

# DECADENT DELIGHTS

As far as memorable dining experiences go, what's in the glass is often just as important as what's on the plate. These five culinary adventures are causing a stir

TEXT Richard Holmes PHOTOGRAPHS Justin Patrick, supplied



**W**hen you imagine a sensory experience combining the finer points of food and drink, chances are it involves a glass of wine. And with such a broad palette of

cultivars and flavour profiles to work with, it's little wonder chefs and sommeliers alike love pairing food and wine.

Among South Africa's leading restaurants, including La Colombe, The Test Kitchen and the Saxon, there's certainly no shortage of fine wine experiences.

But it's out beyond Joburg's city limits at Restaurant Mosaic at The Orient where you'll find one of the country's most memorable gourmet adventures. Here, Paris-trained sommelier Germain Lehodey conjures his wine pairings from a cellar, home to a staggering 75 000 bottles across 6 000 labels from around the world.

"The perfect pairing is this: the wine must enhance the food and the food must enhance the wine," says Germain, who spent his last years in Paris as head sommelier of the 400-year-old Michelin-starred restaurant La Tour d'Argent. "The wine must become the second sauce of the dish so that the saltiness of the food will enhance the flavours of the wine and the acidity of the wine will lift the flavours of the food."

On that score, Germain works alongside award-winning chef Chantel Dartnall to deconstruct dishes, using them as the building blocks to pair with individual wines. Contenders are then tasted against the completed dish, which is often fine-tuned to ensure the perfect match.

"We can't change the wine, but we can tune the dish," says Germain. "Chantel is a smart chef and she understands that if the pairing is superb it gives more credit to the dish."

A stellar example is Chantel's Tidal Pool: salmon ceviche with verbena aspic and a seaweed salad, paired with an unusual Aligoté from French winemaker Aubert de Villaine, co-owner of the iconic Romanée-Conti. Another standout pairing is the soupe du jour with the Naudé Old Vines Cinsault.

"Cinsault is coming back," says Germain. "More people are producing dry, light and elegant Cinsault. It's a cultivar that fits well with Chantel's style of cuisine."

At The Test Kitchen, the pairing adventure begins with the inventive cocktails of their Dark Room

**OPPOSITE** At Restaurant Mosaic, chef Chantel Dartnall and sommelier Germain Lehodey workshop dishes and wines to create the perfect match. The soupe du jour – cauliflower, goose liver mousse and brussels sprouts – is served with Naudé Old Vines Cinsault

## LUXURY FOOD PAIRING



"THE PERFECT PAIRING IS THIS: THE WINE MUST ENHANCE THE FOOD AND THE FOOD MUST ENHANCE THE WINE"

SOMMELIER GERMAIN LEHODEY





**THE STORY OF CREATION WINES**

While formal food-and-wine pairings may have their roots in fine dining, estates and cellars across the Winelands are proving innovative at exploring the interplay between food and wine.

An example is Creation Wines in the scenic Hemel-en-Aarde Valley. Established in 2002 by Jean-Claude and Carolyn Martin, the estate recently picked up Wine Tourism South Africa's prestigious Klink Award for Great Pairings for the fourth time. The estate has also been recognised by the Great Wine Capitals Best of Wine Tourism Awards for the third time, winning a gong for Innovative Wine Tourism Experiences.

While chocolate and brunch pairings are popular options in the airy tasting room amid the vineyards, The Story of Creation menu is at the heart of the tasting experience.

Consisting of seven chapters, each course is paired with wine from the estate. Think smoked duck breast with local goat's milk cheese, beetroot and pomegranate paired with the Creation Reserve Pinot Noir; or the Creation Reserve Chardonnay against a taster portion of *boerenkaas* drizzled with fynbos honey and truffle oil.

Sound overwhelming? Happily, the expert staff, and often Carolyn or Jean-Claude themselves, are adept at talking you through the nuances of each pairing.

**JUST OUR CUP OF TEA**

If wine estates are diverging into food pairings, perhaps little wonder that one of South Africa's leading restaurants is dabbling in pairings other than wine.

Luke Dale-Roberts has put Cape Town on the global culinary map with his flagship restaurant The Test Kitchen and the wine pairings from respected sommelier Tinashe Nyamudoka are undoubtedly superb. But the restaurant is also gaining attention in pairing Luke's adventurous fine-dining cuisine with a range of premium leaf teas.

