solms, who is also the custodian of Solms-Delta wine estate, entered the restaurant with six guests in tow. I recognised him from one of the photos on the walls and shamelessly began to eavesdrop on their conversation. Of all of the information he shared with his guests, this soundbite stuck in my head:

"People thought I was crazy (with the creation of the trust). But if you can't transform one farm, how can you transform a country? It has to work. And if it doesn't, you must find out what you have to do to make it work."

It seems that this wine estate and its leadership have their feet firmly planted on the ground, or as the Afrikaans saying goes: "*Plat op die aarde*." Maybe that could be the name of Solms Astor's next new blend.

● Solms Delta estate will participate in this weekend's Franschhoek Uncorked festivities with *Kaapse* music, *Kaapse* food and *Kaapse* wine. For more information visit www.solms-delta.com