

A LOVE LETTER TO The Karoo

At Samara Karoo Reserve, rewilding an ancient landscape means recovering its food too

by SOPHIE BAKER



Inosipho Witbooi has been cooking three meals a day on open flame since 2019. Plains Camp runs entirely without mains electricity, which means that every omelette, every braai, every home-made pineapple chutney comes off a fire she has built and managed herself. 'It helps me show what I'm actually capable of,' she says.

The Karoo doesn't spring to mind when you think of South Africa's great food destinations, nor its great safari destinations. In the minds of most South Africans, the Karoo simply extends endlessly: thorn scrub and dolerite koppies, the wide empty middle distance, the sky in disproportionate amounts. At most, it's known as the part of the drive you sleep through on long drives to the coast.

But Samara Karoo Reserve, a 27 000-hectare rewilding project three decades in the making, has a different argument to make. For Isabelle Tompkins, who grew up here and has spent most of her adult life trying to show people what they are missing, the food and the landscape are more or less the same story. A kind of love

letter to a place most people drive through without stopping. 'We love the Karoo,' she says, 'and we want to share it with people.'

What the Karoo once looked like is difficult to hold in mind now. Historical records from Graaff-Reinet, the nearest town to Samara, describe something that registers at first as exaggeration: a land-based migration so large that when the springbok came through, 'the dust hung in the air for two weeks after they had passed.' Isabelle describes it as one of the greatest land-based migrations in Africa, larger than the Serengeti's wildebeest crossing. The last recorded migration was at the end of the 18th century. They moved in millions: springbok, black wildebeest, quagga and the predators that followed them. When the colonial government distributed guns to settlers and the animals were shot out, and when the fences of the emerging farming economy divided the landscape into manageable units, the migration ended in a generation. What was left looked like what the Karoo still looks like to most people passing through today: sparse, dry, quietly diminished.



Samara's food may be elevated, but it's not fine-dining abstraction. Instead, it's proper Karoo hospitality



Isabelle's parents bought the first farm in the late 1990s, when she was five. They brought in ecologists from SANParks and found the landscape worked beyond its means: overgrazed, divided into eleven separate farming units, the vegetation stripped to what livestock could not avoid. 'They didn't really know what they were getting themselves into,' Isabelle says, 'but in a good way.' Six years later, all 11 farms had been acquired and 200 kilometres of internal fencing were coming down. Lions arrived in 2019. Elephant, black and white rhino, buffalo and cheetah had come earlier. Five of South Africa's nine vegetation biomes now exist within the reserve's boundaries, from Nama Karoo scrub to mountain fynbos, Albany thicket, and savannah along the river systems to open grassland.



The food of the Karoo grew from the same landscape and carries the same past. The Khoikhoi herded fat-tailed sheep across the semi-arid scrub for centuries before European settlement, and their animals became the foundation of the Karoo lamb breed that still defines the region's food identity. Cape Malay flavours arrived with the settlers: bobotie's sweet-spiced mince, sosaties, the cumin and apricot combinations that are now simply South African cooking. The Voortrekkers moving north in the 1830s added potjiekos, biltong and droëwors. These were preservation techniques born from necessity in a landscape with scarce water and no refrigeration. Karoo lamb today is synonymous with exceptional meat in South Africa, its distinctive sweetness attributed to the indigenous shrubs the animals graze on: anker karoo, spekboom, the low-growing plants that make this land taste like nowhere else.

At Samara, that history arrives at the table too. Isabelle's husband runs a regenerative agriculture project on the reserve whose operating logic is drawn directly from the springbok migration itself. 'The springbok would essentially

decimate the landscape. They would eat absolutely everything. What would be left would be dust, basically, but the roots of the plants would remain. And then they wouldn't come back, sometimes for nine months. Sometimes for two years.' The plants evolved with that cycle. The holistic grazing project mimics that pattern: livestock moved through paddocks in concentrated bursts, then shifted on, the land rested before they return. The project has already recorded a 30 per cent increase in soil carbon in the areas where it operates. 'What comes from our own farm is still in the minority,' Isabelle acknowledges, 'but when we can't supply it ourselves, we source from other farmers doing the same thing.'

