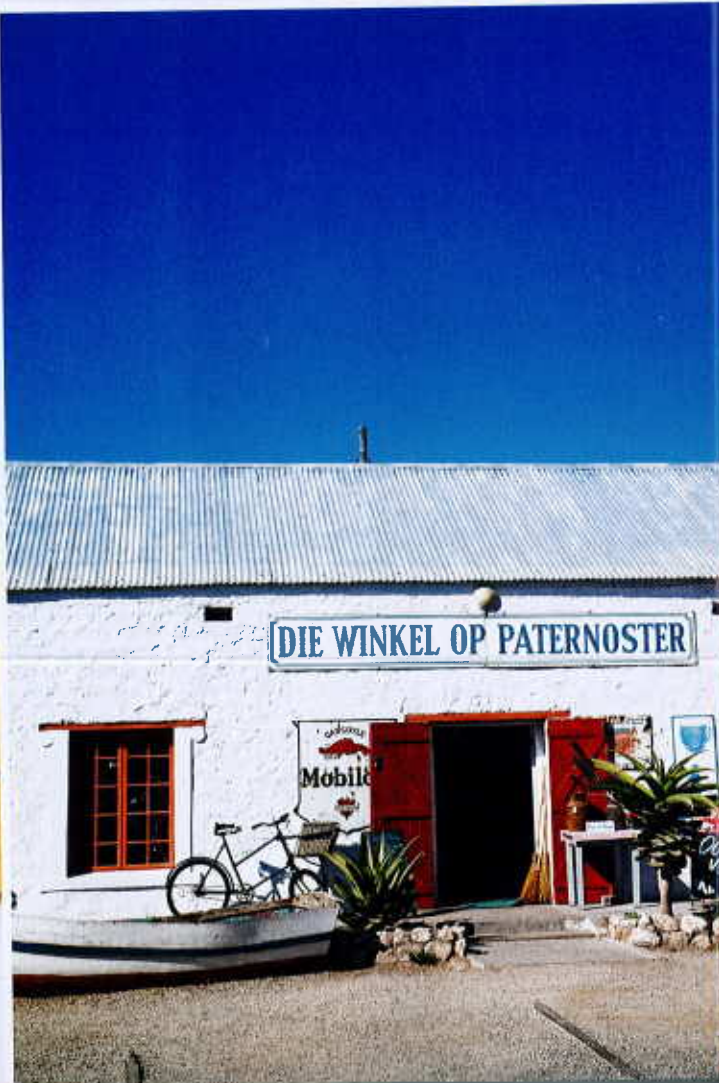




Clockwise: super-chef Peter Tempelhoff outside his Greenhouse restaurant in Cape Town; nettle soup at The Tasting Room, Franschhoek; the general store at Paternoster, in front of the Op ve Koep bistro; yellow salad at Babylonstoren's Babel restaurant. Opposite, on the road to Babylonstoren



The Western Cape's reputation for wine is undiminished but now its cooking has caught up, with young chefs savouring exotic homegrown ingredients and looking to their own traditions rather than to Europe. South African-born Rodney Bolt tucks his napkin in for a road trip to relish. Photographs by David Crookes

SCENE STEALER



QUAIL EGGS in turtle aspic. Try as I might, I cannot dislodge the dish from my memory after nearly four decades: rubbery, slightly salty, with a

sea-taste and an unpleasant, eggy smell. It was my first posh restaurant meal with my parents in my home town on South Africa's east coast. Starched linen, starchy atmosphere, cut-glass and silver: clearly all eyes were fixed firmly on faraway Europe.

All this has changed. On a foodie road trip through the Western Cape, I met daring, proudly local chefs, inspired by the country's natural abundance, plucking at strands from its cultural tangle – Indian and Afrikaner, Cape Malay and ancient indigenous traditions – to bring flavours, spices, methods and sometimes a little madness into the mix. Dishes that had previously existed only in grandmothers' handwritten recipe books, and had been passed down through the generations, are now appearing on menus. And people are talking about South African food the way they once talked about its wine.

