



One of Cabernet & Carne's waiters, Taux Jongwe, at the entrance to the restaurant



Cabernet & Carne: Old cottage atmosphere

FOOD

WINTER WINELANDS WONDER

The name says it all at Cabernet & Carne, a pop-up restaurant inspired by Paris's famous l'Entrecôte

Carrie Hampton

● The name Cabernet & Carne implies two things: red wine and meat. And both are done exceptionally well at this new winter pop-up restaurant in Vergelegen Wine Estate in Somerset West.

The lunchtime-only restaurant takes its inspiration from Paris's famous l'Entrecôte, whose reputation for a single-course menu of steak frites and simple salad has people queuing down the street. Like its muse, Cabernet & Carne tops its succulent sirloin with Café de Paris butter, a perfect balance of savoury flavours hinting at tarragon, anchovy, garlic and mild curry. The steak is served with perfect French fries and a crisp two-ingredient salad of leaves and finely sliced radish with a herby honey-mustard dressing. Simple perfection.

Executive chef Michelle Barry has taken distinctive French flavours and incorporated South African country cuisine into a menu so short

there are no decision dilemmas. Soup is followed by a beef, chicken or vegetarian dish, one dessert and coffee. The wine, specifically paired with the food, is Last Word cabernet sauvignon 2019 and premium chardonnay 2023. *Klaar.*

Ouma's traditional soup starter is a robust bean potage, with or without beef and marrow bone, served with thick slices of farm bread. Perfect for a winter's day in an old shepherd's hut along a track from Vergelegen's main wine tasting and restaurant area.

Drive if you must, but walking lets you appreciate the grandeur of this 320-year-old estate. The post-prandial stroll goes some way towards offsetting the indulgence of a long, lazy lunch.

Was this little building, with its breathtaking mountain backdrop on the boundary of an arboretum, really a shepherd's hut? Knowing the farm's history since 1700, with just five careful owners, probably not. But those thick stone walls and tiny rooms hung with drying veld herbs and flowers and featuring a blazing fireplace set the scene for this narrative. As Mark Twain said: "Never let the truth get in the way of a good story."

There's a huge picture of a gentleman gamekeeper with flat cap, shotgun, loyal spaniel and a brace of pheasants, lording it over the small, limewashed dining room. In contrast with his colonial presence, the waiter, Simba, is equally imposing, with dreadlocked hair under his flat cap, dark glasses and a leather apron. He poses for a photograph while proffering Vergelegen's cabernet sauvignon.

Covid comeback

General manager Wayne Coetzer took the helm at Vergelegen just as Covid hit, and had plenty of time to roam the 3,000ha estate, which includes 1,900ha of nature reserve, dotted with eland, wildebeest, hartebeest, bontebok, quagga and endemic fynbos. Coetzer sees commercial potential through the eyes of an aesthete, and when he thinks there's a better use for a building, he makes something new and beautiful of it. Like the Rose Terrace Tea Room, which overlooks the formal rose garden. It went from a meeting room for the current owners, Anglo American, to a magical space filled with fantastical confections for a perfect morning or afternoon tea.

One idea brought on during the Covid madness was The Nguni Café, which served gourmet hot dogs with the occasional bovine whiff from the cow herd munching on hay nearby. "Gourmet" was stretching it, but it proved a popular family novelty until it was time to be replaced with this year's brainchild, a much more classy culinary affair.

Cabernet & Carne is also a seasonal offering, ending in Au-

gust. A glassed gazebo has been added to the entrance of the old cottage, with an open-view galley filled with winter sunlight. The kitchen is fly-by-night basic, all that's needed for such a carefully crafted menu. If vegetarians come to a carnivore restaurant — "It's in the name, darling" — there's a delicious au-

bergine schnitzel with chimichurri sauce and spatchcock baby chicken caters for non-red-meat eaters. But most diners come for the juicy steak and the unlimited chips. The side salad acts as a palate cleanser, *à la Français*, at the end of the meal, readying the taste buds for the next course.

Old-fashioned *sousluitjes* (cinnamon dumplings) are topped with a crème brûlée custard — and they really do melt in the mouth. To end this *lekker* South African meal, an enamel mug of black *moerkoffie* arrives, together with a little jug of condensed milk. My dining companion gulped this shot of silky sweetness as a finale to a very *génial* meal. **X**

The writer was a guest of Cabernet & Carne. Open from noon, Wednesdays to Sundays. Reservations are essential. More information is available at www.vergelegen.co.za

