

# Relishing the Cape's wild history at Catharina's

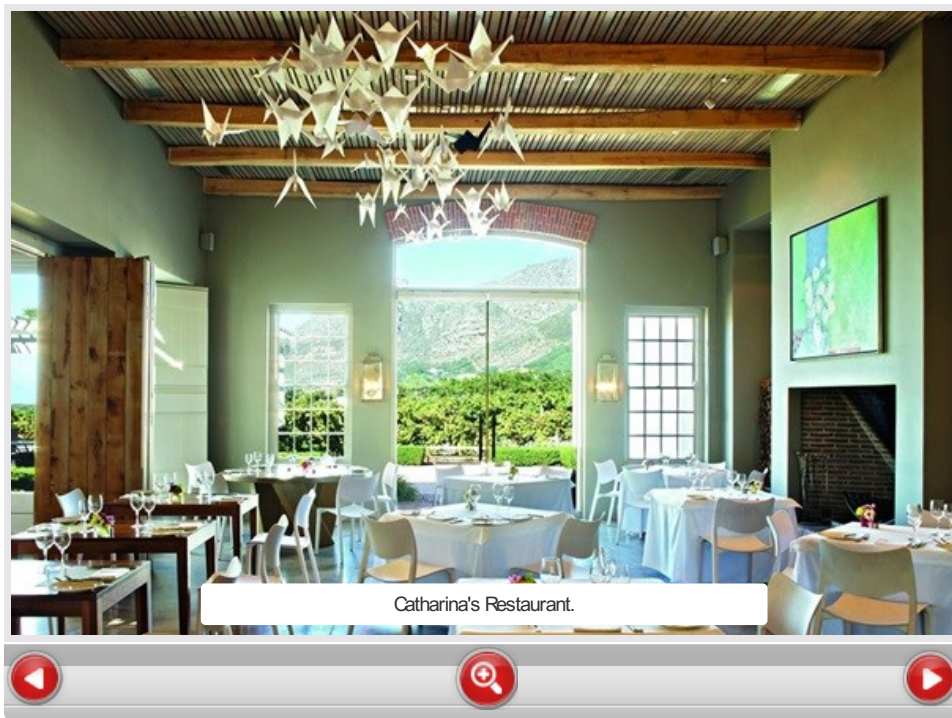
By Leigh Andrews

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Picture Cape Town. Now picture Cape Town in 1662 - an untamed frontier with wild animals roaming the lands and often forming a filling meal, if they didn't get to you first. This is the basis of the 'wild' new tasting menu served at Catharina's on Steenberg Estate.

On the first truly sunny Saturday in months, we were swiftly seated outside at the farm-turned-hotel's rustic wooden tables and chairs and presented with the bread platter before even perusing the menu.

We may have gone hungry otherwise, as that's the ideal backdrop for reading up more about South Africa's first female land owner Catharina 'Tryn' Ras, with the only background noise was that of birdies chirping in the trees, peacocks calling from further along the grounds and geese squabbling to break the green peacefulness. It's happy background noise that made me settle deeper into the comfy chair, pull the blanket tighter around my shoulders (yes, it was still chilly but we weren't going to turn down our outside table), and read up on how the world-renowned wine and cuisine of Catharina's serves as tribute to the woman whose spirit gave rise to Steenberg Estate's enduring legacy.



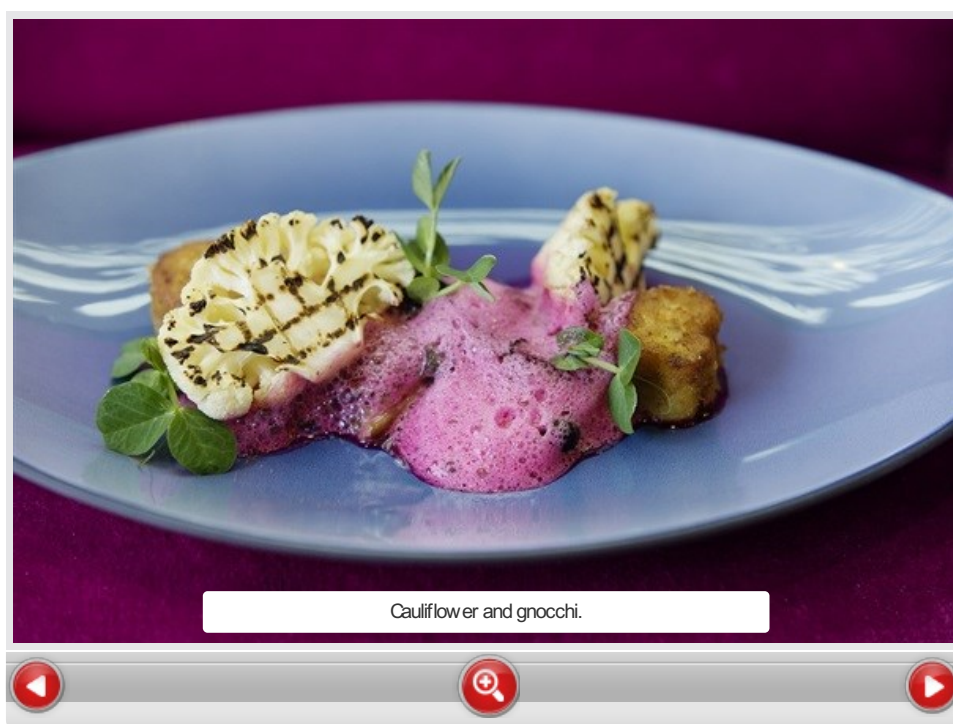
From the story peppered throughout pages of the menu, we learned that Catherina outlived all but one of her five husbands, through times of both poverty and prosperity in the 17th Century Cape. As a 21- or 22-year-old widow from Germany, (with her first husband thought to have either succumbed to scurvy along with the bulk of their fellow travel companions on the *t' Hoff van Zeeland* or died before the journey, where she may have been a stow-away dressed as a man), we were soon immersed in the legend of how she's said to have shot the lion that mauled her second husband while on horseback. Her third was murdered by marauding tribesmen, with her fourth husband crushed by an elephant while out hunting for hippo. This wild, animal-rich history lives on in today's civilised times, with origami swans and 3D 'paper cut-outs' decorating the internal dining area as well as the spotted eagle owl family often spotted in the oak trees outside over breakfast as testament to this. With all this before even giving a thought to what we'd be eating on our lazy lunch that day, it's little surprise my husband went for the eight-course 'wild' tasting menu.

