A TASTE OF RUSSIA

At Avant-Garde restaurant on Hazendal Wine Estate, Executive Chef Michélle Theron creates culinary art using seasonal and sustainable South African produce to adapt Russian recipes. By Joanne Gibson
The word ‘avant-garde’ can be used to describe new, off-centre, experimental, forward-looking and unconventional ideas in art, music, literature and culture. So why not food?

That was the thinking of the Voloshin family, who originally hail from Russia (where abstract art pushed boundaries and flourished until giving way to state-sponsored socialist realism in the 1930s) and who bought Hazendal, a wine estate in the Bottelary Hills north-west of Stellenbosch, in 1994.

Originally granted to the German free burgher Christoffel Hazenwinkel in 1699, Hazendal is steeped in history, but has faced some challenges in recent decades, with the Cape Town suburb of Brackenfell creeping ever closer. If the electricity pylons at the back of the property reflect the ugly side of modernisation, they now also serve to highlight just how sensitively businessman, investor and philanthropist Dr Mark Voloshin and his daughters, Simone and Ina, have transformed Hazendal into a multifaceted heritage destination with a contemporary twist.

From the state-of-the-art winery and incredible Wonderdal edu-play centre, to a wedding pavilion that seems to float above a pond with picture-perfect views, the modern buildings are completely in harmony with – and almost submissive to – the heritage buildings. And right at the heart of this elegant and seamless blending of old and new is Avant-Garde Restaurant.

What the Voloshins wanted when envisaging their fine-dining offering was to create culinary art through a contemporary interpretation – and indeed fusion – of South African and Russian recipes. After eating at Pierneef à la Motte in Franschhoek, which specialises in modern South African heritage cuisine, they knew they had found the right chef to give diners a taste of Russia using seasonal and sustainable South African produce.

Executive chef at La Motte since 2014, having started working there in 2010, Michélle Theron was ready for a new challenge. ‘When the family approached me with their ideas for the restaurant, as well as the Russian tea garden, Babushka Deli and open-fire braai area in the old cattle kraal (watch this space), I knew that I couldn’t let an opportunity of such magnitude...”

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As we study the à la carte menu, food and beverage manager Willem van der Merwe is on hand to explain unfamiliar Russian terms, such as piroshki (pastries), pelmeni (filled dumplings) and pampushki (fried potato balls). Perhaps subconsciously expecting the food to be quite heavy, having not yet experienced Michélle's lightness of touch, I opt against the borscht (beetroot soup) with quail egg, dill and sour-cream mousse, and start with the salad of asparagus, fennel, pear, pickled cucumber and Valley blue cheese. A celebration of freshness and seasonality, it’s beautifully presented, as is my husband’s starter: the octopus terrine with green melon, dehydrated tomato, chorizo and salsa verde.

‘You can’t go wrong with seafood and salsa verde,’ says Michélle, explaining that she puts her blend of herbs and lemon through a foam gun for extra airiness, while a barbecue glaze made from grilled watermelon adds remarkable umami depth. Regarding the presentation, she says: ‘I like to make each dish look like a picture, without fiddling with the food too much.’

PICTURE PERFECT
For mains, I’m tempted by the savoury barley porridge with hazelnuts and mushrooms, served either as a completely vegan option or with slow-braised Karoo lamb, but in the end I choose Michélle’s take on a Russian cookbook staple: duck roasted with apples and potatoes. The breast is pinkly perfect with crispy, golden skin, while the confit duck leg is intensely meaty.

Today, the restaurant is a stately and sophisticated yet welcoming space, where a hand-painted mural pays tribute to all of Hazendal’s past owners.
Alongside a fluffy cloud of pomme purée, apples and onions have been baked in a buttery savoury tart, and a glaze made from indigenous Kei apples completes what has now become a modern South African dish, much lighter than you might expect, without losing any of those familiar roast flavours.

Michélle describes the grass-fed beef as ‘a different take on steak’, which on the day of our lunch is perfectly seared sous-vide sirloin, served alongside a black-lentil salad with marinated brinjals, mushrooms, confit garlic and turmeric dressing. However, she says the cut of meat depends entirely on what her butcher recommends on any given day, and Jerusalem artichokes are likely to come into play over the winter months. ‘I have a nice risotto in the works.’

Dessert is where Michélle and her pastry chef, Corien Hattingh, seem to have the most fun. Their Anna Pavlova with cream-cheese custard, strawberries-and-cream ice cream, matcha-coated milk rocks and green tea sablé is no ordinary filled meringue, but a spectacular display of red-tipped shards that simultaneously evoke scenes from the Bolshoi Ballet and South African childhood memories of candy cigarettes. And then there’s their ‘seasonal Fabergé-inspired creation and gelato’, which changes regularly, but on this occasion is a white-chocolate egg, dusted with edible gold, ‘cracked’ in front of me to reveal a ‘yolk’ and ‘white’ of passion-fruit curd and creamy white-chocolate mousse, liberally sprinkled with roasted white-chocolate rocks.

**LAST ORDERS**

For those who don’t have a sweet tooth, the cheese course sounds equally splendid: Dalewood Boland fondue with tomato and rooibos tea compote, brown butter financier, and pumpkin seed and sunflower granola wafers.

Avant-Garde is open for lunch from Tuesday to Sunday (11:30 am to 3:30 pm). Booking is essential. hazendal.co.za.