My first stop, Groote Post wine farm, was once home to the splendidly named Hildagonda Duckitt, South Africa's very own Mrs Beeton. Duckitt was the first woman in the country to publish recipes gathered from all manner of people – from Afrikaner farmers' wives to the descendants of Malay slaves – over a century ago. Her books are largely forgotten, but at **Hilda's Kitchen** (+27 22 492 2693; www.grootepost.com; about £28 for two), her ghost hovers over chef Debbie McLaughlin. At a table set under the trees beside the whitewashed Cape Dutch farmhouse, I eat a brilliantly updated old-school Cape lunch of local charcuterie with a Hilda-inspired apple-and-date relish, oxtail simmered with cinnamon and butternut – brought to the table in a *potjie* (a three-legged, cast-iron cooking pot). A pudding of sticky date tart is well matched by a luscious Groote Post Shiraz; but just a sip, as I am only stopping off on my way to Paternoster, further up the west coast.

RECENT RAINS have conjured magical yellow and orange daisies and clusters of arum lilies out of the fynbos heathland along the straight, flat coastal road. Paternoster has been 'discovered' by a savvy crowd of South Africans, and even become a little smart,



Clockwise from top left: Cape Malay standard bobotie (curried meat and fruit) at Oep ve Koep in Paternoster; the chef, Kobus van der Merwe, foraging for sea lettuce; salt-fish tapenade with dune spinach; Paternoster fishermen. Opposite, Oep ve Koep

but its simple, white fishermen's cottages have lost none of their charm. A couple of years ago, Kobus van der Merwe took over the old-fashioned tea garden behind his parents' general store, Die Winkel op Paternoster and started a bistro, **Oep ve Koep** (+27 22 752 2105; about £30 for two) where he serves food foraged from the dunes and mountainsides, hunted on the veldt, brought fresh from the sea. The shop reminds me of the country-supply stores of my childhood – dimly lit, the shelves piled with preserves and household bric-a-brac – but the courtyard garden out the back is a different story, with restaurant tables covered in jaunty, mod-African print cloth and peopled with a young crowd of expectant foodies.

Van der Merwe has immersed himself in local culinary heritage, researching the eating habits of the land's aboriginal inhabitants, the Khoi and the San, coastal foragers and hunter-gatherers. His guru is the early-20th-century Afrikaner cook and poet C Louis Leipoldt, whose books include recipes for flamingo, and tortoise cooked in the shell. There's springbok on

the menu today, shot by van de Merwe's father. Its liver makes a fine pâté, served with chutney made from *spekboom* (a desert succulent), and beetroot minced with sweet spices and fenugreek. I'm trying to guess the spices when Kobus strides past, brandishing a huge prickly leaf. 'Ysblad', he says. 'It looks freakishly inedible, but cooked, it's sensational.' The ysblad comes, soft and tamed, *en papillote*, filtering its malty, mellow flavour into a fillet of cod-like *kabeljou*. Alongside, there's a flash-fried tangle of dune spinach, samphire, *waterblommetjie* (lily) buds and wild asparagus.

'People think foraging is trendy,' says Kobus, 'but it's a very African thing. When something's in season you can see everyone out with plastic bags gathering the evening meal.' In some ways Oep ve Koep is a relaxed South African version of the much-hyped Noma, except here, rather than dressing up for a once-in-a-lifetime meal, diners sit around in shorts and sandals in the dappled Cape sunlight.

Later, I take an evening walk on Paternoster's long beach, crunching over



The Greenhouse restaurant at Cape Town's Cellars-Hohenort hotel and, opposite, its bakery

a layer of mussel shells four inches thick, past **Voorstrandt** (+27 22 752 2038; www.voorstrandt.com; about £28 for two), in an old cottage painted scarlet and green – the kind of fish-and-chips, toes-in-the-sand place this coastline is known for – where people are sipping sundowners on the beach-front veranda. Then it's up the hill to **Gaaitjie** (+27 22 752 2242; www.saltcoast.co.za; about £30 for two) in another old fisherman's house, just in time to catch the sunset from a terrace with views far out to sea. Here, chef Suzi Holtzhausen employs only women from local families. 'It was always the fishermen's wives who did the cooking,' she says. 'And they know a thing or two.' Holtzhausen uses traditional ingredients with unexpected results. 'People say Paternoster reminds them of their childhood,' she says, 'that's a good thing, a place of comfort. Once they're in it, then I can try something new.'