Tinashe works closely with upscale tea merchants The Tea Chest, who create their own blends from tea leaves sourced internationally. "In the restaurant, we play around with the various teas and dishes to see what works," says Tinashe.

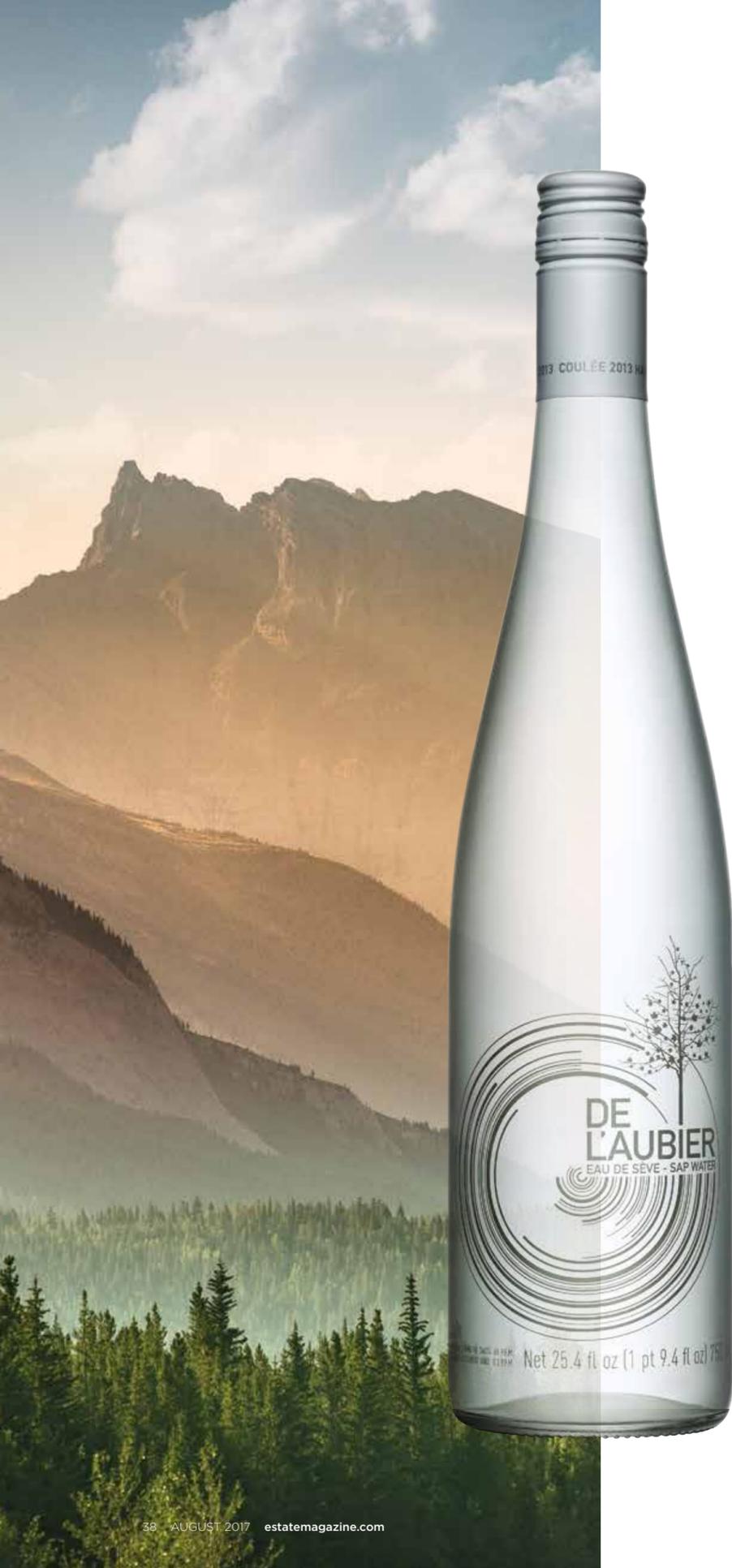
A dash of agave syrup is offered to mask any tannins that emerge during brewing. The principles of wine pairing certainly don't apply to loose leaf tea. "On the palate there may be some astringency or sweetness, but with pairing tea it's all about the aromas," says Tinashe. "So we look for a tea where the perfume matches the dish. We can match the intensity of the nose to the intensity of the food."

