

CLOSE TO HEAVEN



Jessica Doyle visits Babylonstoren farm hotel near Cape Town, where the owners have created from scratch a beautiful and fascinating garden of edible produce inspired by the farm's Cape Dutch heritage

PHOTOGRAPHS CRAIG FRASER

THIS PAGE Citrus trees bordering the garden are underplanted with *Tulbaghia violacea*.

OPPOSITE Birdhouses on stilts surrounded by seed-bearing plants and a gnarled, 150-year-old weeping mulberry tree attract wild birds to the garden; guests can hide in the wicker 'nests' amid the bamboo to watch them





BELOW FROM TOP The stone-fruit orchard lies beyond the herb garden. Berries grow beneath a pergola. The greenhouse is both a tea room and an experimentation area for the gardeners. BELOW RIGHT The Simonsberg Mountain is a dramatic backdrop to the prickly-pear maze

I often get asked about the best time of year to visit the garden, but I must say, standing here now... this feels good,' says Liesl van der Walt, head gardener at Babylonstoren farm hotel. It's a sunny, early-summer morning in mid October, peachy 'Crème Caramel' roses are scrambling over the pergola beneath which we're standing, and the clivias lining the stream to our left are in flamboyant full bloom. Yet, beautiful though it all is, it's not just for show. This is a working garden, and every single plant in its eight acres is here for a reason.

Set in a valley at the foot of the Simonsberg Mountain in the Cape Winelands, Babylonstoren dates back to 1692, when it was granted as a farm to Cape Dutch settlers, and takes its name from the hill that rises in its midst – named the Tower of Babel perhaps due to the mix of nationalities the settlers found in the Cape. When its current owners, Koos Bekker and Karen Roos, came here in 2007, the land surrounding the eighteenth-century manor house had mainly reverted to swamp, but they were captivated, says Karen, by 'the stark simplicity of the Cape Dutch architecture, which looks particularly attractive against the backdrop of the mountain'. They restored the house, built 12 guest cottages – decorated by Karen, then editor of South African *Elle Decoration*, in minimalist, uber-cool style – and set about making the garden. 'The name Babylon proved rather suggestive,' she says – as did the historic Company's Garden, established in Cape Town in the 1650s to supply fruit and vegetables to ships sailing round the Cape en route to Asia. This inspired them to create a garden in which every plant could either be eaten or used for medicinal purposes.

For the design, they hired French gardener Patrice Taravella, known for the medieval garden he created at Prieuré d'Orsan, a former monastery near Limoges. He laid out a neat formal grid intersected by

pathways lined with irrigation canals and bordered by citrus trees, each tidy square within the grid offering a different discovery, from the olive orchard near the entrance to the almond trees and beehives at the far end. Beyond the garden's borders, the stream that feeds the irrigation canals is lined with the glorious clivia walk, where over 7,000 flowers burst into life in spring, and the 200 acres of vineyards supply the farm's fledgling but impressive wine industry.

The driving force behind the garden is to provide food, and there are, of course, plentiful vegetable patches, fruit and nut trees, a berry block, an entire bed devoted to plants grown for teas, and abundant herbs and edible flowers, whose petals are used for anything from cordials and jellies to decorating the cupcakes in the tea room. Much of the produce supplies the hotel's stylish restaurant, Babel, where it is conjured up into ever more innovative and colourful creations – even breakfast will be garnished with the odd nasturtium. Guests staying in the larger cottages with kitchens are also encouraged to forage for vegetables, herbs and fruit to cook for themselves. 'A special part of this garden is that people can meet their food again,' Liesl explains.

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Another important aspect of the garden is recreation. Along with the edible plants, there's a prickly-pear maze, large wicker 'nests' strung up amid a stand of bamboo in which guests can hide to spot the many birds that visit the area, and a chamomile lawn, ostensibly grown to provide plants for tea, but also a lovely, spongy spot to sprawl out and take in the calming scent. This philosophy of leisure and entertainment even extends to the chicken enclosure, which is planted with thyme to attract insects – 'the chickens love to catch them,' Liesl explains – and where a bunch of colourful Swiss chard stalks is suspended from the shed, 'to make the chickens jump; they get bored.'

It is this spirit of fun and experimentation that gives this beautifully designed, utterly tranquil garden its magical character. 'We are fascinated by diversity,' says Liesl, and she and her team are constantly on the lookout for new plants to try, new flowers to eat and different ways to add interest to the garden, with the result that you could spend many hours exploring its paths and enclosures without discovering all of its secrets □

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Some 7,000 clivias bloom in spring. A persimmon tree is surrounded by a delft-style mosaic, a tribute to the original Cape Dutch settlers. A large Brazilian pepper tree shades a sitting area. The 'nests' are by local designer Porky Hefer. Beyond a bridge leading out from the garden, vineyards supply the farm's wine industry, and the hill from which it takes its name rises in the distance. Turkeys peck around outside the restored fowl house

A two-person suite at Babylonstoren (00-27-21 863 3852; www.babylonstoren.com) costs from around £300 per night, B&B. Garden tours take place daily