I tuck in to angelfish spring rolls with a bittersweet tamarind-buttermilk sauce, a brandade of home-smoked and salted snoek (a local game fish): it's eye-wateringly good, the smoke and salt flavours playing gently with each other, neither dominant for too long. The bread comes with a tangerine preserved in its skin, a flashback to my favourite childhood *konfyt* (jam).

THE NEXT DAY, I drive east to the Cape Winelands, long famous for good wines, cellar-door tastings and vineyard restaurants, and now home to a handful of chefs causing ripples beyond the national border. A road sign warns of tortoises crossing. Secretary birds – eagles on crane's legs – stalk the fields between grazing sheep as the fynbos gives way to green hills and vineyards. Franschhoek – named 'French Corner' after the Huguenots who settled here in 1688 – is set in a basin edged by craggy mountains with vineyards hoisted up their slopes like the edges of carpets, the backdrop to a scatter of whitewashed Cape Dutch farmsteads. With a nod to its Gallic heritage, Franschhoek is considered the epicurean epicentre of the Winelands. In the little town centre, on wine farms, in restaurants along the road, forks prod, lips smack, tongues swirl flavours.

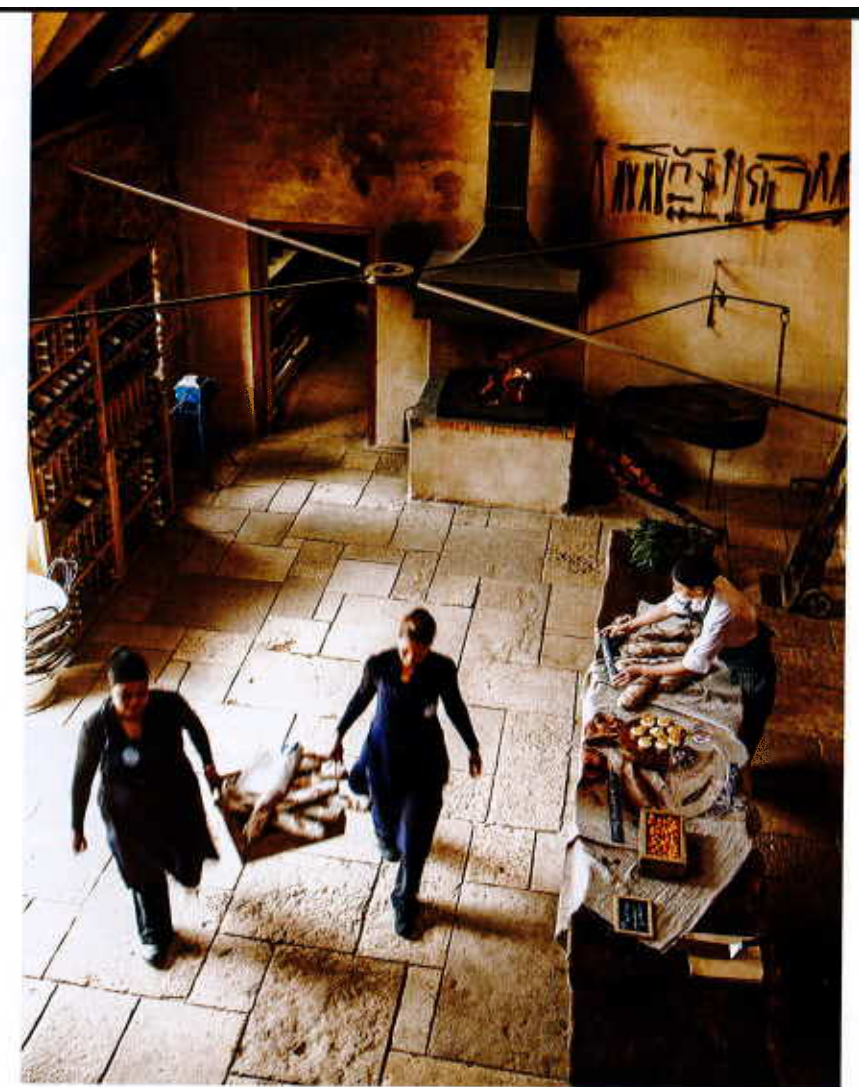
One local ingredient causing a flutter is the charcuterie made by Neil Jewell at **Bread & Wine Vineyard Restaurant** (+27 21 876 4004; www.moreson.co.za; about £28 for two) on the Moreson estate. I drop in to sample his sublime salamis, saucisson and hams (air-dried, smoked

