

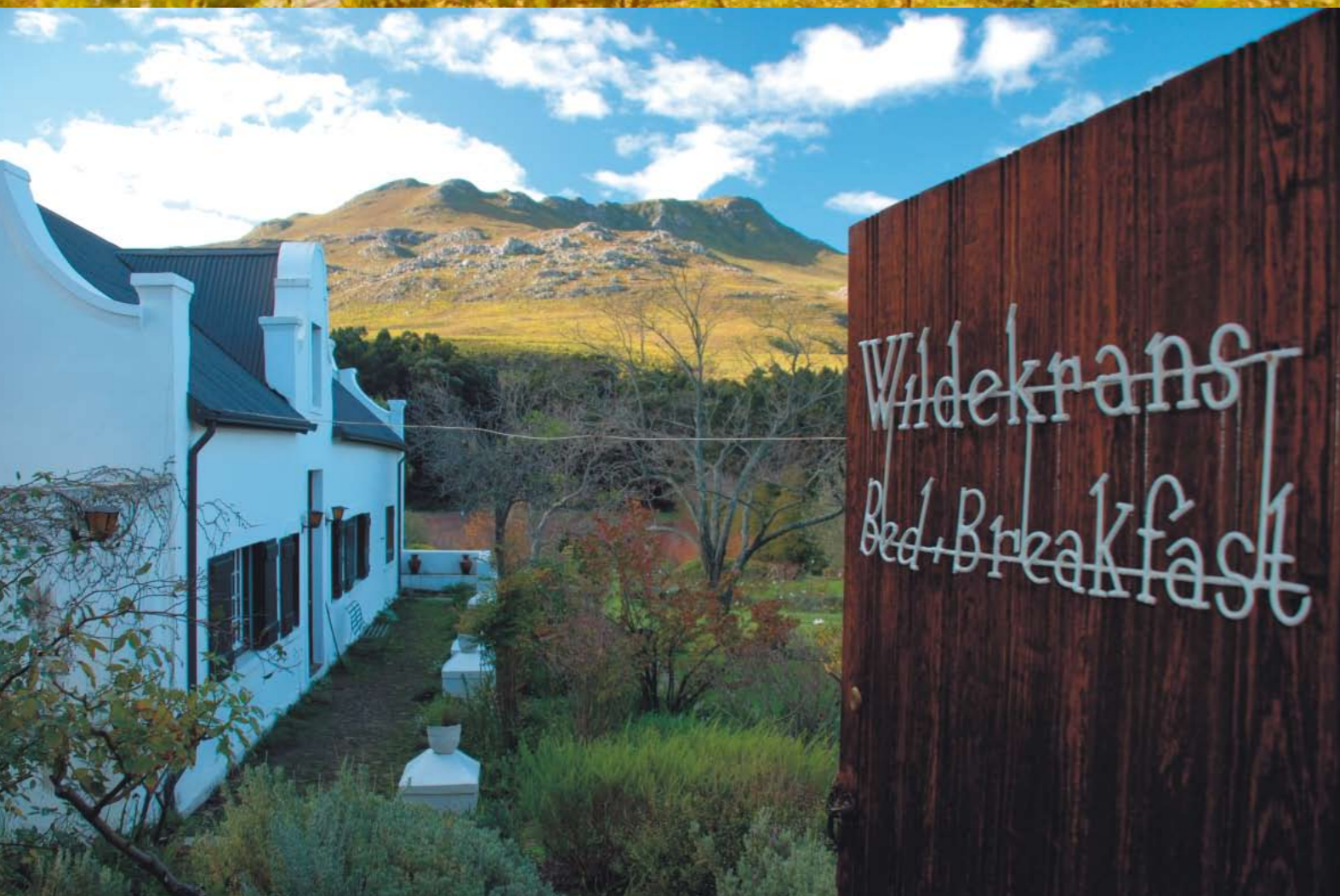
Rocky Mountain High

The Cape's Elgin valley is filled with marvels of the scenic, edible and drinkable kind

By RICHARD HOLMES
Photographs by RICHARD HOLMES; some courtesy of Appletiser and Elgin Tourism Board



Oak Valley cycle trails



I've driven the N2 out of Cape Town dozens of times, following a well-worn trail on weekends away in the Overberg. Through Somerset West, over Sir Lowry's Pass, down Houw Hoek on the other side and off into the distance we go.

