

HOTEL

Little place of luxury

Route 62 – the scenic drive that meanders between Cape Town and the Langkloof, taking in small towns along the Breede River Valley and Klein Karoo – has become so popular (thanks, perhaps, to the Ronnie's Sex Shop pub) that it now boasts a five-star boutique hotel.

The Robertson Small Hotel opened in the winelands' town in August, to much acclaim. A good deal of the attraction is that its restaurant, Reuben's, is owned by celebrity Franschhoek chef Reuben Riffel. He designed the menu, but has given free rein to his protégé, executive chef Aviv Liebenberg, who previously worked at Reuben's, Terroir and Bouillabaisse.

Because this Reuben's is a much more intimate space, Liebenberg is able to give greater attention to detail. Expect layers of tastes and textures – foams, jellies and sponges – and seriously good food.

I recommend the dukkah-crust lamb with smoked aubergine, coconut sticky black rice, raita, and coriander foam (R120). Or the pan-fried gnocchi with butternut puree, spinach, mushrooms, balsamic and roasted garlic foam (R72).

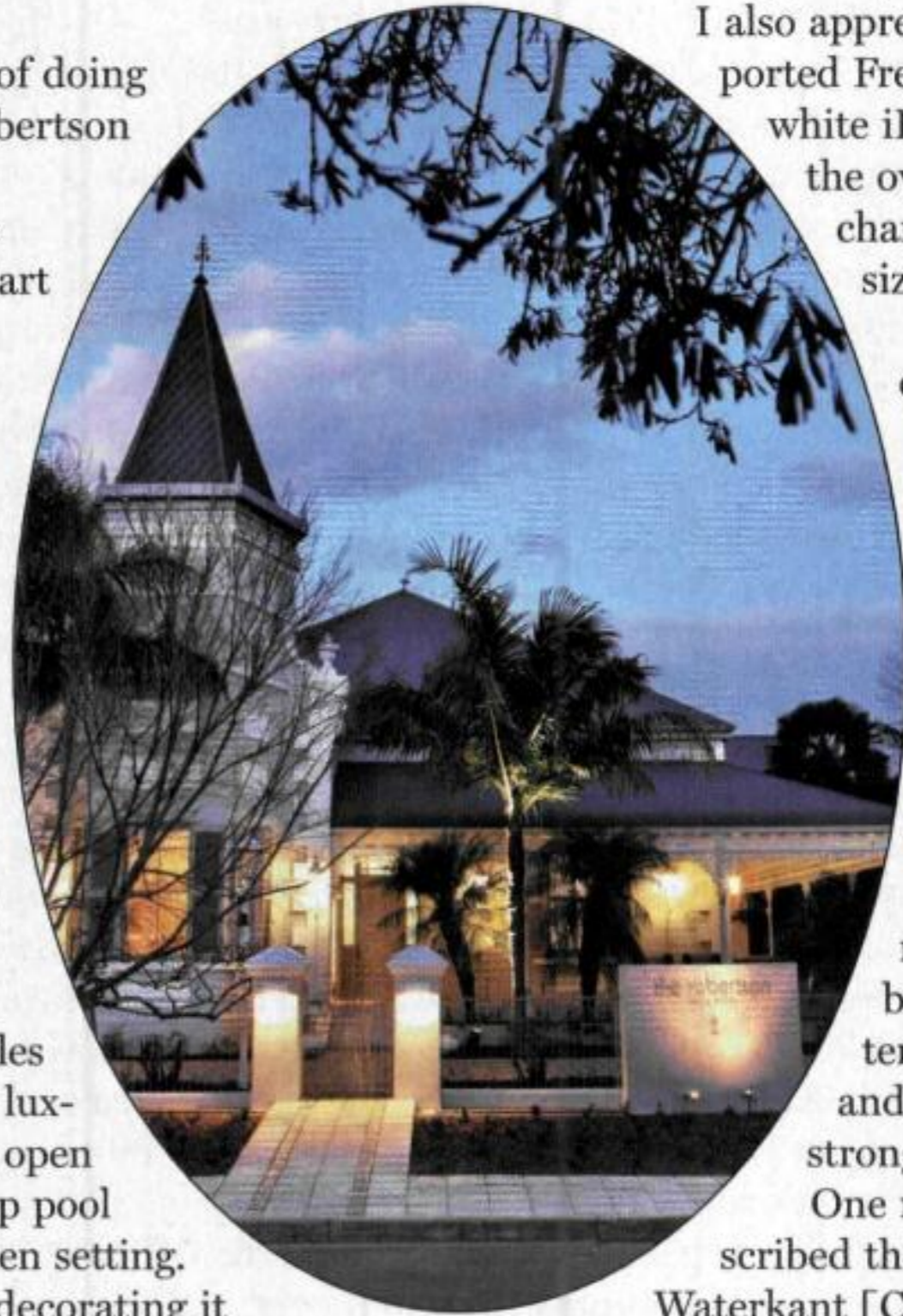
The restaurant is flanked by a temperature-controlled wine room, allowing visitors to enjoy a variety of wines, so it's no surprise to learn that the hotel's owner is Tim Rands, the MD of wine wholesaler Vinimark.

After 20 years of doing business with Robertson wineries, Rands decided the place should have a smart hotel. He had been eyeing the Victorian manor Zandvliet (circa 1909) for years, and when it came up for sale, snapped it up.

Extensive renovations involved merging three neighbouring properties, restoring the stables and creating four luxurious suites that open directly on to a lap pool in a tranquil garden setting.

But instead of decorating it all in period style, as many would have done, Stellenbosch architect Rick Stander and Franschhoek interior designer Nica Maree went to the opposite extreme, creating state-of-the-art contemporary suites with incomparable finishes and every conceivable luxury.

The attention to detail is impressive.



Small things, such as the fact that the design of the little stopper on the condiment jars in the room is repeated in the embroidery on the waitresses' uniforms, are what caught my eye.

I also appreciated the imported French bath products, white iPod docking station, the overscale modern chandelier and king-size, extra-length bed.

Though the facade, pressed ceilings, fireplaces and wooden floors of the original national monument have been retained, everything has been rendered white with touches of grey and sealing-wax red. Against this backdrop, the contemporary fittings and furniture make a strong design statement. One reviewer cattily described the mood as more De

Waterkant [Cape Town's gay quarter] than Die Boland, and noted that "if it weren't for the unbelievable food served up at Reuben's, one would wonder if the local *manne wat jag en visvang* would ever dare to put a dusty veldskoek over the threshold".

In fact, the locals are understandably proud of the new hotel and, of course, many of the wine farm owners know Rands. According to him, 136 people were invited to the launch, 136 people replied and 136 people turned up. This must be some kind of record.

In his opening speech, Rands paid tribute to the valley and its wineries. He told the story of when, 15 years ago, he was attending Vinexpo in Bordeaux and was asked to meet a man from SA who was looking for somebody to talk to. He told the organisers that he was making wine in Robertson and didn't know how to go about selling it. The man was Abrie Bruwer, owner of Springfield Estate, now a household name in SA wine circles.

Bruwer was one of the 136 guests attending the opening night. I bet there wasn't any dust on his veldskoens.

Claire Bisseker



THE ROBERTSON SMALL HOTEL
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Poolside by night