

ESTATE *of grace*

In a valley just outside Cape Town, Franschhoek continues the vinous tradition of its Huguenot settlers. *Jennifer Byrne* checks in to Grande Provence estate for a taste of South Africa's capital of food and wine.

PHOTOGRAPHY SHARYN CAIRNS





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**STEELING
BEAUTY**

The public wine-tasting area at Grande Provence Heritage Wine Estate, Franschhoek. Opposite: view of the Drakenstein mountain range from the Manor House at Grande Provence.



Near the southern tip of Africa, where the Atlantic and Indian oceans meet, lies a fertile valley surrounded by dark mountains, the Drakenstein range – bare, jagged and crazy-steep, like a child’s drawing of what mountains should be.

Once, only elephants lived here, lumbering up and down the rocky, narrow passes. But a few centuries ago, in one of those strange twists of history, this remote valley then governed by the Dutch East India Company became a refuge for a small group of Huguenots fleeing religious persecution.

They found a place of perfect safety. And the Dutch authorities found their perfect frontier community. The Huguenots had a fierce work ethic and knew wine terroir when they saw it. They escaped the turbulence of late-17th century France to carve out a glorious new wine country. Olifantschoek, Dutch for Elephant’s Corner, evolved into the fabled valley of Franschhoek, the French Corner – the undisputed wine and food capital of South Africa.

Scarcely an hour’s drive from Cape Town, the town of Franschhoek lures international tourists and locals alike to its vineyards, celebrated restaurants and historic houses, with gardens so very beautiful, and roots so old, it feels as though you’ve traversed those dark mountains to enter a fairytale.

The mood remains chic and cheekily French; I swear I saw a man whistling along the main street

of town in a striped T-shirt, with a beret, carrying a baguette. Almost all the estates bear grand French names – though the latest property to change hands might find itself known as Virgin Mont Rochelle, having been bought in 2014 by Sir Richard Branson.

The architectural style of the valley is Cape Dutch: wooden, white, with square-paned windows and distinctive gables, and elegant courtyards surrounded by climbing roses. It’s a vivid green in the growing season but I visit in April when the last grapes are coming off the vines and the valley is changing colour to gentle gold and brown. The mountains are wreathed in cloud in the mornings. The air smells of lavender.

Our destination is the venerable estate of Grande Provence, a 30-hectare property with a farmhouse built by one of the original Huguenot asylum-seekers more than 300 years ago. Since 2004 it’s been managed by entrepreneur Alex van Heeren, whose vision also gave rise to Huka Lodge near Taupo on New Zealand’s North Island, and Dolphin Island in Fiji.

On arrival, he gathers us in front of the fire in the library of the estate’s vast Owner’s Cottage – with space for 10, it’s some cottage – and promises we’ll experience the best of Franschhoek in the next few days: from wine-tastings and fine meals to lessons on filleting and curing salmon from The Restaurant’s chef.

Occupying the Cottage’s suite is a promising start: ostrich-leather desk, an acreage of bed, charcoal-coloured slate bathroom and a handsome lead-cut decanter of Port in my own elegant sitting-room.

When van Heeren discovered the place, he tells me, it was in a “highly dilapidated state... not so much a hotel as a winery which could take guests”. New Zealand-born designer Virginia Fisher was enlisted – her work vaulted Huka Lodge into the top rank of lodges – and a three-year renovation launched. He poured energy into revitalising the vineyards and then chose to make Franschhoek his primary home. “It’s the quality of life and light. Of design,” van Heeren says, “and of dealing with so many different cultures – from Zulus to Europeans to Cape Malays – all starting with that original nine or so Huguenot families.”

This sense of history permeates the Grande Provence estate, though that simple Huguenot farm from 1694 is now almost unrecognisably grand, with tearooms, a sculpture garden and an award-winning restaurant, where meals of gorgeous complexity are created by executive chef Darren Badenhorst. All the meals are extraordinary, including springbok with porcini brûlée and a slow-braised Karoo lamb pastilla, though the repeat order for me is a dish of mushrooms foraged from the forest, with pine and acorn panna cotta, pickled wild mustard, confit tomato, cucumber tartare, and “essence of the forest”, the smoke of essential oils trapped under a cloche, which tastes just like autumn.

