

GRAPE STUFF, De Kelder Restaurant, Cape Town, Caroline Browne for SA Interior Design (2001)

“South African wines were the inspiration for this restaurant as well as the charm of the Cape and the Boland,” says Raymond Smith, interior designer of the new De Kelder restaurant in Tygerberg. The décor at De Kelder is thoroughly ‘indigenous’ as everything besides the light bulbs, sound system and air conditioning was locally designed and manufactured. The 200 seater restaurant is the first in a limited franchise concept which plans to introduce a fresh South African aesthetic to the hospitality industry.

Sixteen of South African's top wine estates display their wines in stylish back-lit cabinets along the walls. Above each cabinet two black and white photographs depict both the interior and exterior of the estate in question. “While savouring a fine vintage, diners are simultaneously offered a glimpse of the farm of origin,” comments Raymond.

In fact, wine imagery permeates much of the décor. Hanging above each table is a handmade paper luminaire shaped like a cork and corkscrew. “It's a tongue-in-cheek addition that's proved to be a unique talking point,” remarks Raymond. The curved ceilings at the entrance and around the restaurant are made of aged oak slats suggesting the curve of early cellars and wine barrels. Raymond has tried to communicate the modern penchant for wine blends through his design by combining three different woods – African Rosewood, aged Oak for the cabinets and Iroko for the bar, server unit and the Cognac and Cigar display cabinet.

The uniquely designed ‘Ezantsi’ chairs – meaning ‘from the South’ in Xhosa – feature contemporary styling with a subtle Nouveau influence. The chairs are component-based for easy exportation and are quintessentially South African – “These are not mass-produced, high-technology chairs,” explains Raymond. “Their production is labour-intensive and requires great attention to detail.” In a playful twist, a third of the chairs have left armrests, another third have right armrests while the remainder have no armrests at all. The blue, burgundy and green of the synthetic leather upholstery has been mixed at random and each colour evokes a different aspect of the enchanting Boland landscape – blue symbolizes the mountains and the sky, burgundy represents the wine leaves in autumn, while green alludes to the valleys and vines in summer. Simulated sandstone and blue slate tiles make an interesting contrast on the floor while the walls have been painted in a natural cement colour by Earthcote.

A 16-metre long bar – the longest in Cape Town – a cocktail bar and a Cigar/Cognac lounge with comfortable leather couches makes this a decidedly stylish place.

The design takes full cognisance of the new smoking laws – while there are no partitions or walls, split-unit air conditioning systems ensure that the smoke doesn't encroach into the non-smoking section while the relevant signage has also been applied.

As for the food, it's a celebration of the Cape's cosmopolitan melting pot of influences. "The refined and elegant design enhances the infinitely pleasurable and sociable act of eating and drinking," concludes Raymond.