over apple wood, flavoured with hazelnut, tarragon and local wines) on my way to Babylonstoren, one of the best hotels around, known for its spectacular setting and classy, contemporary conversions of old farm workers' cottages. An eight-acre kitchen garden, inspired by one the Dutch East India Company planted in the 17th century, fills larders at the **Babel** restaurant (+27 21 863 3852; www.babylonstoren.com; about £35 for two) with pretty much everything a cook could want. Chef Stefan Dunz transforms the daily harvest into such delights as a 'red' salad of pickled beetroot and turnip, with fresh radish, grapefruit, smoked trout and toasted macadamia nuts; or citrus-glazed lamb served with grilled satsuma and rhubarb. All served with homemade cordials (pomegranate and thyme; yellow plum and geranium) and fine Babylonstoren wines.

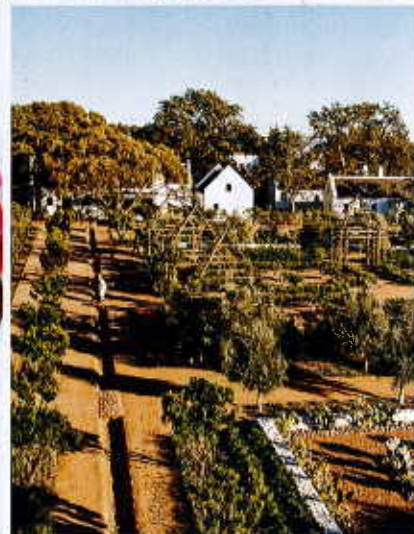
In town, **Reuben's** (+27 21 876 3772; www.reubens.co.za; about £35 for two) is the flagship restaurant of South African

celebrity chef Reuben Riffel, who worked his way up from waiter, through lowly kitchen ranks, to opening three restaurants in the Cape. On the day I visit, he's away overseeing the launch of a fourth, in Paternoster. But the simple values Riffel learned watching his grandmother, mother and aunts cook, is still at the core of his cooking. I try his butter-soft pickled tongue, then braised neck of lamb in a *waterblommetjie* sauce, the lamb rich with the herbs, grasses and wild shrubs munched in the Karoo semi-desert.

'My golden rule is never over-complicate a dish,' says Riffel, when I catch up with him later. 'Overworked food is a tragedy.' Abundant produce, family recipes and a library of cookbooks are his inspiration. 'I never had the means to travel,' he says. 'Cookbooks allowed me to get into the minds of chefs worldwide.' Now young South African chefs are 'researching their own food heritage, growing more and more confident, and



There's a story behind each dish. The lamb is from a farmer who plays his animals classical music; the butter is from a cow called Daisy



Clockwise from top left: Cape Town's Cellars-Hohenort hotel; citrus-glazed lamb with grilled satsuma and rhubarb at Babel; the gardens at Babylonstoren; red salad (beetroot, turnip, radish, grapefruit, smoked trout) at Babel. Opposite, fishing boats at Paternoster

that's where the future lies – in a more authentic South African cuisine,' he says.

