

OFF THE BEATEN PLATE

BEYOND THE CITIES, A SLOWER, MORE SOULFUL FOOD SCENE IS EMERGING, DRIVEN BY LOCAL INGREDIENTS AND MEALS MADE FOR LINGERING OVER

Words **Sophie Baker**



A fire crackles warmly in the interior of Vine Restaurant & Wine Bar in Dullstroom, where the evening starts with guests relaxing in armchairs as part of their lounge-to-table concept.

The fire is on when the first guests arrive at **Vine Restaurant & Wine Bar** (sahodullstroom.com/vine) in Dullstroom. They are shown not to a table but to armchairs arranged around the hearth, where they'll spend the first hour of the evening with wine and tapas, such as halloumi fries with their crisp squeak intact or beef carpaccio thin enough to see the plate underneath. The wine list is extensive, sourced from estates across the Cape and beyond, while the food is straightforward: steaks with your choice of sauce, slow-cooked lamb shank, pork ribs basted in home-made barbecue sauce. It's pub food, elevated by patience: no one rushes you from the fireside, and by the time you move to the candlelit dining rooms, you've already settled into the idea of an unrushed evening. Outside, mist settles over the highland town's fishing dams and the pine plantations that ring the valley. Inside, the menu features fresh, seasonal ingredients.

This is not how serious South African restaurants used to operate. For decades, Johannesburg and Cape Town absorbed the talent, accolades and diners willing to travel for a meal. If a chef wanted recognition, a city address seemed essential.



Vine Restaurant & Wine Bar offers an extensive wine selection, featuring over 400 labels.



THE PATERNOSTER EFFECT

That assumption began to shift in 2019, when **Wolfgat** (wolfgat.co.za) opened in the West Coast fishing village of Paternoster, with 20 seats, menus shaped by strandveld plants and the day's catch, and deliberate rejection of urban scale. International accolades followed quickly, but, more importantly, it proved that restaurants didn't need urban scale to earn serious attention.

Restaurants along the West Coast, including **Gaaitjie Restaurant** (gaaitjie.co.za) in its converted fisherman's cottage and **IKhwattu's** (ikhwattu.org) modern but proudly San food, proved that compelling food could be entirely anchored in place rather than imported to it. Geography became a drawcard, rather than a limitation. The philosophy has since appeared in towns that have little in common with the West Coast, except remoteness and dedication to high-quality cuisine.

LEFT IKhwattu's menu features local ingredients and traditional San dishes, including West Coast musse's and traditional potato dumplings.

RIGHT Bocca di Lupo serves traditional Italian cuisine in Clarens.

BELOW The gardens at Baris Monger supply much of the fresh produce, offering a Winelands-style experience in Clarens.

HIGHLAND HOSPITALITY

In Dullstroom, the pantry is built for cold-weather comfort. Hearty dishes suit the high altitude and the mist that rolls through most mornings, when the chill makes warm food feel essential rather than optional. Trout comes from dams that have supplied anglers for over a century; the waters here were stocked in the early 1900s, and the fishing tradition has shaped the town's identity since.

Across town from Vine, **Mrs Simpson's Restaurant** (mrsimpsons.co.za) has become something of a must-visit for Joburgers driving in for a weekend. The restaurant, named for the Duchess of Windsor, operates from a period house with an iconic yellow dining room featuring eclectic artwork and mismatched furniture. The signature trout pasta flies out of the kitchen most evenings. The cream-slicked spaghetti is tangled with herbs, black pepper, and flakes of fresh trout. Moroccan prawns and mussels appear on tables alongside lamb shanks tender enough to warrant their permanent place on the menu. It's comfort food elevated by context: highland air pressing against the windows, the clinking of red wine glasses, and the sense of having driven just far enough that the ordinary becomes an occasion.



garners consistent praise. It's contemporary French-style country cooking, served in an intimate enough setting that the chef often checks on tables himself. Down a quieter street, the Italian owner of **Bocca di Lupo** (boccadilupo.co.za) hand-makes Neapolitan-style pizzas in a wood-fired oven, the dough stretched and blistered according to techniques learned in Naples.

On the outskirts of town, boutique farms add to the draw. **Millie High Vineyards** (milliehighvineyards.com) is one of the highest-producing vineyards in the country, and offers handmade comfort food, including pot pies, soups, pasta and apple crumble. **Baris Monger** (baris.co.za), a cheese farm within easy driving distance, offers tastings in a garden setting that evokes the Cape Winelands without the traffic or tour buses.

RIGHT Cheese boards are the highlight at the family-run Baris Monger, where the award-winning Vliedermaus cheese leads the tasting line-up.

BELOW The Northern Cape is a surprising treasure trove of culinary experiences, from quirky padstals to upscale dining at African Vineyard Boutique Hotel & Spa.



FREE STATE REVIVAL

Against the sandstone cliffs and the Maluti foothills of the Free State, Clarens has undergone its own shift. The town once catered primarily to weekenders en route to the Golden Gate Highlands National Park, its main street lined with steakhouses and pizza parlours to accommodate a lot of people. Slowly, kitchens have emerged that adopt a healthy refusal to serve food that feels mass-produced or indifferent.

Clementines Restaurant & Bar (clementines.co.za) occupies an old corrugated-iron building that has become a local landmark. The owners have built genuine relationships with nearby farms, Free State lamb producers, and vegetable growers working the fertile valleys below the Maluti escarpment. The menu reflects those ties: springbok carpaccio, sliced thin and dressed simply, slow-cooked lamb bredie, rich with tomato and spice, and vegetables pulled from regional soil. What could be a forgettable lunch stop becomes, instead, a reason to extend the weekend.

At **Troat** (troatrestaurant.co.za), Chef-owner Francois Potgieter has built a reputation for precise execution. The lamb shank arrives with a mint-infused jus, while the deconstructed beef Wellington

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY IMAGES



THE NORTHERN FRONTIER

Along the Kokerboom Food and Wine Route in the Northern Cape's Orange River valley, farm stalls and wine estates have begun treating food as a reason to stop rather than an afterthought for those passing through on their way to Namibia or Kgalagadi.

At **Die Pienk Padstal** (diepienkpadstal.com) in Kakamas, dried fruit and preserves share shelf space with home-made pies. A few kilometres west, **Die Mas** (diemas.co.za) sits on the Orange Riverbank, its elevated veranda overlooking vineyards that stretch toward the desert. The family-run estate makes award-winning copper pot-still brandy, alongside wines and gin, with wood-fired pizzas available for those who linger.

On Kanoneiland, **African Vineyard Boutique Hotel & Spa** (africanvineyard.co.za) offers slow-food dinners from local ingredients.

What connects these scattered kitchens is not a single philosophy about sourcing or regionality. Paternoster's kelp comes from morning foraging; Dullstroom's trout from local dams; Clarens' pizza chef imports his technique from Naples; the Northern Cape estates rely on what the Orange River makes possible in the middle of the desert. But the cooks share a conviction: that smaller towns allow for slower rhythms, closer relationships with the diners, and the freedom to build a reputation on consistency and craft rather than novelty or scale.

For travellers, this reshapes how a South African weekend unfolds. The same drive that takes you to the fishing dams or the sandstone cliffs now delivers you to tables where the food is worth the journey, served by people who chose to be exactly where they are. ■