

THE MAGIC OF ROBERTSON VALLEY

On a recent visit, Phakama Mbonambi saw how the wine estates in this region tap into their rich history and artistry to offer singularly pleasing wines

After a long, hard year, you may be wondering where to go to unwind over the festive season. Robertson Valley – just two hours from Cape Town – is a fantastic option. There’s plenty to do there and, as I discovered while spending three days there recently with friends, the valley produces a variety of sublime wines, of which the most impressive is Chardonnay.

Robertson Valley lies on the famous Route 62, which meanders between Cape Town and Oudtshoorn, the Langkloof and Port Elizabeth, offering a shorter, more scenic alternative to the N2 highway. The towns of Ashton, Bonnievale, McGregor, Montagu and Robertson are nestled in the valley.

With such a wide variety of wonderful wine estates to choose from, where do you start? Here’s how our trip unfolded...

Day 1 Rooiberg Winery

We started at Rooiberg Winery, situated on the R60 just outside Robertson. It’s famous for its range of award-winning creations, such as the Pinotage Reserve,

Chardonnay Reserve, Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve, Chenin Blanc, Alexkia Merlot Reserve, Shiraz Reserve and the award-winning Muscadel.

We were treated to a wonderful food and wine pairing, and visitors can also enjoy freshly baked pastries and breads at the on-site Bodega de Vinho restaurant. Situated close to Rooiberg’s entrance is a giant red chair – billed as Africa’s biggest chair – onto which visitors can climb (with the help of a ladder) to enjoy unparalleled views of the area around the estate. www.rooiberg.co.za

Zandvliet Estate

Next we trooped to Zandvliet Estate on the outskirts of the valley. It’s known as the home of Shiraz, upholding a tradition going back to the 1870s, and has won numerous awards for this varietal. In addition to Shiraz and Chardonnay, Zandvliet also produces white and red blends, Rosé and Vintage Liqueur Wine that’s made from Shiraz and is known on the farm as “*very lekker wyn*”. We sampled the wines in the comfort of the recently revamped and sumptuously decorated Kalkveld Lounge.

The estate belongs to ANB Investments, owners of



© Marne Marais

Right: The famous Rooiberg Red Chair.



© Marne Marais

the ClemenGold and Citrogold citrus brands – a huge producer of naartjies and clementines. Clementines are cultivated on the land and are added to a range of delightful, handcrafted products – gin, honey, marmalade and chocolate – to give them a wonderful citrus zing. Whether it’s sampling Chardonnay with marmalade or trying a Shiraz with a chocolate or, perhaps, a Muscat with biscotti, pairing products with the right wine is a delightful exercise here. www.zandvliet.co.za

Windfall Wine Farm

Later we headed to the boutique Windfall Wine Farm in the Agterkliphogte Valley. The place is an absolute gem. The tasting room, set beyond a rolling lawn, is tastefully decorated and when we got there in the late afternoon, the estate was enveloped in stillness.

Windfall produces small quantities of Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Noir, a red blend, a Méthode Cap Classique and a sparkling wine from Chardonnay grapes (Blanc de Blanc), as well as a brandy called The Hunter. We did another wine tasting and food pairing, this time with a platter of cold meats, cheeses, crackers and an assortment of fruit.

Property developer Robert Alexander owns the farm and Kobus van der Merwe is the winemaker. All

the estate’s wines are superbly smooth and refined, pairing well with food. Every sip tells you that you’re drinking a special boutique wine. By the time we arrived at the Four Cousins Restaurant for dinner, the wine was happily coursing through my veins and, by the time I went to bed I was thoroughly exhausted, but also entirely relaxed. www.windfallwine.co.za

Day 2 Excelsior Wine Estate

Breakfast at Graze at Excelsior Wine Estate – owned by the De Wet family since 1870 – was followed by a tour of the farm, where three categories of wine –

Reserve Range, Classic Range and Purebred Range – are produced. Not only can you sample the various blends, but you can also create your own red blend, then bottle and label it in the tasting room beside the farm’s dam. It’s a simple and rewarding exercise and a guide is always on hand to help. www.excelsior.co.za



Above: Excelsior Estate.

Right: Kibali, from Windfall Wine Farm.

Weltevrede Estate

Our next stop was Weltevrede Estate in Bonnievale, which has been in the hands of the Jonker family for four generations, since 1912. In a candlelit underground tasting cellar built a century ago, we sampled a range of the estate’s wines: the Weltevrede 1912 Chardonnay, the Weltevrede 1912



Left: Jan Harmsgat Country House.

Below: Weltevrede Estate's underground cellars.

© Andy Lund



It was time to move on to Esona, a small boutique wine estate nestled beside the Breede River, where wine-making is an almost sacred activity.

