

HERMANUS

WHERE THE AIR TASTES LIKE CHAMPERS

text & photography SETH SHEZI

Hermanus, which marks the beginning of the Garden Route, was originally called Hermanuspietersfontein but had its name shortened when it proved too long for the postal service. A charming fishing town on the southern coast of the Western Cape, Hermanus is about 120km from Cape Town and famous for whale watching during the winter and spring months.

The Old Harbour Museum, which houses an impressive life-size skeleton of a whale, tells the tale of the area's rich fishing history. Along the R320, amid the rolling slopes of the Babylonstoring Mountains, lies the Hermanus Wine Route.

Meandering through the picturesque area known as the Hemel en Aarde Valley, this lowly road is home to world-famous vineyards, and a good reason to visit Hermanus. If you do, make sure you spend time at these places:



FROM TOP Pool at Birkenhead House. Vineyard at Hemel en Aarde. Ashbourne Sauvignon Blanc Chardonnay



BIRKENHEAD HOUSE

In a town said to have Champagne air you will be spoilt for choice when it comes to upmarket eateries and accommodation. Found at the eastern end of Hermanus and perched atop the dramatic rocky promontory, Birkenhead House is a multi-tiered, five-star boutique hotel overlooking picturesque Walker Bay.

Included in the prestigious Royal Portfolio, Birkenhead House has been established with no expense spared: the decor is beach-house luxury rivalling the likes of the Hamptons with not one, but three, swimming pools. One of them is an infinity pool overlooking the azure Atlantic Ocean, which plays host to southern right whales between May and December.

The 11 ultra-chic suites are palatial in size, with large windows allowing you to take in the majestic sights without leaving your luxury room. Here the emphasis is on comfort and pampering – the knowledgeable concierge goes a long way to help you retreat into this enchanting and romantic haven.

119 11th St, Voelklip. 028 314 8000. birkenheadhouse.com

MUST DO

Forming part of the Garden Route, the imposing mountains are covered in lush fynbos, making for scenic hiking trails. Exhilarating horse rides on the beach in the mornings or a stroll along the wide beaches right at the doorstep of Birkenhead House towards the pink flamingo sanctuary will leave you revitalised and ready for an indulgent afternoon of wine tasting.

HEMEL EN AARDE VALLEY

Famous for producing world-class Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays, the valley is home to high-end farms such as Bouchard Finlayson, Sumaridge, Southern Right and Creation.

A Hermanus trip would not be complete without a visit to these master wineries.

hermanuswineroute.com

HAMILTON RUSSELL

Not so long ago, the Wall Street Journal stated that Hamilton Russell Vineyards was a “producer of one of the best New World Pinot Noirs you’re likely to find”.

Their world-class Pinot Noir achieves what all great South African wine sets out to do: it’s a marriage between the old world of Pinot Noir from Burgundy in France and the new world of South African red wine.

The colour is brilliantly clear, the nose you get has a hint of game and on the palate the silky texture is light, almost ethereal. One word comes to mind, finesse.

Open Mon-Fri. 9 Hemel en Aarde Rd, 028 312 3595. hamiltonrussellvineyards.co.za

ASHBOURNE SAUVIGNON BLANC CHARDONNAY

Hamilton Russell produces applauded Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays fit for special occasions, and thankfully the family is now offering something for everyday drinking with the introduction of their new three-year-old Ashbourne Sauvignon Blanc Chardonnay blend.

The 80% Sauvignon Blanc and 20% Chardonnay Ashbourne blend, sourced entirely from the maritime Walker Bay, launched to rave reviews for both its character and the enchanting Belle-Époque label. This easy-drinking blend opens with a floral bouquet on the nose, a classic structure and crisp notes of citrus softened by the fruity but subtle Chardonnay on the palate.

By appointment only. Hemel en Aarde Rd, 028 312 3595

THE RESTAURANT AT NEWTON JOHNSON FAMILY VINEYARDS

Situated within one of the Cape’s premier viticultural sites, The Restaurant at Newton Johnson offers the best gourmet experience in Hemel en Aarde, elevating its culinary standard on par with that of its fine wines.

Specialising in contemporary fine dining, the relaxed service, airy ambiance with ample light and sprawling vineyard views, makes The Restaurant an ideal spot for a long, indulgent lunch.

With the uber-talented Eric Bulpitt (ex executive chef at The Roundhouse) at the helm, patrons are treated to a concise, seasonal menu of locally sourced produce and farm-foraged greens that have been prepared meticulously and with respect.