But behind the blur of pear and apple orchards in the Elgin valley there is, I recently discovered, a wonderful eco-tourism destination waiting to be explored. Ignore the N2 and forget the Overberg... one of the Cape's best weekend escapes waits just over them thar hills.

If you're planning a visit to the valley you've got a busy few days ahead, so you'll need to stock up. The bakery at the Peregrine Farm Stall is legendary, and you'll be hard-pressed not to leave with a basket of fresh "Ouma Brood", a cheesy quiche, milk tart and a bagful of syrupy koeksisters. It's a great place to fill a picnic hamper and grab a bottle of freshly squeezed apple juice or bottle of local wine.

The Houw Hoek Farm Stall, another 12 kilometres or so down the N2, is another tried and trusted option with an excellent bakery. Their sausage rolls and millionaire's shortbread bring road-trippers from far and wide. You can also cast a line into the well-stocked trout dams up on the hill. Either pop your catch in a cooler bag or ask the restaurant to throw it in the pan.

Well-stocked and ready for the day ahead, start off at a leisurely pace with some twitching at Elgin Vintners, off the Viljoenshoop Road. The farm dam is home to dozens of bird varieties, including a good selection of fynbos endemics, and a small jetty allows you a rare chance to get up close to a nest of black-headed herons.

If that's a little sedate, the mountain bike trails on offer at Oak Valley should get your pulse racing. The farm offers three well-marked routes: a 14-kilometre Green Route suitable for all skill levels; a 21-kilometre Red Route for stronger riders; and the 25-kilometre Black Route for complete nutters. Laid out by Oak Valley winemaker and avid cyclist Pieter Visser, the trails are mostly single-track and wind through forests, fields and fynbos. Hot showers are available at the finish, as well as shady lawns to relax under and rest those tired limbs.

GOURMET TRAVEL

NOT JUST APPLE CIDER

You can quench a different thirst with Visser's wines at the nearby tasting room. With its cool climate and slow-ripening vineyards, Elgin is rapidly making a name for itself as the origin of some of South Africa's top wines.

"Elgin is the best place to grow vineyards in South Africa," says Paul Wallace, viticulturist and one of the shareholders at nearby Elgin Vintners. "The slower your ripening, the better it is for what ends up inside the bottle." Their Rhône-style shiraz and barrel-fermented viognier are certainly proof that South African wines don't have to be all about big fruit and high alcohol.

A short way down the N2, Paul Cluver Wines is credited with proving that you can grow excellent grapes in a valley famous for its apple and pear orchards. Cluver's pinot noir is among the best in South Africa, but the estate also makes great weisser riesling, chardonnay and sauvignon blanc.

In all, there are over 20 wine labels in the Elgin Valley, up from just a handful five years ago, with estates like Iona, Highlands Road and South Hill also worth a visit.

Elgin is also home to two of the largest brandy pot stills in the world. Oude Molen may get its chenin blanc and colombar wine from the Klein Karoo, but the cool and misty Elgin valley is evidently the perfect place to mature the distillery's cognac-style brandy.

Distillery tours (R30 per person) take place at 10:30am and 3:30pm daily, and lead you on an entertaining and informative walk through the brandy-making process, brought to South Africa by René Santhagens in 1910. The hour-long tour ends, of course, with a tasting.

EATING ELGIN STYLE

South Hill wine farm is a good place to stop at around lunchtime. If you haven't packed a picnic, chef Gordon Manuel will be only too happy to put something together for you at the estate's restaurant, The Venue.