Cabernet Sauvignon, a Méthode Cape Classique called Entheos Chardonnay-Pinot Noir and Bedrock Black Syrah, as well as two heritage wines (Oupa se Wyn and Ouma se Wyn) that were created in honour of the Jonkers' ancestors. The estate excels at Chardonnay due to the calcareous soils and shale-rock slopes between Bonnievale and Robertson.

With its pale golden colour and intense flavours of ripe lemons and

dried mango with a chalky finish, the Weltevrede 1912 Chardonnay was definitely a winner for me. "Weltevrede", an Afrikaans word meaning "well satisfied", summed up our feelings as we trooped out of the underground darkness into the glorious sunshine, ready to sample yet another jewel somewhere else in the valley.
www.weltevrede.com

Esona Boutique Wines

It was time to move on to Esona, a small boutique wine estate nestled beside the Breede River, where winemaking is an almost sacred activity. Run by husband-and-wife team Rowan and Caryl Beattie, the estate produces small batches of delectable wine from its single vineyard.

The estate began operating in 2004 and its first bottle

hit the market in 2010. The Beatties haven't looked back, delighting wine lovers with their delectable wines. A small team, which knows every vine through their hand-picking of the grapes, maintains the farm.

An old cellar has been converted into a tasting venue where we did a Taste the Difference pairing that included two vintages of Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay and Shiraz with comparisons between Joker glasses and Riedel grape-specific glasses, paired with fruit preserves and chocolates. Even the background music was paired with each cultivar. The estate's range includes Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Shiraz and Pinot Noir Blanc de Noir.

"Esona", a isiXhosa word meaning "the very one" – is a perfect description of the vintages made with such dedication and love. Upstairs, on a deck surrounded by vineyards and overlooking the river, we sampled cheeses, breads and fruit at Caryl's Deli. www.esona.co.za

Jan Harmsgat Country House (JHG)

Our journey took us to Jan Harmsgat Country House at the foothills of the Langeberg Mountain, just off the R62 to Swellendam. This historic Cape Dutch farmstead is famous for its wines created from single blocks of the vineyards, which, according to Mitch Boy, head of wine at Jan Harmsgat, means "the wines are of a higher quality because smaller volumes are produced, allowing you to track each bottle of wine back to the vineyard it came from". ➤

To give the wine its dynamic flavour, JHG uses spontaneous fermentation and no enzymes in the vinification process, which may cause sediment to occur in some of the bottles. Far from being a problem, this is a sign of authenticity.

The estate's signature wine is the Pinotage. Other equally stunning varietals are Shiraz, Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay.

Founded in 1723, Jan Harmsgat Country House epitomises country luxury. Whether it's breakfast or dinner, all the produce served at the Amy Restaurant is sourced from the estate. In addition to exploring the delightful garden or taking a dip in the pool, JHG visitors can pack a picnic basket and relax or read a book under the pecan trees.

Day 3

The day of departure eventually arrived. We were a little sad to leave the valley, but, truth be told, never before had I consumed so much wine in such a short period. I feared a *phuza* face! After a delicious, cold country breakfast at JHG – the pomegranate juice being a standout – we took a tour of the vineyards in a 4x4.

Several hours later we packed and began our journey home, stopping briefly on the way at Van Loveren Family Vineyards and Four Cousins for yet more wine tasting. In the end my poor tastebuds refused any more wine and I opted for a 12-year-old blended Scotch from the Four Cousins empire, but this nectar, we were told, is made by a fifth cousin in Scotland. www.vanloveren.co.za and www.fourcousins.co.za



EVEN MORE REASONS TO VISIT

Mira Weiner, owner of Hot Oven Marketing, a boutique PR and destination marketing agency for travel, tourism and wine in South Africa, has been a resident of Robertson Valley for many years. She knows the superb hospitality of the Robertson Valley all too well.

Why should wine-lovers come to Robertson Valley?

The Robertson Valley offers incredible country hospitality and the stories of generations of winemakers provide for an authentic and personal experience. Many of the boutique wine farms are run by the owners and winemakers themselves, so you get to connect with people behind the brands.

When's the best time to visit the area? The valley is an incredible region to visit all year round, as each season has a unique charm and beauty.

How can those who can't visit the farms buy their wines? Wines can be purchased online from many of the wine farms or from two wine shops in the area – La Verne Wine Boutique in Voortrekker Street in Robertson, which stocks wines at cellar prices, as well as a wine shop in Ashton called Platform62, which also stocks arts and crafts, jams, preserves, wines and brandies from the valley.

Twitter/Instagram - @LangebergValley. Twitter - @HOT_OVEN. Instagram - @hotovenmarketing

Right: @Four Cousins' stylish eatery is well worth a visit.

Above right: Mira Weiner, owner of Hot Oven Marketing, one of Robertson Valley's most passionate champions.

