

Fragrant roots from the past

A new culinary fynbos garden near Franschhoek, which will revive forgotten traditions, delivers more than surprising food



THE STORY is not always what you expect it to be. This story, as we boarded a minibus in Observatory, was going to be about the establishment of a culinary fynbos garden on the approach to a wine estate near Franschhoek. And, in a way, it is about that.

But it is also about two boys growing up in a strange town in Namibia. A house on one corner of the dusty diamond mining town was our family home. Next door, over the fence, were my childhood playing friends, Teresa and Lee.

We played "cars", making tracks in the desert sand, grading it with our palms, riding Dinky and Corgi cars, sometimes overturning them. I had a plastic Esso garage handy for refuelling or repairs.

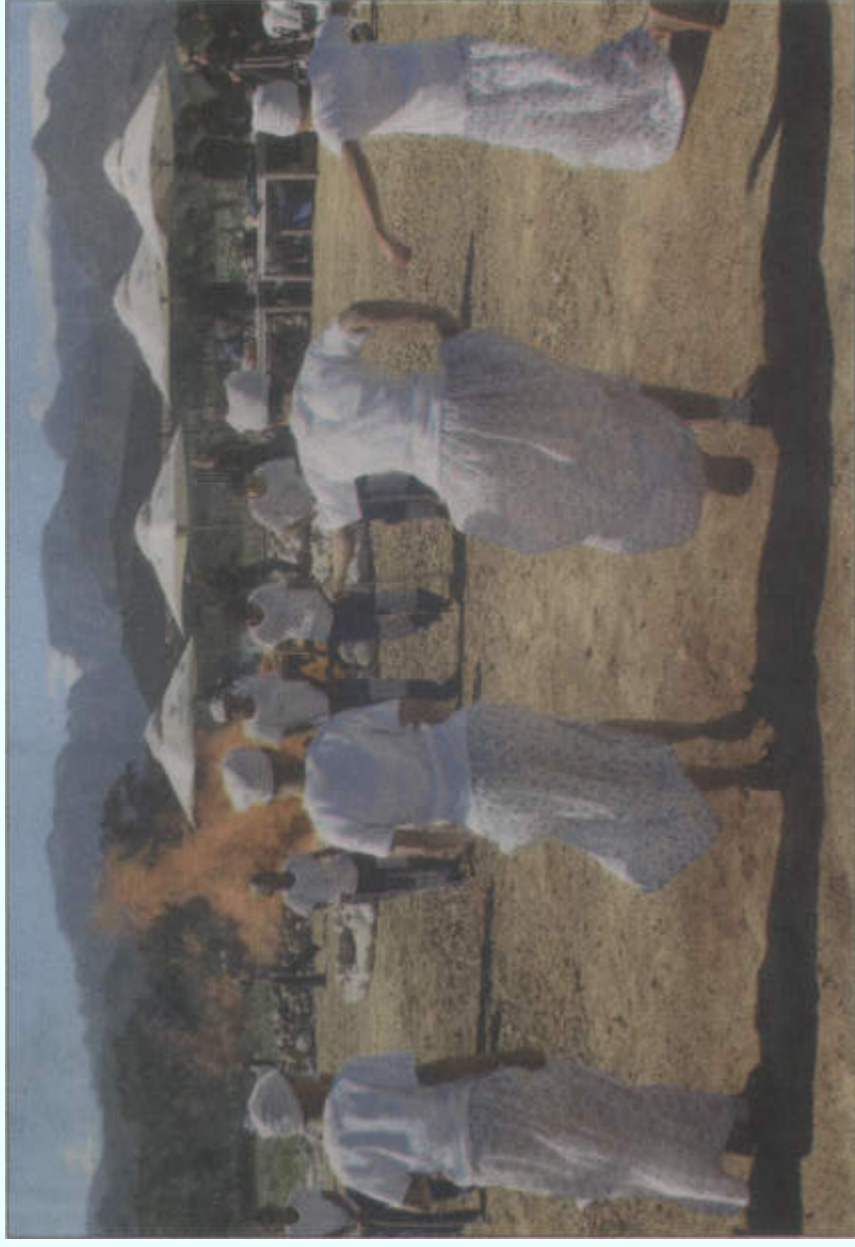
Teresa played with her Barbie dolls, endlessly combing their hair. I would sometimes pull one apart, holding Barbie's torso and severed head in one hand and legs in the other. Mean.

In 1961, their mother Sylvia presented a brother to them. Mark was a quiet, thoughtful boy. There was something going on in that head.

Somewhere in the sixties, they moved to the general manager's house when their father, Doug, became GM, and the playmates were gone. One vivid memory of the early 1960s was the day Lee fell off the roof of the Pink Pan yacht club building and landed head-first on the concrete. It was the most shocking thing I had known, apart from the time I watched Sylvia plunge a shovel right through the middle of a Cape Cobra.

In 1969 we left for Cape Town. The past was severed, allegiances broken. And time washes away like sand on a beach. Memories disappear into the blue. And sometimes it's as if what was, never really was.

Now the bus is getting closer to



ABOVE: Chef Shaun Schoeman harvests veldkos.

LEFT: The garden is blessed with a Khoe ceremony.

PICTURE: TONY JACKMAN

Franschhoek but the driver has taken a very odd route. Somehow we find ourselves driving through Stellenbosch, over a pass, and all of a sudden there's a landmark we all recognise and we blurt as one, "How the hell did we end up here?"

We turn off and into the Solms-Delta estate. Important people are gathered in a clearing – food scientist and author Renata Coetzee, the ethnobotanist Alan Somnberg, restaurateur Peter Veldsman and photographer Volker Miros. There is karri to drink (a fynbos tea) and bizarre fruits, roots and herbs laid out on a table. Maybe aliens are coming for a picnic.

We're herded towards rows of plastic chairs to watch children dance traditional reels, nothing to do with the dances of Celtic climes. A man has been wandering around wearing a hat and a cardigan but and his kid brother's chosen career. Mark is here today to introduce us to one of those brilliant ideas that has everyone else saying, "Now why didn't I think of that?" – the Dik Delta Fynbos Culinary Garden, planted with edible fynbos, indige-

nous plants with roots, leaves or fruit that you can eat. Their restaurant, Fyndraai, is named after this tract of land, which Mark explains over lunch is "the moment of no return before orgasm". He had earlier asked Renata Coetzee to explain what the word meant. She had demurely declined.

This land is unlike the serried vineyards of these parts. It is sparse and seems dry, and the neatly spaced plants are still small, with only the promise of the harvest to come a year or more from now.

The restaurant celebrates the region's three culinary traditions – the veldkos of the Khoe who lived on this land 2 000 years ago with their Sanga cattle and fat-tailed sheep, the diet of slaves, and the boerekos and Dutch food of the farmers. You can pre-book a "her-

itage menu" of these.

It's not all about food. There's a keep for the spotted-hide Sanga cat-tle, a kraal where fat-tailed sheep and ostriches are kept, gardens of aloes and vygies, a fynbos walk and a gustatory stroll through the fynbos garden where you can smell, touch and taste the leaves of buchu, honeybush, spekboom and many others, on guided walks from the estate's Museum van de Caab.

The cuisine of Dik Delta will also find its way to the market – atjars, teas, jams and syrups.

Lunch gives a generous taste of what is to come – no big surprises, all very local and familiar, well-prepared by chef Shaun Schoeman. After which Dr Mark Solms, who a Google search reveals has some jaw-dropping achievements to his credit, hurriedly but graciously excuses himself. The kid from next door has had a call from Groote Schuur Hospital and has to rush off to do some very brainy things.

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