Across the way, at **The Tasting Room** (+27 21 876 2151; www.lqf.co.za; about £100 for two) in Franschoek's delightful Le Quartier Français hotel, star chef Margot Janse seems of the same mind – although her fanciful, fearless style is a world away from Riffel's. 'I truly believe in South Africa,' she says. 'First and foremost a chef should ask, "where are we?" You have to have your own identity. We need to celebrate what we have here, all the indigenous produce. We're African.'

Janse began her career at **Ciro Molinaro's La Cucina di Ciro** in Johannesburg, let loose in a kitchen by a chef who spotted her potential. 'The important thing is that I was allowed to play,' she says. 'Food is not just a nice bowl with a filling, there's a story, a soul behind each dish.' That playfulness shines through that evening in the restaurant's 'surprise menu'. There's a faux mussel with a shell made of cocoa butter, seaweed that is in fact shredded kale, toasted crumbs that are really seaweed and charcoal aioli (a nod to the

South African obsession with the barbecue). The lamb is from a farmer who plays his animals classical music, the butter is from a favourite cow. 'Her name's Daisy,' says the waitress, as she delivers mealie bread (maize bread) cooked in a leftover tin can ('the way we do it at home'). The flavours are exhilarating – nettle soup with a zap of passion fruit; soft beetroot sponge with a zing of dill-and-cucumber granita – so much so I keep forgetting to drink my wine. I am transported.

ON THE ROAD AGAIN, I drop in on Steenberg wine estate in Cape Town's smart suburb of Constantia, where self-taught Brad Ball has been impressing residents with an unpretentious brasserie-style menu at **Bistro Sixteen82** (+27 21 713 2211; www.steenberg-vineyards.co.za; about £30 for two). There are no barrel-lined walls and candle-lit wooden tables here; instead the bistro takes its design cue from the stainless-steel vats of 21st-century wine-making, towering at one end, with bright light, clean lines, whites

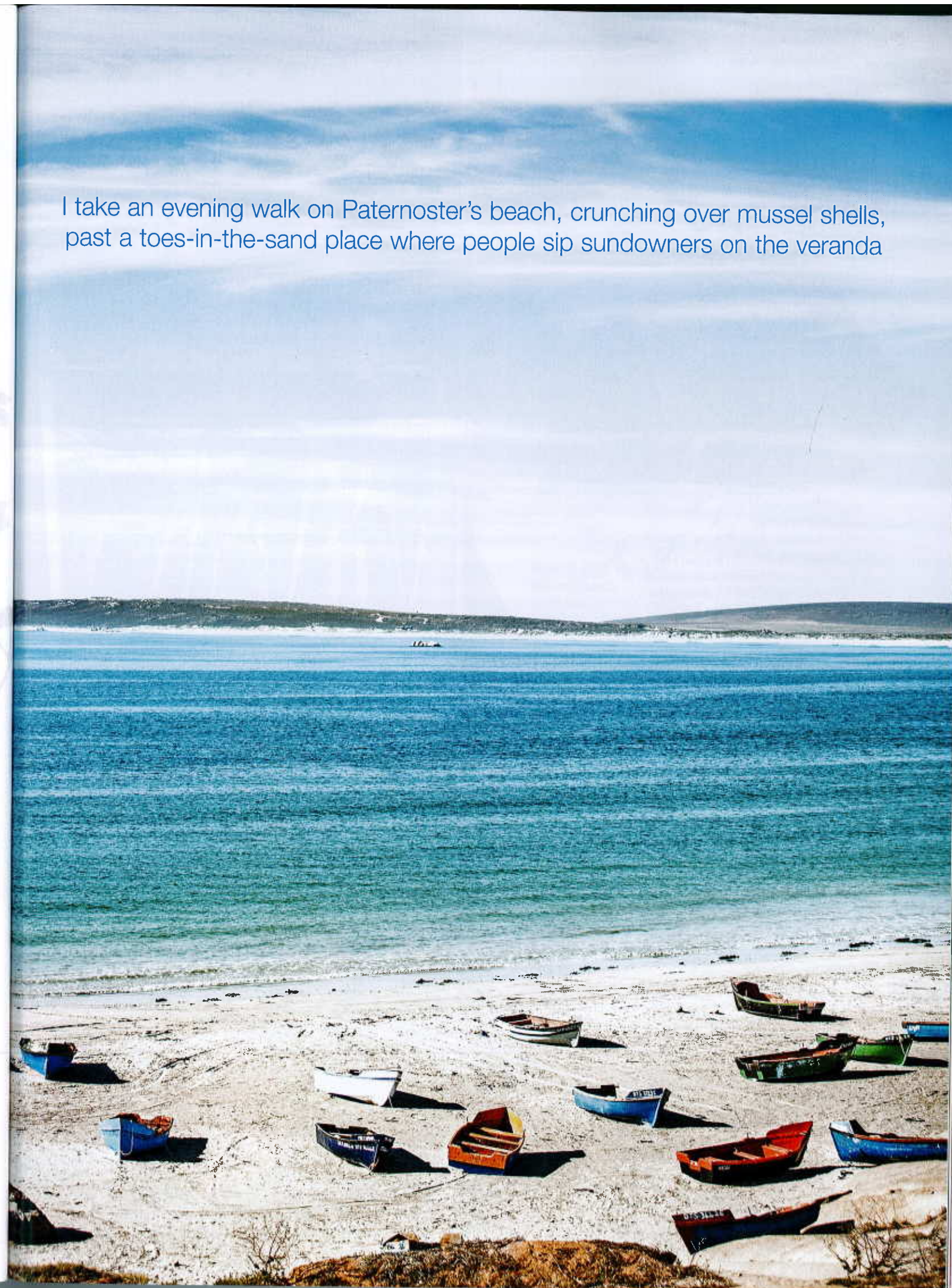
and greys. The food, too, is unfussy, subtle, with an occasional cheeky touch: perfectly cooked Cape whiting with a Chardonnay-butter sauce; a creamy mushroom risotto with a crunchy sprinkling of puffed rice. It is a perfect, quiet note after the fanfares of the previous few days.

