

# Cape of plenty

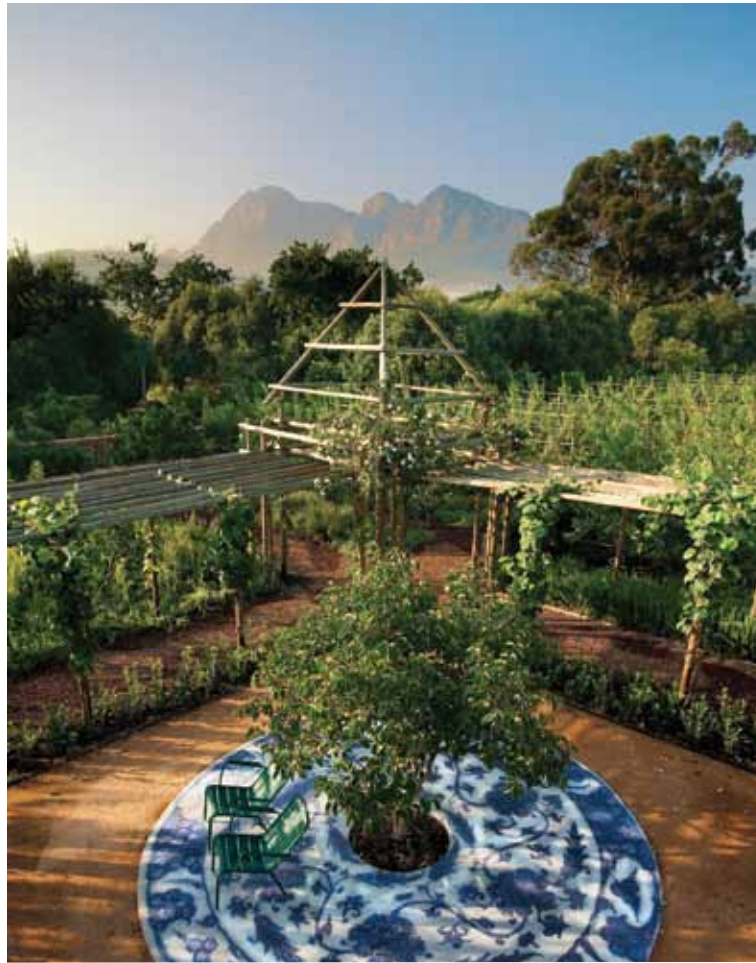
*While Cape Town's tourists head south on the Garden Route, locals go north to enjoy the Western Cape's outstanding gastronomy. The setting may be laid-back and rustic, but the food takes itself seriously / By Stephanie Plentl*

Capetonians are a gastronomically discerning clique. Their palates are honed not only by living in the culinary capital of South Africa – a fertile hub that provisioned passing ships as the halfway point on the Spice Route during the 17th century – but by virtue of the world-renowned vineyards on their doorstep.

Intriguing then, that these gourmands head north out of Cape Town for a quick gastro-getaway – to a veritable blind spot for south-bound, Garden Route-focused tourists. Paternoster, a tiny unspoiled fishing village, is only an hour up the western coast. Here, the plankton-rich, icy Benguela Current results in exceptionally rich fishing conditions and Capetonians are lured here for the staggering varieties of fish and seafood.

With its stretch of white sandy beach studded with colourful fishing boats, and the succession of low, whitewashed thatched cottages, this peaceful idyll bears an uncanny resemblance to Greece. But nothing here is as it seems: in Paternoster, fine-dining and avant-garde >

*Idyllic Babylonstoren, an old Cape Dutch farm that now welcomes guests. Its restaurant, Babel, serves food from the farm, including colour-coded salads (red, yellow or green)*



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:  
*Babylonstoren's produce growing against a mountain backdrop; the produce makes it to the breakfast plate; the hotel's tempting cheese shop; a suite at Bushmans Kloof; a safari retreat in the heart of the rooibos-growing region*

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gourmet experiences take place in lowly shack-chic, bohemian structures.

At a dusty crossroads in Paternoster's sparse centre, an unassuming farm shop harbours the first of the village's foodie magnets, the Oep ve Koep bistro. In a charming garden terrace bursting with bougainvillea, affable chef Kobus van der Merwe delights with an array of indigenous delicacies: think *bokkum* (salted, dried mullet) with creamy poached egg and sliced green apple, or calamari *bobotie* (a shepherd's pie-style dish, but with an omelette-like egg topping instead of mash). Dessert might be a sticky *koeksister* doughnut, a Dutch delicacy given extra flavour and spice (star anise, lemon peel and cinnamon) by the Cape Malay community. This is unusual comfort food, presented with panache.