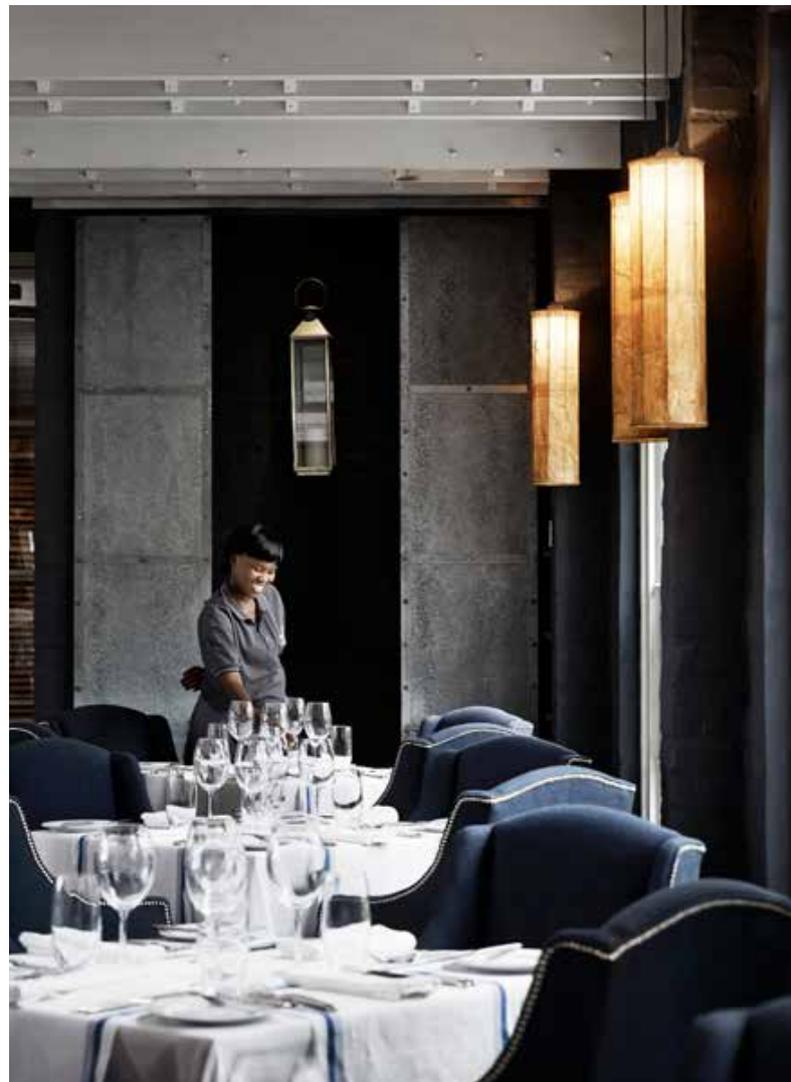
Late one morning, Durban-born Badenhorst brings a mighty salmon to our cottage for the promised lesson on filleting and curing. The result is delicious>

VALLEY HIGHS

Above: the driveway to Grande Provence Heritage Wine Estate. Opposite, clockwise from top: the lounge in The Owner’s Cottage; The Restaurant at Grande Provence; poolside at The Owner’s Cottage.



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and, I venture to suggest, possibly unrepeatable by an amateur. He laughs sympathetically. "I've always leaned to the elaborate, the exotic. When I started cooking at about eight, I remember my mother looking over my shoulder and saying, 'maybe a bit too much happening there'."

Sharing van Heeren's vision is chief winemaker Karl Lambour, who came to Grande Provence just three years ago but is linked by blood: his forebears were among those who fled France for Holland after the religious wars that erupted in the wake of the Edict of Nantes in 1598, and moved later to Franschhoek. We take a tour of the cellars and spend a happy hour in Lambour's tasting room, one of the estate's oldest and grandest buildings.

The wines we taste range from a chenin blanc, notable for its backbone and structure, and a highly aromatic viognier, once one of the rarer grape species, which now thrives in Franschhoek's microclimate. Blended and aged in French oak, these two varieties create the flagship Grande Provence White, the winner of a swag of awards.

Days are filled by a rich combination of pleasures: cycling or sauntering around the estate in the morning, admiring the manicured vines, then raising a glass at sunset under the trees in a lush courtyard. Or in the public tasting area beside the restaurant, with its galvanised steel bar and tractor-seat stools.

We see "wild" baboons in the foothills of the Drakenstein – so wild we have to hoot the horn to get them off the road – and ride on a *Puffing Billy*-style

Wine Tram, designed to transport visitors between vineyards and tastings in sober style.

We read books in The Owner's Cottage library. Taste more wine. Explore the sculpture garden and face temptation in The Gallery, a showcase for established and emerging artists working in paint, jewellery, textiles, and exquisite handicrafts from around Africa (I succumbed and bought a carved leather-and-steel knife from Benin).

The night before we leave, we call on van Heeren at his private residence, the Manor House: big-boned and timber-lined, impeccably furnished, books everywhere, with a private terrace and pool from which we can see to the end of the valley, with the mountains behind.

Several times I've heard singing around the property – true, operatic singing. It's the voice of Deborah Wai Kapohe, one of New Zealand's most acclaimed musical performers and also a guest at Grande Provence. She's keeping up her practice.

Would she perform for us, I ask? Just a taste. After dinner she arrives at our cottage with the offer of a song popular in her homeland, she says, with outdoor types. In front of the fireplace she sings – gloriously, with vibrato – "The Happy Wanderer". Best version of the song I've ever heard. ●

THE FINE PRINT

GETTING THERE

Qantas flies direct from Sydney to Johannesburg; connect to Cape Town on South African Airways or British Airways. Franschhoek is 75 kilometres west of Cape Town.

STAY

Grande Provence Heritage Wine Estate
Rooms at The Owner's Cottage at Grande Provence cost from \$253 per person per night twin share, including breakfast, tour of The Gallery, wine tasting and cellar tours. Exclusive use for up to 10 guests costs from \$1,965 for the first couple, and \$150 for each additional guest, and includes Cape Town airport transfers. Spa treatments, dining, regional tours and cooking classes can be arranged at extra cost.
Main Rd, Franschhoek 7690, Western Cape, South Africa, +27 21 876 8600, grandeprovence.co.za



FOR ART'S SAKE

The sculpture garden at Grande Provence estate. Opposite, clockwise from left: upstairs bedroom in The Owner's Cottage; waiter Foster Soko serves Grande Provence White 2014; The Gallery; rose and white chocolate macaron with caramelised white chocolate mousse and cotton-candy ice-cream at The Restaurant.