

Winter comfort cuisine at the President Hotel

 By [Lauren Hartzenberg](#)

11 Jul 2016

Winter is a tricky season for the restaurant business in Cape Town. Dwindling tourist numbers and Capetonians who lock themselves indoors at the first sign of frost ultimately results in fewer feet through eatery doors. But those not leveraging minimal-degree weather to morph into a grizzly bear can benefit from one of the best perks of the season: winter restaurant specials.



The President Hotel, Bantry Bay, Cape Town.

I'm a long-time fan of these for two reasons. Firstly because it affords me the opportunity to visit restaurants which may ordinarily be out of my price range; and secondly because even when visiting establishments more aligned with my budget, it means more bang for my buck.

The Winter Warmer special at the President Hotel's The Islands Restaurant fits into the latter category, and I was invited to sample the special menu this past Saturday evening. Celebrated for their buffet breakfasts, The Islands Restaurant is now running the daily dinner special offering guests a choice between a one, two, or three course set menu with three to four options for each course. The menu options are R100 for a main course, R145 for two courses, or R190 for the three course menu.

A light start

Stepping inside, the space and décor is simple and unassuming. Slim wooden slated panels and a few paintings adorn the area, but I wouldn't say that there's a noticeable theme in the interior design. However, the towering heaters were blazing and imparted a warm glow onto the walls – and our cheeks – which provided a cosy ambience.



The adjacent Botany Café had some interesting upside-down hanging plants and wicker-covered chairs against a crisp white backdrop, which caught my eye; I imagine it makes for a good lunch spot. It too has a [winter special running](#).

Some fresh rolls were brought to our table, which I attempted to ignore because apparently carbs are evil. Then I discovered the bread was warm... resistance crumbled and I piled on the butter. For shame!



Creamy soup du jour.

For starters I chose the pear, blue cheese and walnut salad cloaked in a light balsamic vinaigrette. It was delightfully fresh and the pears were the sweetest I've tasted. I could have done with a more pungent blue cheese, but this could have easily overpowered what was otherwise a delicate dish, so understandably they erred on the side of caution. My partner had the soup du jour, which was of the butternut variety on this particular evening. It was smooth, creamy and well-seasoned. This was served with a bundle of croutons in the centre of it, and I was told that they maintained their crunch until the last morsel was consumed.

Moreish meats

Mains were next. I opted for the roasted butternut penne pasta, as per the recommendation from our waitress. This came in a sage cream sauce and was topped with pine nuts and parmesan. It was homely and quintessential comfort food; the sauce was light enough to not overwhelm the dish. My partner had the braised shoulder of lamb with soft polenta, red wine jus and homemade tomato chutney. The flavour was deep and delicious with lamb that was cooked perfectly. Forget being able to cut it with a spoon, a gentle breeze would have likely caused the meat to fall apart. Delicious.



Braised lamb shoulder.

The chef then treated us to a specially prepared dish of roast beef, mushroom, buttery mash and smoked onion puree with wine jus. If the extra course was a means to demonstrate the chef's culinary prowess, it worked. The most distinguished diner would be hard-pressed to find a fault with it. Every element on the plate complemented and elevated the next, and the beef was tender, pink and juicy. This was undoubtedly the stand-out dish of the evening, but the bad news is that it's not currently on their menu. I strongly recommended to the waitress that it become a permanent fixture, so fingers crossed.

On to dessert

By this point we were sufficiently stuffed, but we all know there's a separate stomach for dessert so we forged on. My partner went for the chocolate brownie with vanilla pod ice-cream. It was decent, but I would have preferred darker chocolate to be used and for it to be slightly gooier. My second choice was the crème brulee but sadly it wasn't available that evening. This left me with the cheese platter which, let's face it, is still an impressive last resort. The platter comprised generous helpings of five cheeses along with some fresh fruit, nuts, dried fruit and crackers.



An abundance of cheeses.

The President Hotel has partnered with 14 different wine farms and the result is an impressive and extensive wine selection. We washed our meal down with a bottle of Creation Wines 2016 Viognier; it was crisp and wonderfully complex in flavour. Service was friendly and enthusiastic, and our waitress assisted with recommendations when my tendency towards indecision reared its ugly head. On two occasions the managers did their table rounds and engaged with diners in what seemed to be genuine and spirited conversation. This isn't something I come across often, and it perhaps extends from the general service standard of the President Hotel. A perk of hotel dining maybe?

The Winter Warmer menu is well balanced with options to suit every taste. Vegetarians are well catered for but the chef really knocked it out of the park with both meat courses we tried. I'd suggest opting for the two or three course option; the value for money, cosy interior and friendly staff are bound to leave one wanting to linger a little longer.

The Islands Restaurant Winter Warmer special is available for dinner seven nights a week until 31 August 2016. [Click here](#) to view the full menu and call 021 434 8111 to make a reservation.

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