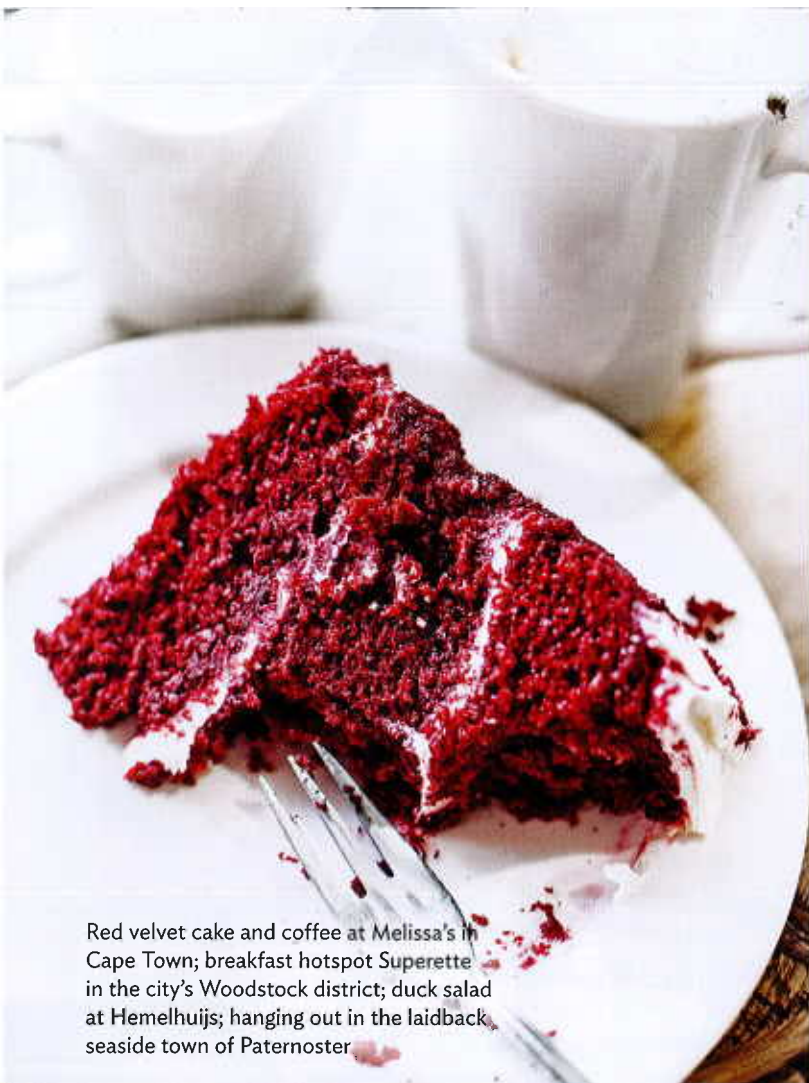
Closer to town, also in Constantia, behind Table Mountain, **The Greenhouse** (+27 21 794 2149; www.petertempelhoff.com/the-greenhouse; about £60 for two), trails a shower of stars and 'best restaurant' awards at the quietly elegant Cellars-Hohenort hotel. Chef Peter Tempelhoff shot from cookery school in Cape Town, through the kitchens of Marco Pierre White (Quo Vadis) and Giorgio Locatelli (Zafferano) in London, to the top job at Automat in Mayfair, before returning to South Africa. 'I'm a classicist at heart,' he says, 'but I like to keep innovating.' Witness the Springbok Wellington on the menu: no ordinary meat-and-mushroom pastry this, but an old-style dish brought vibrantly up to date, by delicacy of touch, flair in presentation and some very new flavours. It's offset with a puree of pear and rooibos, a pairing that seems so natural it's as if the chef had discovered, rather than invented it. There's ostrich tartare, wrapped with sublime skill in a sliver of avocado, and a wild Arniston oyster. 'Take it slowly, chew on it,' advises the waiter. He's right. It has a firm, grape-like texture, and releases its taste teasingly.