The sourcing philosophy runs through everything that appears on the table. Meat comes from local Karoo farmers working the land carefully. A woman nearby grows vegetables without chemicals and supplies them alongside edible flowers, running a recipe-sharing group for her customers. An on-site herb garden provides rosemary, thyme, rocket and more. Fish is the one ingredient that travels any distance, coming up from Gqeberha, a three-hour

drive away. The bar draws from small producers around Graaff-Reinet: local rums, craft beers, small-producer wines. 'We try to support mostly local, small businesses,' Nosipho says. 'Local families around the area. Even the meat, fruit, vegetables, everything.'

At all the camps at Samara, everything is made from scratch: the mayonnaise, the ice cream, the salad dressings, the pineapple chutney that arrives alongside the bobotie. 'We do buy mustard, though,' confesses Chef Elona Manyenyesa of Karoo Lodge. The two camps offer distinct expressions of the same ethos. Karoo Lodge sits in a restored farmhouse at the foot of the mountains, its kitchen running on gas, its dining room turning out bistro-style meals with a fine-dining lean. Plains Camp, a tented set-up across the reserve on the high open plains, has no mains electricity at all. Everything Nosipho produces, for every guest, three times a day, comes off fire.

The signature dish at Karoo Lodge is Elona's bobotie spring rolls: the sweet-spiced mince filling, a recipe rooted in centuries of Cape Malay influence, wrapped in filo pastry and fried until



PHOTOS: SOPHIE BAKER

golden, served three to a plate alongside that home-made pineapple chutney. Guests ask for them every day; some request them for every meal of their stay. Breakfast brings a rolled omelette stuffed with local boerewors, colourful peppers and mushrooms – a generous portion, large enough to share before a morning game drive and practical enough that many guests do exactly that. Lunch might be Elona's ostrich pie, introduced for the colder months and already a fixture, or a Karoo lamb burger: two patties stacked with cheese, served on a wooden board with a home-made tomato relish and chunky sweet potato fries. The lamb carries the clean sweetness the landscape produces, the renosterbos and spekboom doing their work on the palate in a format as unfussy as the Karoo itself. The portions are intentionally generous: Samara's food may be elevated, but it is not fine-dining abstraction. Instead, it's proper Karoo hospitality.

And in the evenings, around the open fire at Plains Camp, Nosipho often braais kudu or springbok directly over the coals, the game sourced locally and cooked in the most direct way the camp's set-up allows. Venison appears too at the boma



dinner at Karoo Lodge, where the fire is the kitchen and the Karoo is the dining room. Out on the Samara Mara, an hour's drive from Karoo Lodge, a picnic has been laid under a tree at the edge of the plains: red and orange tablecloths in colours that echo the Masai, a view out over the valley and to the horizon, metal lunchboxes stacked and waiting. Inside: a handmade sausage roll, a vetkoek filled with curried chicken, a salad, a lemon meringue dessert.

Isabelle is careful not to cast local farming as the enemy of conservation. 'It's quite easy to set up an opposition of rewilding versus farmers, but at the end of the day, farmers are custodians of the landscape. So how does one work with farmers to ensure there is space for nature?' The Eastern Cape has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country. Creating jobs through tourism helps, but building a supply chain that supports local farming families and keeps livelihoods rooted in the land is, in Isabelle's view, conservation at a different scale. She describes a long-term vision of ecological corridors linking Samara to Addo Elephant Park, Camdeboo National Park and Mountain Zebra National Park. The local sourcing is not separate from this thinking. It is community. It is livelihoods. It is the same instinct expressed at a dinner table rather than across a landscape.

'We don't try and pretend to be perfect,' Isabelle says. The herb garden is modest. The supply chain is still being built. But the direction has been consistent since the first farm was purchased and the first fences came down. For Nosipho, who arrived as a culinary school graduate in 2019, found a permanent job and has been cooking on open flame ever since, the ambition is simpler to state. She plans to stay. 'Just make things beautiful,' she says.

The recovering veld, the returning predators, the land-based food culture restored alongside everything else: at Samara, the land and the plate are more or less the same thing. To eat something handmade and specifically South African here – the lamb with its indigenous sweetness, the bobotie in its unexpected golden casing, the picnic laid out under the wide Karoo sky – is to understand what Isabelle means by a love letter to the Karoo.

