

Beachfront Belgian Bites

Text: Fransje van Riel
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Sometimes life hands you a nice surprise. For years, Strand was never really more to me than a place to feel the sand between my toes during leisurely walks along the beach. A great gastronomic experience was certainly never part of it until very recently, when I had lunch at De Brasserie.

The restaurant opened in May 2013 and is the brainchild of Joep van Almenkerk, the patriarch of the Almenkerk family, who moved from their native Belgium to South Africa in 1999. A few years later the family purchased an apple farm in the Elgin area, which they decided to convert

into a vineyard. Today, after just over a decade, there are 15 hectares of vines in production, with four hectares set aside to grow apples and pears.

While son Joris is in charge of making the award-winning wines and his wife Natalie heads up the sales and marketing, PR, and admin, Joep spends his time mentoring the business side of winemaking, which lead him to open De Brasserie restaurant in Strand in May 2013.

Joep openly admits that the founding of De Brasserie was a way to market the Almenkerk label. "Lots of people are

going about it this way," he says. "It is a great way to reach a lot more people than if we were solely dependent on the sale of wines on the estate. And people love it."

On the Wednesday I visit the restaurant, it is busy. I decide to try one of the specials, a beetroot carpaccio served with a delicate pesto, baby lettuce leaves and several miniature deep-fried cheese balls. The presentation is similar to that of a fancy dish from MasterChef, and the taste is really quite exquisite. The accompanying Almenkerk Sauvignon Blanc rounds off the dish to perfection.



Van Almenkerk has partnered with Keam Mazo from Equatorial Guinea, whom he describes as the beauty *and* the brains of the restaurant. Since completing her studies at the Private Hotel School in Stellenbosch, Keam has been running the business with a distinct African flair.

"Both of us enjoy good food and so our signature dishes are the result of our joined gastronomic preferences and experiences. Our menu consists mainly of European cuisine with several typically Dutch and Belgian offerings, but we also prepare two starters and main courses using local and seasonal produce on a

daily basis," explains Van Almenkerk.

The main courses are as impressive as the starters. While the Belgian mussels and the bouillabaisse are favourites, I opt for the vegetarian main - a stack of grilled aubergine, tomato and halloumi. The portions are generous, and it is nice to find quite a few unusual dishes on the menu.

The regular sound of whisking in the kitchen hints at an excellent sabayon, and so - although I normally forgo dessert - I relent. The finishing touch to the meal is as delightful as the first two courses, and the bill is very reasonable.

"For me, the greatest compliment is

for guests to leave De Brasserie bearing contented smiles," says Van Almenkerk. "I love being part of the business and sharing my family's love of good wines with our guests, and of course I love the food too!" he enthuses. "Working with Keam, designing and creating new dishes that aren't necessarily found in every other restaurant in the area is also both great fun and a challenge."

I for one am certainly a new fan, with plenty reason to head out to Strand more often these days.

For more information visit www.debrasserie.co.za. ■