

weekend life

Crags venue earns five-star rating in only six months

● Luxurious lodge sources delicious menu items locally

There's a place a couple minutes off the N2 in the Crags, Plettenberg Bay, that is like stepping out of the real world for a time-war into the foothills of mountains, nature, absolute peace and luxury.

Crags Country Lodge, which opened in March this year, was recognised in September as a five-star establishment by the SA Tourism Grading Council — a prestigious acknowledgement and as Plett Tourism CEO Patty Butterworth says, a credit to the greater Plett region.

From the moment you leave the N2, the experience begins because the lodge is flanked with views of the Outeniqua and Tsitsikamma mountains.

On the day we arrived the property was shrouded in soft mist, but by the next day the sun was out and what a welcome surprise to see just how picturesque this setting really is.

When I say it could be anywhere in the world, I am not exaggerating because it's hard to believe that the town of Plett is so close when you feel as though you might just be in the foothills of the Drakensberg.

There are many hoops to jump through to get five stars which this lodge did in six months and it's no wonder why.

No sooner than guests arrive so do friendly staff greet you with a refreshing hand-cloth and a welcome drink.

Luggage is whisked away to your room and this warm hospitality has just begun.



People & Places in the Garden Route
ELAINE KING

I can't remember when last I heard so many genuine 'it's a pleasure' responses delivered with big smiles.

Going that extra-mile is something that the Crags Country Lodge people have perfected.

The owner of the lodge has spared no expense when it comes to furnishing her place.

Simple classy wooden furniture has been used in the dining room and bar area which works perfectly with the biophilic feel of the place — letting all the glory of nature in through wall to floor windows without competing with it.

As modern as it is, this lodge also has homely spaces such as the lounge area which has comfy couches and a roaring fire, books on the coffee table.

Needless to say, the king-size beds are comfy, there are big fat pillows, electric blankets, there are thick fluffy white dressing gowns.

Only the best furnishings have been used, a lot of things have been sourced locally such as the Mungo bedspreads.

There are eight rooms each

one with a private patio offering every creature comfort.

The magic touch for me were the hot water bottles in their bespoke jackets which were popped into the turned-back bed at night, but also offered for your lap in the dining room in the evening and at breakfast.

Crags Country Lodge is the perfect place to relax, enjoy birdlife, do nothing except absorb the mountains or cast your cares upon them.

This unspoilt oasis is a haven for birds and other animals.

There is an easy delightful walk through the forest to Whiskey Creek and on the way down you will see the foraging marks of bush pigs and you will almost certainly hear and hopefully see the Knysna turaco.

A walk to down to the creek is mandatory because you need to burn some calories to mitigate the thousands that come with each meal.

James and Alice Burnham-King are the couple who run the lodge having met while



GLORIOUS VIEW: The location of Crags Country Lodge is nothing short of splendid. **INSET:** The lodge's enthusiastic owners, Alice and James Burnham-King

both working in East Africa. James is the general manager, sommelier and go-to-for anything person.

With a passion for the hospitality industry, James has worked in various lodges in East Africa as a sommelier while he has a qualification from the Wine and Spirit Education Trust.

Alice is an accomplished chef with a qualification from the Institute of Culinary Art in Stellenbosch.

She worked her way through the ranks to senior sous chef at a fancy restaurant in Stellenbosch, was head chef in Tanzania and Rwanda establishments.

Alice is in her element having been given the chance to create a menu from scratch which changes all the time.

She uses only free range meat and eggs from farms in the area as well as locally sourced cheeses, vegetables and herbs.

I got a chance to chat to her in the kitchen and it's probably one of the most inspirational cooking spaces I've ever seen with huge windows letting nature and light flood in — allowing creativity and artistry to flow.

James explains their bespoke gins come from SA and feature the high-end Cape St Blaize from Mossel Bay.

Their vermouth comes from a distillery in Knysna and the Saggy Stone beer from Robertson.

When it comes to wines, James says he wants to focus on Plett wines which are good, but not cheap.

"By offering Plett wines by the glass, we hope to encourage guests to try them, experiment with them and support local," he said.

A fan of Plett wines, he also has a soft-spot for Swartland wines and the older wines that come from the Old Vine Project.

James is your man when it comes to talking wine and food. Let him introduce you to some boutique wines, such as a small batch of pinot noir from That Wine Demesne, who are just down the road in the Crags.

No doubt while everything about being here is lovely, meal times are the piece de resistance of a stay.

There is some kind of magic that happens here when the couple get together to create a

wine and food pairing experience. Sometimes the food dictates the choice of wine and sometimes it's the other way around.

Inspiration can be drawn from seasonal local produce or a wine that inspires a dish.

A charming touch are menus personalised with guest names on them.

At dinner, for starters I could have had the roast beetroot salad, with mixed leaves, orange segments, local Fynbos Caprini goats' cheese, pecan nuts and mustard dressing.

