

Spoilt for choice...



The Westcliff

If food has become the new rock'n roll, wine is its groupie. Top chefs and winemakers have not become celebrities by accident. It's cool to be seen dining at the right place, sipping the right liquid from suitably smart crystalware. But what's The Right Wine and how do you choose it? For those who don't know their Arras from their Elgin, help comes in two forms. A top restaurant will have a qualified sommelier or, at least, a trained wine steward to advise on food-wine pairings. A good winelist should be a useful guide too, but the longer ones take a lot of reading. As a more relaxed way to develop one's nose, many enterprising restaurants host wine-pairing dinners that allow diners to taste with each course a well-matched wine, without having to buy a bottle of each.



La Belle Terrasse, Johannesburg

Reviewed by Victor Strugo (alias Le GastroGnome)

In fast-moving Joburg, The Westcliff has in ten years acquired the same stately aura as its century-old sister in Cape Town, The Mount Nelson. Like the Nellie, it was acquired by the fabled Orient-Express hotel group for its individual cachet and unique setting. High on the hilltop of one of the country's wealthiest suburbs, the hotel and its dining-room – aptly named La Belle Terrasse – commands unrivalled views that stretch for 50 km to the distant Magaliesberg hills and follow the entire northern suburb greenbelt all the way to the unexpected wildlife in the municipal zoo down below.

Dining at La Belle Terrasse is a multi-layered experience. Service and gleaming table appointments reflect the sophisticated norms of Orient-Express, Afro-contextualized by warm hospitality and ten pages of desirable Cape wines. Having won a national Top Ten Restaurant Award here in 2005, chef Sven Niederbremer returns to the hotel after a two-year absence. A self-professed fan of modern Spanish cuisine, Michelin-trained Niederbremer now modestly claims he's gone "back to basics," meaning that with simple preparations rather than extravagant sauces, the chef's art surrenders the limelight to the pure flavours of best-quality local ingredients.

But once an artist, always an artist. The stylishly geometric platings and thoughtful balancing of intense with delicate flavours is beyond the ken of lesser chefs. And while anyone can surprise you by coupling unexpected partners on the same plate, it takes great culinary skill to make them harmonious to the taste-buds. I'm talking about combinations like oysters with leek and potato broth, veal frikadele with prawns and, most startlingly, juxtaposing seared foie gras with ... rhubarb and pork shoulder!

The best introduction to La Belle Terrasse is to opt for the tasting menu – starter, fish entrée, meat, cheese and sweet, with three choices of each course - and by-the-glass wine pairings, naturally.

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95 Keerom, Cape Town

Reviewed by Vicki Sleet

Of all the food-loving nations, it is the Italians who just seem to get the appreciation of food and wine in one sitting so right. At 95 Keerom, such is chef patron Giorgio Nava's commitment to quality that he has his own tuna fishing boat; a Karoo farm that rears specially imported cattle for beef, as well as local sheep, and he has local farmers grow the herbs and vegetables essential to his Milanese style of cuisine. When it comes to wines to marry with his food, Nava has an impressive selection of offerings too, many of them in the classic style to stand up to the bold and unfettered flavours he serves. For those fond of food and wine pairings, Nava has teamed up with Stellakaya wines, pinpointing which wines are happy partners for some of his choice dishes. The 95 Carpaccio is a signature starter, and the choice of a berry-laced Stellakaya Merlot 03 sets the tone for an experience peppered with robust flavours. For the pasta course of butternut and ricotta ravioli with brown butter and sage (another 95 must-eat), Nava opts for the earthy flavours of Stellakaya's Hercules 05, while the duo of game (kudu with tomato and black olives, and springbok with bay leaf and tomato) meets its match with a silky Stellakaya Shiraz 05. Staying with the reds, Nava's pièce de résistance, the chocolate soufflé is given star treatment by Stellakaya's Orion blend, a lightly spiced and gentle tanned offering. While a foodie experience at 95 is always one for the books, one that takes the homework out of making the right wine marriages ensures that you'll be starry-eyed, indeed.

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The Beverly Hills Hotel, Durban

Reviewed by Tracy Gielink

Having haughtily presided over Umhlanga's picturesque coastline for decades, the Beverly Hills Hotel is the grande dame of the small town. Five stars are mandatory here, and epicureans can best indulge their hedonistic whims at the monthly gourmet wine evenings.

Pre-dinner drinks are taken on the terrace where diners can take in the manicured gardens, breathe in the salty air swept off the Indian Ocean, and whet their palate with a pre-dinner drink. The plush Plantation Room is the destination du jour for the tasting which, limited to 22 people and held at one stately table, offers a bespoke gourmet experience.

The winemaker or marketing representative does a brief introduction of the featured estate and its wines, and both oenophiles and novices are equally comfortable as information is provided according to level of interest and knowledge shown. The focus, however, falls firmly on relishing inspired food and wine pairings, and executive chef Louis van Reenen talks guests through the thought process behind the menu and wine pairings before dinner commences.

A four-course dinner could see an intensely flavourful prawn and leek ravioli with rocket and parmesan teamed with a herbaceous Sauvignon Blanc reserve. A Shiraz/Cabernet Sauvignon blend lends itself to a roast rib eye of beef with potato gratin, braised beans and a Shiraz jus, while a dessert wine may be showcased with an orange tart with vodka-marinated orange segments.

The cost of R400 per person includes a four-course dinner with wines, mineral water and filter coffee. The line-up for the remainder of the year is Ken Forrester (August), Moët & Chandon (September), and Veuve Clicquot (November). Reservations are essential.

The Beverly Hills Hotel, McCausland Crescent, Umhlanga
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