

A close-up photograph of three pieces of fresh mozzarella cheese. Two are stacked vertically, and a third is in the foreground, slightly out of focus. The cheese is white and has a characteristic wrinkled texture. It is resting on a light-colored wooden surface. A metal knife with a serrated edge is visible in the lower-left corner, also resting on the wood. The background is softly blurred, showing warm tones of yellow and orange.

Back to basics

The international trend of a back-to-basics approach to gastronomy has reached Wellington. Emma Odendaal spent the weekend sampling the town's expanding repertoire of wine and fresh produce.



Franschhoek, Stellenbosch and Paarl, with their luxurious guesthouses, expensive antique stores, art galleries and fine-dining restaurants, have traditionally attracted the lion's share of tourists visiting the Cape Winelands. Wellington has been somewhat of a poor, distant cousin, always part of the Cape wine scene, but never able to attract visitors in the same numbers as the aristocrats of the winelands.

A drive through Wellington itself will not elicit the same 'oohs and ahs' that, say, Franschhoek may – parts of the town are run-down and it lacks the high-priced quaintness of other towns in the region. But that's not necessarily a bad thing. It's

ABOVE: Grand Dédale is Wellington's first five-star guest house, found in a suitably romantic location, tucked away at the foot of Bainskloof Pass.

LEFT: The creamy, delicate flavours of buffalo mozzarella are no longer hard to come by in SA.

It's surprisingly refreshing to be spared the tourist hordes, but still be in a picture-perfect setting...

surprisingly refreshing to be spared the tourist hordes, but still be in a picture-perfect setting: surrounded by the Groenberg mountains and renowned vineyards.

Our stay in Wellington begins with a drive to Grand Dédale, the town's first five-star guest house nestled at the foot of Bainskloof Pass. The road winds past some familiar names – just outside Wellington is Diemersfontein, the famous home to coffee Pinotage. Later, at the foot of Bainskloof Pass, Bovlei flashes past the car window – a good stop for value wines. As we turn left and hit dirt road Dunstone's entrance catches my eye and I make a note to buy some of this boutique wine farm's Shiraz. Next is James McKenzie's Nabygelegen that has produced some highly

acclaimed wines, including Seventeen Twelve 2004, a blend of Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot. We also drive through the farm now producing Jacques Smit Wines, Welvanpas, one of the most historic farms in Wellington that's been in the Retief family for countless generations. That's the Retiefs of *voortrekker* Piet Retief fame...

At the furthest point on the Bovlei Road, in the heart of the mountainous labyrinth, we arrive at Grand Dédale on Doolhof Wine Estate and are greeted by Angelo Casu. Our Italian host came to South Africa 16 years ago and was the architect behind several Cape Town restaurants' winelists, including the award-winning Harveys at Winchester >



ABOVE: Vineyards contrasted against the imposing mountainous labyrinth contribute to the spectacular scenery in Wellington. **INSET:** At Buffalo Ridge the animals are pasture fed and no harmful substances are used to produce the delicate, pearly white cheese.

Mansions, before moving to Wellington.

Angelo is passionate about marketing Wellington as a destination and equally enthusiastic about using fresh produce from the region's farmers, much of which has won international acclaim. His venison is sourced from Bontebok Ridge, a game reserve and quagga-breeding project nearby. Just down the road is Foxenburg Estate that supplies Grand Dédale with organic goat's cheese, olives and oyster mushrooms, and Upland Organic Estate, owned by Dr Edmund Oettlé and wife Elsie, supplies its Guinevere Cask brandy,

which came second in the Guldkorken International Competition in Stockholm.

In following the international slow-food movement, each of these producers is implicitly aware that our food choices affect the rest of the world. They are making a considerable effort to encourage consumers to rekindle an interest in the food they eat, where it comes from and how it is produced. The awards won by many of these farms speak for themselves; Foxenburg Estate, for instance, recently won a Slow Food Award for Excellence for its *fromage de chèvre* based on

its ecologically sound farming principles.