I chose the flaked confit duck leg with pumpkin purée zucchini ribbons and jus which is a sauce or thin gravy made from meat juices

For mains, I chose the seared tuna with atchar pick-

●● A stay here is unforgettable!

led cucumber, avocado purée, spring onion, green beans, broccoli, edamame beans and cherry tomatoes, but a pork belly was available as was a vegan option.

These various courses are paired with wines such as Lodestone sauvignon blanc Semillon 2021, an Eenzaamheid Cinsault 2021 and other lesser known varieties.

James chooses the wines that create perfect harmony with the food choice and he also narrates his wine choice and discusses options with guests.

There are smoked trout ribbons, a croissant croque madam with gypsy ham topped with a béchamel sauce and a fried egg with leaves nestled around it.

It would be hard to beat their country breakfast.

Almost everything that comes out of this kitchen is homemade by Alice including the bread.

The owners of Crags Country Lodge aim to treat their guests, international and South African, to a memorable and luxurious stay and I can say a stay here is unforgettable.

And the town of Plett is just down the drag, but so too are attractions such as wine farms and various animal sanctuaries for children to enjoy, should you decide to.

Just ask James.

SA Cap Classique can rival French champagne

SA wine lovers need to get over the national inferiority complex and embrace home-grown Cap Classique bubbles, because the best of them easily beat the champagnes of France on quality and value.

That's the view of SA expert and economist, champagne-lover and passionate Cap Classique advocate, Prof Jali Bakoro; and tasting the bubbles of Charles Fox from Elgin with him recently, you'd be hard-pressed not to agree.

Now based in Philadelphia, Rustenburg-born Bakoro has spent most of his career in the US.

A lifelong love affair with wine, champagne especially, was born in his student days in Marseille, in France, and grew through many visits home, discovering SA's wine culture, and falling deeper in love in California's Napa Valley.

Connecting the similarities of terroir across the Champagne region, Napa and Elgin brought him to the doorstep of Fox, boutique producer of exclusively Cap Classiques in Elgin, and they bonded instantly over their love of premium bubbly.

Bakoro became Fox's distributor and ambassador in the US, adding a Napa producer of sparkling wines to his portfolio, and recently established his own wine business, Jali et Fils Vignerons (Jali and Sons Winegrowers),



A Vine Time
SAM VENTER

which he says has proved a welcome distraction from the two economics textbooks he's currently writing.

Not content with just consuming and distributing bubbly, Jali "bummed some grapes and cellar space from Charles" and got into wine growing and making himself, and has just shipped the first pallet of his own Elgin Cap Classique to the US, under his own brand of Phoka, his clan name and eldest son's name.

Phoka Cap Classique is a 2017 vintage, following in Fox's method of extended bottle ageing of bubbly for five years or more, that lends them such elegance and character.

Bakoro's economics background comes through when he explains why he believes SA is "sitting on a gold mine" when it comes to Cap Classique and his drive to get South Africans to ditch their inferiority complex and drink local.



GLOBAL APPEAL: Prof Jali Bakoro explains why SA Cap Classique can give French Champagne a run for its money

"When you're buying the French brands like Veuve Clicquot, Moët et Chandon, Billecart Salmon, Krug and the like for R1,400 a bottle, as an economist I ask myself, can I do better?"

"And the answer with premium SA Cap Classique at, say R500-R500, is yes.

"Why spend an extra R900 on something not always as good, sometimes not even from Champagne itself and often non-vintage, when you could enjoy a better quality

SA product, where you know the grower, the varieties, terroir and vintage, and still have money left over to pay the school fees?"

When it comes to Charles Fox CIPHER Brut 2015 (±R550), Jali says it has knocked out top French brands in blind tastings he's hosted in New York and "I challenge anyone to say that Veuve, Salon or Dom Perignon are better".

A Platters five-star, aged for at least six years on the

lees, this is just beautiful — dry, steely, restrained with bites of lime among rich brioche, a rare treat.

The key thing, he says, with the Charles Fox bubbles is how they are made — the attention to growing, the fact that he grows his own Pinot Meunier (a small but key component in Champagne, "pulling out the minerality", but not found in many SA bubbles), and the extended ageing.

"What we are drinking tonight IS proper Champagne."

"We're just not allowed to call it that," he told members of the Wine to Door club at the tasting at Kiplings at the Boardwalk.

The diversity of Cap Classique was experienced through the freshness of Charles Fox Brut Rose 2020 (R520) and the slightly spicy/burnt sugar of the "casual, uncomplicated" Reserve Gold (great value, R220).

The highlight — Charles Fox Prestige Cuvee Blanc de Blancs 2017, a Platter 4.5-star and rated a number one bubbly by the New York Times — sparkling golden and just glorious and elegant with crunchy green apple up against baked apples, touches of almond and pear, a zing of citrus, all wrapped up in fine, persistent bubbles and silky texture.

At R450, buy three of these and beat the French at their own game!

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