'If South African produce doesn't inspire you as a chef, there's something wrong with you,' says Tempelhoff. 'I love playing around with ideas, saying to the guys in the kitchen "I've found this new ingredient, try this pairing," and seeing what they come up with.' Tonight, rooibos (best known as a bush tea) makes an appearance not only in the pear puree, but flavouring the butter, and as a foam of faux egg white (in a real egg shell on a straw nest, the 'yolk' made of tangerine sorbet).

The boundlessly energetic Luke Dale-Roberts vies with Peter Tempelhoff in Cape Town gastro-gossip for the 'hottest chef in town' title. Born in the UK, Luke trained in Switzerland and honed his skills in Elena's L'Etoile in London's Soho, before whirring his way through Australia and Asia, from Singapore to Seoul, sucking up flavours, ideas and inspiration as he went. 'I have an insatiable appetite for new things,' he says, 'I just can't keep still.' At **The Test Kitchen** (+27 21 447 2337; www.thetestkitchen.co.za; about

I take an evening walk on Paternoster's beach, crunching over mussel shells, past a toes-in-the-sand place where people sip sundowners on the veranda





Red velvet cake and coffee at Melissa's in Cape Town; breakfast hotspot Superette in the city's Woodstock district; duck salad at Hemelhuijs; hanging out in the laidback, seaside town of Paternoster



MAP: MARIKO JESSE

£60 for two), in a former biscuit factory in the Woodstock neighbourhood, crayfish is cooked live at the table in concrete balls, on charcoal embers sprinkled with cinnamon and vanilla. 'Taste, taste, taste, that's my mantra,' says Luke. 'I have stacks of ideas, and now I can just do it. But with cooking, as with any art, what you're doing should represent who you are and what you've done, not what you want to be.'

Dale-Roberts recently opened **The Pot Luck Club** (+27 21 447 0804; www.thepotluckclub.co.za; about £25 for two), on top of the biscuit factory's former grain silo. The menu draws on his Asian experience with Eastern-influenced dishes served in small, tapas-like portions. 'Tapas should be crunchy, have zing and power,' says Dale-Roberts, 'the food here is not conceptual like at The Test Kitchen.' I choose smoked beef fillet in a chocolatey truffle-*café-au-lait* jus and grilled kingklip (cusk eel) with an intense, Thai-style pepper sauce. The food is sublime and the view – over the red roofs of Woodstock to Table Mountain – magnificent.