Devouring a gluttonous excess of slow food may hold a certain altruistic appeal, but the truth is that these gastronomic delights are as delectable as they are 'green'.

One producer that goes to great lengths to endorse sustainable agriculture while preserving culinary traditions is Buffalo Ridge – one of only a handful of producers in the southern hemisphere producing authentic buffalo mozzarella and the only *mozzarella di bufala* producer in South Africa.

One awful Caprese salad after another, consisting of weak attempts at buffalo-style mozzarella (cow's milk mozzarella that has been bleached to take on the pearly white appearance of authentic buffalo mozzarella), inspired Wayne Rademeyer to trade his suit and tie for gumboots and head to Wellington.

After learning the techniques of produc-

PAIRING MOZZARELLA DI BUFALA AND WINE

The delicate flavours of buffalo mozzarella make your wine choice critical. Cheese and wine should always have similar intensities, so a soft, subtle cheese should be paired with similar wines. If you are eating the mozzarella on its own, perhaps with a sprinkling of black pepper and olive oil, you'll need a dry, understated wine such as Buitenverwachting Blanc de Noir. If you are having a Caprese salad the tomato will play an important role in your choice of wine, so opt for a crisp white wine such as the Mooiplaas Bush Vines Chenin Blanc.

This pearly white treasure captures the sweaty, gamey flavours of buffalo milk – sensual, tender and dripping with ‘fresh’...

ing authentic buffalo mozzarella in Italy – century-old methods, handed down from generation to generation – Wayne set up shop just outside Wellington with 24 water buffalo from Australia. The farm is run on natural principles, true to the premise behind slow food – no pesticides or other harmful substances are used – the cheese contains no additives, colourants or flavourants and the buffalo are pasture fed.

Like so many culinary delights, buffalo mozzarella started as a poor man's food. This is of course no longer the case, with Buffalo Ridge mozzarella retailing at roughly R65 for 125g. But, despite the high price relative to other cheeses, the tender, creamy Italian delicacy has become highly sought after by fine-dining establishments.

The cheap cow's milk 'mozzarella' that one finds on supermarket shelves is distinctly rubbery with a pale yellow hue, while the more expensive varieties look like Ping-Pong balls. Some manufacturers even call their cow's milk product

'buffalo-style mozzarella' – but don't be fooled. Real buffalo mozzarella is wonderfully elastic and should be floppy rather than rubbery, delicately flavoured and preferably eaten within 10 hours of being made. This pearly white treasure captures the sweaty, gamey flavours of buffalo milk – sensual, tender, creamy and dripping with 'fresh' – best devoured with nothing more than crushed black pepper and a drizzling of olive oil.

We end our visit to Buffalo Ridge in Wayne's office, where Angelo places an order for buffalo yoghurt which he plans to use to make ice cream for his dinner menu. Unfortunately the yoghurt is not yet for sale, but I'm hoping that my forlorn expression may have convinced Wayne to make it available for purchase some time in the near future.

PLACES OF NOTE

Grand Dédale Country House

Accommodation at Grand Dédale consists

of six beautifully appointed, luxurious and individually designed rooms and suites in the historic Manor House and one free-standing thatched cottage. Outdoor activities such as walks along the river and horse-riding take full advantage of the spectacular setting. (Tel 021 873 4089, email info@granddedale.com)

Doolhof Wine Estate

Only 40ha of Doolhof are currently under vine, yet in recent years the wine estate has produced a number of award-winning wines. On the white side, it's the Signature Sauvignon Blanc 2009 that impresses, having recently scored 4 Stars in WINE magazine – a mélange of passion fruit and guave. On the red side, the Malbec 2007 won a Decanter gold medal and Double Gold at the Michelangelo awards last year. The intimate tasting room is open to the public. (Tel 021 873 691)

Buffalo Ridge

Although the farm is generally not open to the public, visits and tours can be arranged. Buffalo Ridge mozzarella can be purchased from leading delis in the Western Cape (such as Melissa's and Giovanni's), the Neighbourhood Goods Market and selected Pick n Pays. (Email buffaloridge@iafrica.com)