On the menu, that could mean a heady Imperial Lapsang Souchong matched with Luke's unique take on niçoise salad or char-grilled scallop with the cheekily named Weekend in Shanghai blend. Tinashe's favourite, though, is the Indian Nights tea poured with veal sweetbreads wrapped in lamb bacon with licorice jus.

"This red tea is infused with cinnamon, so it's warm, quite earthy and there's with some spice on the nose. It works perfectly with the dish," he says.

Whether it's Luke Dale-Roberts' consummate interpretation of a niçoise salad, chamomile ice cream or baby vegetables in a Korean *ssamjang* dip, sommelier Tinashe Nyamudoka has it covered **OPPOSITE, BOTTOM LEFT AND MIDDLE** At Creation Wines, the art of food and wine pairing is elevated within sight of the Hemel-en-Aarde Valley vineyards





**RAISE A GLASS**

While The Test Kitchen pushes the boundaries of fine-dining pairings with tea, up the road at The Taproom of the Devil's Peak Brewing Company, chef Jacques Fourie is showing how craft beer and a hearty bite play nicely together.

Whether you're pairing wine, whisky or grappa, "the essence is the same: taste the drink, identify the main and underlying taste flavours, and pair them with complementing flavours and textures," says Jacques. "With beer you have the added factor of carbonisation, which aids the pairing process."

Incorporating brewer JC Steyn's award-winning beers into some dishes also helps in the pairing process, a flavour thread linking plate and pint. A great example is the comforting mac and cheese, made with a beer-cheese sauce incorporating Devil's Peak Lager.

"The delicate malt notes and the low bitterness work well with the aged cheddar," says Jacques. "High carbonation levels help to cut through the slight oiliness of the dish and bring to light the creamy richness of the cheese."

Across the new menu, the pairings stack up neatly. Bold hop aromas on the Pale Ale tame the spiciness of the lamb burger; the caramel and bitterness in the Alpha Lager cut through the rich fried chicken with corn bread; and the bitterness of the India Pale Ale balances the spice of a beef and black bean chilli.

In a sense, the opportunities for conscious pairings of food and drink are limitless. Tequila, brandy, gin, cordials ... you name it, a sommelier somewhere in the world has done it.

**TEST THE WATER**

But what about a humble glass of water? Perhaps it's not so humble, though, when a refreshing glass could set you back R250. That's what a bottle of De L'Aubier Maple Sap Water from Canada will cost at The Merchant Hotel in Belfast.

Say hello then to, perhaps, the next new trend in food pairing: water. The Merchant Hotel, a grand edifice in the city's charming Cathedral Quarter, made waves in 2015 when it launched its flagship water menu. Featuring more than a dozen options from across the northern hemisphere, they include water melted from ice off Newfoundland to digestifs from glacial flows in Georgia. Carbonation, dissolved salts and mouth-feel all come into play as the waitstaff recommend which will pair best with the modern Irish cuisine of head chef John Paul Leake.

"Water has a significant impact on the way we taste food, just as with wine and spirits," says Martin Riese, water sommelier at Ray's & Stark Bar in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. "We are already accustomed to pairing food with wine or beer, but many people don't know that water is just as important to the entire dining experience."

Certified as a water expert by the German Mineral Water Trade Association, Martin oversees the restaurant's 20-strong collection of fine water, each listed with tasting notes, mineral content and country of origin. They are flown in from 10 countries, including Badoit from France and the mineral-laden Vichy Catalan from Spain.

On local shores the trend has, unsurprisingly, yet to catch on. Although a handful of hotels have dabbled in eye-wateringly expensive water, for now you'll have to make do without your glass of melted iceberg. Happily, there's a sommelier standing by with an innovative wine, beer or cup of tea to take its place.

**LUXURY FOOD PAIRING**



"WITH BEER YOU HAVE THE ADDED FACTOR OF CARBONISATION, WHICH AIDS THE PAIRING PROCESS"

CHEF JACQUES FOURIE



At Devil's Peak Brewing Company in Cape Town's up-and-coming Salt River district, JC Steyn and his cohort of passionate brewers - Jaco Coetzee, Andrew de Groot and Christo Vermeulen - are turning heads with an innovative range of craft beers; in the adjoining The Taproom, chef Jaques Fourie pairs a pint with beer-friendly food

**OPPOSITE** In the world of fine waters, De L'Aubier is at the leading edge of the trend (or fad?) of pairing food and a humble glass of H<sub>2</sub>O