To make the most of their unique ambience, Paternoster's two fine-dining restaurants are best visited at night. The Noisy Oyster's enchanting garden may be dotted with fire-pits and festooned with fairy lights and fishing paraphernalia, but it takes its menu very seriously. It's renowned for sea-sweet oysters, mussels, calamari and crayfish – the juicy, spiny lobster for which the West Coast is known.

Gaaitjie, meaning 'small hole' in Afrikaans, is a former fisherman's cottage, now gourmet restaurant, on Voorstrand beach. I took a

table on the *stoep* deck to watch the first blush of sunset while snacking on tin-baked bread with sesame seeds and caramelised onions served with pesto. With a spotlight on lesser-known local fish such as *snoek*, *alikeukel* and *maasbankers*, chef Suzy Holtzhausen also caters to carnivores with springbok carpaccio and crisp pork belly with leek mash and hot apple *moes* (mousse). Wines are ardently West Coast local.

An hour further north (allowing for crossing tortoises) is Muisbosskern, an open-air beach buffet lunch extravaganza. Set in a lowly thatched *boma* (enclosure) this is a two-hour feast of barbecued fish, seafood, stews and salads. The 90-minute drive inland – across the vast plains of Clanwilliam and through the epic Cederberg Mountains – gives time to reflect and digest.

Bushman's Kloof Wilderness reserve, a chic safari retreat, is almost invisibly nestled in the isolated heart of rooibos country. Rooibos (or red bush) is a natural herb unique to the Cederberg Mountains and is the plant from which the caffeine-free, antioxidant tea derives – an elixir that is one of the country's best-known products and accounts for an industry worth US\$23bn.

At Bushman's Kloof the versatile rooibos plant, which turns mahogany red on harvest, is used in the soap and spa treatments, cocktails and condiments, not to mention many of the restaurant menu items. Although none of the >



ABOVE: At Bushmans Kloof, guests can dine on a picturesque nearby plateau; as the sun drops, flaming torches and starlight take over

so-called 'big five' roam the expansive surrounds, the majestic landscape is rich with oryx, antelope and springbok as well as delicate ancient rock art by indigenous hunter-gatherers. After a day surveying the humbling bushveld on safari, guests are driven to a plateau lit by flaming torches for a white-tablecloth *braai* (barbecue) under the Milky Way.

In the heart of the Cape Winelands, beyond the fruit orchards of Ceres on the route back to Cape Town, lies the ultimate kitchen garden, Babylonstoren. Structured with centimetre-exact precision, this entirely organic eco-enterprise comprises of eight acres of diverse fruit trees, vegetables and over 300 edible plant species. Forming the centrepiece of a unique hotel, individual historic farmhouses have been restored and given a minimalist redesign by owner Karen Roos, a former editor of *Elle Decoration*. Several of the houses feature private glass kitchens that encroach on the garden, so

guests can harvest food and cook it themselves or invite chefs from the hotel restaurant, Babel, to demonstrate. Farm to fork has never been closer.

The kaleidoscopic variety of produce has prompted the salads to be colour-coded: red, yellow or green. A red salad of beetroot, pomegranate, aubergine and cabbage might be followed by a main course of local smoked trout in lemon butter with melon, viognier grapes and fresh poppy seeds. At a private outdoor table with a panorama of the Drakenstein valley mountains, a Gorgonzola and rosemary crème brûlée with cabernet balsamic syrup and Serrano ham crisp rounds off an exceptional experience.

Babylonstoren is a climactic finale to a five-day tour of the Western Cape's beach and bushveld. Here, in this small corner of South Africa, dedicated artisans are quietly showcasing unique local produce with intriguing concepts and inventive flair. It's little wonder that Capetonians are hooked. 

To Escape To (020 7060 6747, [www.toescapeto.com](http://www.toescapeto.com)) is a locally based South Africa specialist. It creates tailor-made experiences using on-the-ground knowledge, compiled into a personal itinerary booklet and app containing invaluable tips and information for your trip. They can arrange a package including two nights in Camps Bay Retreat (Cape Town), two nights in Paternoster Dunes Boutique Hotel, one night at Bushmans Kloof (full board and activities) and two nights in Babylonstoren, on a B&B basis for two people sharing. The price is £1,895 per person including flights on British Airways to Cape Town from Heathrow, and car hire.