His three starters varied wildly, starting with salmon, shaved fennel and horseradish risotto served in a miniature green Le

Creuset pot; followed by a pleasing portion of cauliflower steak with parmesan gnocchi, mushroom ragout and beetroot in various forms – tiny shiny maroon blocks and a blur of pink foam that tasted like air; followed by seared yellowfin tuna with grilled pear salad and pea purée.

## Comfort food out your comfort zone – crocodile or zebra, anyone?

Deciding to live up to my inner Obelix I went for the a la carte option, my eyes lighting up at the chance to fulfilling a somewhat nerdy childhood dream of the wild boar mains those Gauls often feasted on as I ate up everything on those colourful pages with my eyes. It was everything I'd expected: A somewhat overwhelming portion of slow-cooked rashers that tasted a little like pork belly but slightly fattier and served to perfection on ashy cauliflower rice, sautéed Jerusalem artichoke, broccolini and baby carrots with a splash of butternut puree and blue cheese jus to keep things interesting. That description is quite a mouthful, as was my serving. It was such a huge portion that it kept me going throughout my husband's two mains from the tasting menu – the equally wild crocodile of the whitest, softest tail flesh with garlicky creamed leek and blackened corn salsa, and mains plate two: Tiny turns of smoky grilled zebra loin on smoked aubergine maize meal with chickpeas and toasted pine nut/coriander dressing. Both were beautifully plated and the true stars of the day.



Cauliflower and gnocchi.

Executive chef Archie MacLean, also responsible for front of house duties at Catharina's and the exceptionally busy man behind the meals since April this year, found the time to quickly wipe his hands and regale us with tales of all the produce's provenance: The boar is a pest on a farm near Ceres, the crocodile from a farm north of Pretoria where it's seen as a by-product of that lust over leathery skin. MacLean was a true treat to talk to, enthusiastically explaining in his soft Scottish accent that his new menu may seem a little outlandish to some but it ties in with the story of Catharina's day and what she would have probably eaten – making it all the most pleasurable to savour those flavours. He dubs it 'contemporary heritage, and there's nothing fussy about it, with traditional favourites like jewel-bright chakalaka and maize meal also making an appearance, albeit with a slight twist.

Appetites somewhat revived, we were presented with dessert portions of the suitably named Langbaken Karoo sunset: mature cheese with mustard cracker and *baba ganouche* of sour fig and goji berry, all the colours of a sky on fire; as well as 'the Coffee' panna cotta with Amarula brûlée and cocoa nib ice cream. Feeling less adventurous by now and somewhat defeated by the boar I just went for 'the Chocolate', comprising mousse-y triangles of *cremeaux* offset by crème fraîche sorbet – that may sound out of place but it was so very moreish, especially when washed down with a strong cappuccino.

With warm sunshine on our backs and all that rich food was resulting in "*magies vol, ogies toe*", we bravely forged on through a final dessert platter carefully curated by Chef Archie to showcase 'the Lemon' in a tiny triangular dome of tangy posset, 'the Guava' through a crisp-yet-jammy guava macaron, and 'the Chocolate' in a deliciously fudgy chocolate-ball and the sweetest strawberry capped in crisp chocolate.

Deliciously wild and elegant. We didn't even sample Steenberg's award-winning wine list... Sacrilege!

*\*Leigh Andrews was a guest of Catharina's. The a la carte and tasting menus are both available for lunch and dinner and guests at the same table can order from either menu, seven-days a week. The eight-course tasting menu is R795 without wine pairing and R1100 with. For bookings, contact +27 (0)21 713 7178 or email [reservations@catharinasrestaurant.co.za](mailto:reservations@catharinasrestaurant.co.za). For more on Catharina's history, [click here](#).*

## ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh\_Andrews.

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