Afterwards, I walk through once-dodgy Woodstock, now the hippest quarter in town where farm-to-table breakfast spot Superette has been joined by cafés, galleries and interior-design shops. The 30 spices of the kingklip sauce at The Pot Luck Club still linger on my tongue. Flavours from the past few days float back to me. Some of those dishes, I know, will be lodged in my memory for a very long time. And they are a far cry from quail eggs in turtle aspic. 🍴

WHERE TO STAY
Strandloper Ocean Boutique Hotel
 This charmingly run hotel is set on the edge of Paternoster, with some rooms opening directly onto the dunes. Expect great breakfasts and restrained modern design with the odd indigenous touch. +27 22 752 2237; www.strandloperocean.com. Doubles from about £95
Babylonstoren Farm Hotel
 A collection of 12 beautifully converted workers' cottages on a working wine farm near Franschhoek, with a sensationally laid out formal kitchen garden. +27 21 863 3852; www.babylonstoren.com. Doubles from about £200
The Cellars-Hohenort
 An elegant Relais & Châteaux hotel set in a large and beautiful garden in Cape Town's Constantia. Classic chic decor gets subtle tweaks with eye-catching fabrics and curious objets. +27 21 794 2137; www.collectionmcgrath.com/cellars. Doubles from about £185



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WHERE ELSE TO EAT
Bistrot Bizerca

In the heart of town and with a great lunchtime courtyard, Chef Laurent Deslandes' dishes (pig's trotter meat in crispy filo pastry, with seared scallops and enoki mushroom salad) bring Gallic flair without pretence. 98 Shortmarket Street, Heritage Square, Cape Town (+27 21 423 8888; www.bizerca.com). About £35 for two

Superette
 Media types, the Google gang (their office is nearby) and other hipsters drop in for working breakfasts – mushrooms on sourdough rye toast, home-made cranberry granola – lunch or coffee, in an industrial-canteen setting. 66 Albert Road, Woodstock, Cape Town (+27 21 802 5525; www.superette.co.za). About £10 for two

Hemelhuijs
 Stylish, soothing city-centre spot where you can venture out on artichoke, smoked trout and courgette soup, or settle back to the whoppingly good hamburger with tomato relish, creamed mushrooms and rocket. 71 Waterkant Street, Cape Town (+27 21 418 2042; www.hemelhuijs.co.za). About £10 for two

Tamboers Winkel

Theo van Niekerk recreates the atmosphere of his grandparents' farm kitchen, with a concrete floor and one long wooden table for chunky breakfasts and wholesome farm fare (an epic organic roast chicken with seasonal veg). 3 De Lorentz Street, Cape Town (+27 21 424 0521; www.tamboerswinkel.com). About £15 for two

FOR FOOD TO TAKE BACK WITH YOU

Wine at the Mill is stocked with new-generation, non-mainstream South African wines usually only available at the cellar door. *The Old Biscuit Mill*, Woodstock, Cape Town (+27 83 357 9353; www.wineatthemill.com)

Melissa's is an excellent one-stop deli for biltong, konfyt, rooibos iced tea and a host of other South African delectables. *Constantia Courtyard*, Constantia Village, Main Road, Cape Town (+27 21 794 4696; www.melissas.co.za)

GETTING TO THE WESTERN CAPE

Scott Dunn (+44 20 8682 5070; www.scottdunn.com) offers a seven-night trip to South Africa's Western Cape, including two nights at Strandloper Ocean Lodge in Paternoster, three nights at Cellars-Hohenort and two nights at Babylonstoren, from £2,975 per person. This is based on two people sharing on a bed-and-breakfast basis and includes return economy flights, taxes and car hire. Special thanks to Cape Town-based travel specialist **Law Rod** (+27 82 888 1134; www.lawrod.com) for his invaluable advice.