

7 BIG LITTLE REASONS TO VISIT ROBERTSON

Beyond the buzz of its popular festivals and famous wine estates, there's another story to the Robertson Wine Valley – a tale of big personalities who love celebrating the small things in life

PHOTOGRAPHS JAN RAS TEXT ANNETTE KLINGER



The Robertson Wine Valley's unique aspect and climate produces exceptional wines.

Once a year, as June approaches, the inevitable question on Capetonians' minds is: "Are we doing Wacky this year?" You see, there are no half measures when it comes to the Wacky Wine Weekend (1–4 June) when the valley – including Robertson, Ashton, Bonnievale and McGregor – welcomes a deluge of visitors who shuttle from farm to farm, making the most of their six tasting coupons per winery. There's so much more to this neck of the woods, though. For folks keen on enjoying Robertson closer to its natural laid-back state, the Slow Festival (4–6 August 2017) offers leisurely estate lunches and food and wine masterclasses. And, if you entertain fantasies of sipping champers on a boat (who doesn't?), Wine on the River (20–22 October) lets you catch a cruise on the Breede River between all your sipping and snacking. But one of the best times to visit is when there's nothing scheduled, locals are going about their business, and you can have this beautiful destination more or less to yourself.

robertsonwinevalley.com; wackywineweekend.com; robertsonslow.com; wineonriver.com

1. STAY IN THE LITTLE HOTEL THAT COULD

All architectural greys and crisp white *broekielace*, the Robertson Small Hotel might look like an old-world sophisticate from the outside, but inside this Victorian gal beats the heart of a hipster. Because, for all her 116 years, the building's new contempo-quirky interior suits her perfectly. The revamp, driven by owner Abigail Rands, has played up The Small's friendlier, more humorous side. "While the level of luxury is high, I didn't want the surroundings to intimidate or show off," says interior designer Sophie Ashby from Studio Ashby in London. Sophie, who is a childhood friend of Abigail's, collaborated with local young creatives including textile designer Alexis Barrell, ceramicist Michael Chandler and SMITH studio curator Amy Ellenbogen to breathe new life into the space, which includes ten en-suite rooms, a spa, a bar and a restaurant. "It's now full of art, design, colour and soul."

Abigail wanted the food to follow suit and steered the menu away from fiddly foams and gels. She asked Sophie's sister, Rose, who is a chef at Skye Gygnell's Spring restaurant in London, to consult and the result is food that leans heavily on seasonal produce and ingredients from the valley, including olive oil and tapenades from award-winning Marbrin Olives, rose geranium cordial from Owl's Rest lavender and olive farm, and wines from local estates.

Since March 2017, local chef Mariska Hennig has headed up the kitchen and has incorporated a modern bistro spin: hearty classics such as five-spice duck breast with celeriac mash, and beef fillet with garlic-and-onion purée, are elevated with refined, playful plating. It's a yin and yang echoed in, and complemented by, the décor. Tables are set with starched linen and silverware... and quirky ceramic cow, pig or horse sculptures to play real-life Farmville with when there's a lull in conversation. There are masculine custom-made leather-and-wood dining chairs, whimsical free-form ceramic lampshades, and a revolving collection of original art that appeals to fans of abstract minimalism and offbeat illustrations alike.

This is a place where painstaking attention has been paid to the details. Not the least of which is The Small Guide, a carefully curated mini-compendium of food and drink experiences that extend beyond wine tasting. The only catch? You have to check in to check out the whole guide.

therobertsonsmallhotel.com



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2. UNLEASH YOUR INNER BEEKEEPER

Farmer Redbeard – or Albertus van Zyl as he’s known to his friends – is one of the area’s best-kept secrets. Along with his wife, Pat, he lives for offering city slickers a slice of farm life. Whether this entails picking fruit in his orchard, harvesting and stomping grapes, or collecting honey from his hives (there are beekeeper suits to keep you sting free), depends on the season. If you’re more of a sit-back-and-watch type, take a tractor ride through the vineyards and up into a eucalyptus forest where you can chill out, sip on the farm’s small-batch wines or *moerkoffie* (brewed in an enamel pot on a camp fire) and enjoy a traditional bush braai. There’s even a converted red bus to crash in (things can get wild up there).

farmerredbeard.co.za

4. EAT ALL THE CHARCUTERIE (AND STOCK UP ON BREAKFAST WINE)

Businessman turned viticulturalist Theunis de Jongh is what you might call an autodidact in the field of wine-making, but that didn’t stop him from bagging a Michelangelo gold award for Kleinhoekkloof’s first ever Shiraz in 2014 (made to a soundtrack of Pink Floyd, no less). After completing a course under charcuterie king Neil Jewel (of Bread & Wine Restaurant fame), reading up and “watching a lot of YouTube videos,” Theunis started making his own bresaola, culatello, prosciutto, Italian-style salami, coppa and Spanish ham from locally sourced free-range pork to serve with the estate’s seven wines at the tasting room. Theunis’s daughter Danielle has subsequently joined him in the cellar, and maintains their Merlot rosé is the perfect partner for bacon (preferably theirs) and eggs. Breakfast wine? Genius.

kleinhoekkloof.co.za



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3. GET BEER FROM A STONE

The reason why the beers at Saggy Stone microbrewery are so chuggable, according to their maker Adrian Robinson? Spring water, from the top of the Langeberg mountains, filtered through moss and over granite. Of course it helps that Adrian knows his way around a brewery. And that the brewery is set in one of the most beautiful areas in the Nuy Valley. If you’re in a hurry, simply stop by to fill your car boot with California Steam, Big Red Ale, Desert Lager and Dark Horse (but don’t be, because you’ll miss the wood-fired pizza). saggystone.co.za

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5. CHANNEL QUEEN ELIZABETH I

Word is, QE1 thought no breakfast was royal enough unless there was some lavender conserve on the table. Knowing little tidbits like this comes with the territory if you happen to buy a lavender and olive farm, as Hedley and Patricia Manicorn did when they retired from the rat race. While Owl’s Rest’s main claim to fame is its essential oils and eco-friendly beauty and household products (all made by Hedley, a chemical engineer), there’s also a teeny-tiny café among the groves where you can make like a monarch and enjoy your lavender marmalade on freshly baked muffins (both made by Pat) with a cuppa. Oh, and their rose geranium cordial? Great with sparkling water; even better with gin. owlsrest.co.za



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7. STRIKE OIL

Robertson has several great olive oil producers worth a visit and Marbrin Olive Growers is a good place to start. Their intense extra virgin olive oil was recently named one of Absa’s top five in the country. Owner and olive-oil maker Clive Heymans is happy to take you through a tasting of the collection, which includes medium, mild and intense extra virgin olive oils (all cold pressed from a blend of Mission, Coratina, Frantoio and Leccino olives), infused truffle, chilli and saffron oils, tapenades and honey. With enough of his home-made focaccia for dipping and a shot of their limoncello if you’re brave enough. marbrin.co.za

6. MEET SA’S ANSWER TO COINTREAU

While Tanagra Private Cellar has no shortage of wines, you’ll want to stick around for the hard tack. Owner and winemaker Robert Rosenbach has quite a knack for distilling delicious single-variety grappas using grape skins from nearby Springfield Estate. When it’s not harvest time, he distills eau de vie from the peaches, apricots, quinces and lemons grown on the farm. He’s also turned his talents to making an orange liqueur that’s just begging to be flambéd in your next stack of crêpes Suzette. tanagrawines.co.za



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