A veteran of boutique hotels, Manuel's skill in the kitchen brings a touch of class to hearty country cooking. The menu changes weekly, but expect crispy duck, seared salmon and meltingly good risotto. Original South African artworks adorn the walls of this old apple shed, with sliding doors to let the vineyard and orchard views wash in.

A lazy lunch can easily extend into late afternoon, and with the sun dipping behind the Hottentots Holland Mountains we found ourselves pushing open the door into five hectares of secret garden at Wildekrans Country House. The manor house was built in 1811 as a stop on the traditional wagon route to the interior, but the farm dates back to the previous century, when the stream that flows through the property served as a watering hole for oxen about to attempt the then-treacherous

Houw Hoek Pass.

A sense of history is palpable at Wildekrans, from the low doorways and creaky floors to the sturdy walls, now bright with some of South Africa's finest contemporary artists: Deborah Bell, Guy du Toit, Llewellyn Davies and William Kentridge.

"We try to buy at least one piece of art a year," says Alison Green, who runs Wildekrans with her architect husband. "We like the contrast between the historic homestead and modern South African art, so some artworks are displayed in the house while others are scattered around the garden."

And a fine setting for fine art it is too. Ordered and carefully planted near the house, the garden becomes wilder as it scampers up towards the fynbos-clad mountains that are emerald green and lush thanks to early winter rains.

A rambling rose garden wafts delicate scents towards a flock of inanimate sheep (courtesy of sculptor Wilma Cruise) and the stream gurgles its way past an orchard of olive and pear trees. Alison is justifiably proud of her art collection, but the garden – along with the cosy guesthouse, of course – is the real highlight of Wildekrans. Benches wait patiently for someone to arrive with a favourite book, deckchairs have "snooze in the sun" written all over them and a sparkling pool invites on hot summer days.

DOWN THE GARDEN PATH

Wildekrans isn't the only property in Elgin with lovely gardens, and happily the keen gardeners of the valley are happy to share them with the rest of us. The Elgin Open Gardens is an annual event held each October, allowing the public to admire and enjoy a range of private gardens strung out across the valley.

Last year over two dozen green-thumbed residents opened their lawns and flowerbeds to willing feet and enthusiastic noses. And yes, finding time to stop and smell the roses is compulsory.

On a chilly winter's evening, however, it's the fireplace in the lounge that draws one indoors, along with the promise of a glass of wine from local vineyards. Wildekrans by name perhaps, but it's certainly not wild by nature. The mountains above are rugged, for sure, but there's more than a touch of fine living on offer at this delightful guesthouse. Lots to see and do, great food, outstanding wine... there's little you won't enjoy about a weekend away in this corner of the Cape.

To book a room at Wildekrans, call 028-284-9827 or visit www.wildekrans.co.za. For more information visit www.elginvalley.co.za or www.greenmountain.co.za.



Pieter Visser
of Oak Valley



Sheep sculpted by Wilma
Cruise at Wildekrans





MORE ELGIN MARVELS

- Elgin is not just the place where apples come from, it's also the home of local brand Appletiser. Edmond Lombardi wanted to create something "deliciously sparkled" for his beloved, so in 1966, on Applethwaite Farm, Appletiser was born.
- What started slowly with a few stalls has turned into a must-visit on a Saturday morning. The Elgin Valley Market prides itself on uplifting the community and gives students who've completed entrepreneurship courses through the Elgin Learning Foundation the opportunity to manage stalls and learn about running a small business. Stock up on wine, honey, olives and fresh produce like fish and veggies. You can also have a hearty breakfast or coffee and a cupcake before hitting the road. Every Saturday from 9am to 2pm, next to Peregrine Farm Stall.
- New in town is Old MacDaddy, little sister of Cape Town's ultra-cool art hotel, Daddy Long Legs. Top local artists and designers have been asked to come up with luxurious, functional and innovative designs for the four-star rooms overlooking Elgin's vineyards and fruit orchards.

By Lisa van der Knaap



Wildeckrans
Country House