Bontebok Ridge Reserve

Two-hour game drives through Bontebok Ridge Reserve allow visitors to get up close with bontebok, found exclusively in the Cape, eland, wildebeest, red hartebeest, springbok, duiker, grysbok and grey rhebok, as well as zebra, which are part of a revolutionary attempt to re-breed the extinct quagga. One is able to purchase free-range venison from the reserve – the boerewors made from wild pig, wildebeest and mutton is legendary among those in the know in Wellington! (Tel 021 864 1169)

ABOVE: The tasting room at Doolhof Wine Estate is modern, yet intimate, and the wines available for tasting are certainly worthy of the hour's drive from Cape Town. **LEFT:** For Dr Edmund Oettlé organic is primarily philosophical as opposed to agricultural, and this premise is reflected in Upland's award-winning brandies and grappa. **BELOW:** The plains of Bontebok Ridge.

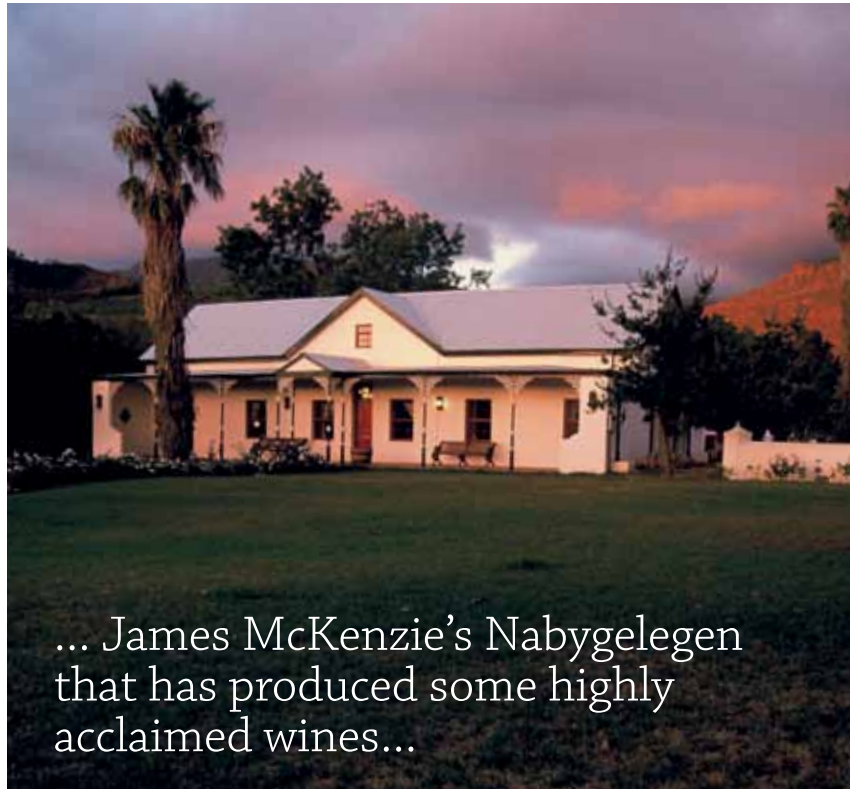


Foxenburg Estate

Situated on the slopes of the Groenberg Mountain, Foxenburg has been recognised as a priority biodiversity site in the Cape Floristic region with an established nature reserve on the farm. The estate produces French-style goat's cheese by hand-honouring traditional farmhouse cheese-making methods, as well as organic olives and olive oils and oyster mushrooms. (Tel 021 873 5617)

Upland Organic Estate

The rustic, unassuming organic estate of Upland is a small DEBIO-certified fruit and wine farm that has been producing organic brandy, grappa, Port and Cabernet Sauvignon for over a decade, based on the premise that its products "don't cost the earth". Upland's organic grappa won the 'World's Best Grappa' award at the Guldkorken International Competition in Stockholm and its list of other international and local awards is impressive. (Tel 082 731 4774) ■



... James McKenzie's Nabygelegen that has produced some highly acclaimed wines...

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