Chef-proprietor Bulpitt and his team have mastered the art of making gastronomic theatre accessible and appear unfussy and everyone is taking note. He explains: “We were barely open a year when Eat Out announced us as a Top 10 restaurant. It came as a very humbling, unexpected surprise.”

Open Wed-Sun 12-3pm and Fri-Sat 6.3-8.30pm. Upper Hemel en Aarde Valley. 021 200 2148. newtonjohnson.com

CARTOLOGY

Named after the study of maps, this intriguing dry farmed bushvine Chenin and Semillon white blend, produced by young winemaker Chris Alheit of Alheit Vineyards, is a vinous exploration of the Cape’s heritage.

Getting hold of Cartology is a study in patience – it is sold out until the release of this year’s vintage, but due to overwhelming demand Alheit is already taking down names for the waiting list.

By appointment only. Hemel en Aarde Ridge, 083 274 6860. alheitvineyards.co.za

CLAUDIA BRUT METHODE CAP CLASSIQUE

Located at the highest point of the Hemel en Aarde wine route, Domaine des Dieux is aptly named. Directly translated as “house of the gods”, Domaine des Dieux is the oldest and most celebrated Methode Cap Classique (MCC) producer in the valley and is where the au courant come to “pop bottles”.

The 10% Pinot Noir and 90% Chardonnay flagship Claudia Brut MCC spends 40 months on its lees, helping the wine to develop rich brioche notes.

Look out for the expansive mousse on the palate – it is beautifully creamy, with a long citrus finish.

Open Tue-Sat 11am-4.30pm and Sun 11am-3.30pm. Top of R320, Hemel en Aarde Road. 028 313 2126. domainedesdieux.co.za

THE BEANERY

Often, after a night of rambunctious wine drinking, one needs a decent cup of coffee. Eric Bulpitt, executive chef at The Restaurant at Newton Johnson, swears by Mike Bayer’s roast at The Beanery.

Tucked away in an unassuming part of central Hermanus, The Beanery continues to be the locals’ well-kept secret.

Open Mon-Sat 7.30am-close. Shop C8, Main Rd, 028 312 2416



FROM TOP Starter from The Restaurant at Newton Johnson Vineyard. Anthony Hamilton Russell, owner of Hamilton Russell Vineyards, rides his bike around the farm. The Hamilton Russell Vineyards tasting room



Sharp tongue

ON HEARTS

On a narrow street in Rivonia, in a room of plastic tablecloths, you can order a plate of hearts. At the Little Sheep, they’re of the chicken variety and served raw – dark, shrivelled things, thawing on a saucer – for you to cook yourself, in a tub of bubbling Szechuan stock.

Other hot pot ingredients are easily executed: fish balls can be left boiling for an hour; paper-thin slices of beef only need seconds.

Hearts are particular. Slowly simmered at the right temperature, they are tender, a delicately fibred cut; yet, any great shocks – too hot, too quick – and they become gumbot tough, unyielding. Hearts need care.

The Japanese have two words for heart. Hato, the organ; and kokoro, the heart, mind and spirit, the essence of a being. When they make yakitori, they use both.

For weeks my own heart, recently broken, wouldn’t allow me to eat. I was offered tea, toast, cake, whisky. I chewed dutifully, tasted nothing. For days, I sat, heart thudding hopelessly fast against my ribs. When it quietened down, I would check to see if it was still there. I wondered how a part of me that was capable of loving so fiercely could feel so hollow.

In the days that followed, a near-stranger fed me fresh uni at her table in Athens. My elderly father offered to pack his bags and fly across the world for a hug. There were offers of refuge, promises of chicken soup in London, Nairobi, Washington, northern Italy. My stomach knotted itself with such kindness, but my heart remained numb, taut.

Then, under a tropical full moon next to a temple for good fortune, I found myself sitting at a table heaped with blood cockles. Scrubbed, milky shells revealing deep red inhabitants, metallic on the tongue: something primal, of mudflats, of rawness, of being alive, of identity. Hearts absorb flavours, have memories.

The wok-baked local crabs were still sweet and brittle under dusty paper pineapples. The melamine bowl of garlic, chili, sugar and lime, made to the same recipe. There was the boulder I had climbed as a child in my mother’s hometown, rubbed smooth by tiny hands.

The empty watchtower from before the war, staring calmly out to sea. Stray dogs on tsunami-washed sand. There was laughter, licked fingers, something unconditional. I realised, it’s possible for a heart to be broken, yet full.

Little Sheep Hot Pot, Rivonia, 083 380 7558
Sea Pearl Seafood, Penang, Malaysia, +604 899 0375

— NASTASYA TAY

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