

## A River Runs Through It

From Robertson to Bonnievale a wide fertile valley is patchworked with vineyards, fruit orchards and racehorse stud farms. Flanked by majestic mountains, the Breede River meandering lazily through it, the Robertson Wine Valley feels a world away from the city and has so many gems to explore.

Text Kit Heathcock

Ask any Robertson Valley local what they love about the area and, after rhapsodising about the natural beauty, the river, the birdsong, the glorious mountain views, they'll continue to say, "And the people...". It's a busy farming valley, but people have time to talk, to share their passions and enthusiasms, the rural hospitality is on overload, and visitors *really* are treated like VIPs. It's a place of artisan producers, of family wine estates going back generations (and more recently established boutique farms), the calcium-rich soil making it a natural fit for superb chardonnays and cap classiques (as well as horses and fruit trees).

Farm cottages, guesthouses within the *dorpie* itself, rustic mountain chalets and luxurious ecolodges are just a few of the places to base yourself for a weekend or week in the valley. Some lead onto a private network of mountain trails, others have river frontage enticing you to canoe-borne misty-morning paddles and birdwatching immersion. It's tempting to stay put in nature-infused bliss, but there are things to do and people to meet... "small" gems of experiences to explore. By small we mean intimate – shining gems of experiences, where it's all in the detail. Many are by appointment only, hosted by the owners themselves, so you immediately get on first-name terms with the big heart and generous hospitality of this welcoming rural community.





**Explore the valley on horseback**

The beautiful and well-schooled Boerperd horses at Robertson Horse Adventures are among the best guides in the valley. Horse whisperer Wilke Volschenk chooses the route according to your preferred terrain (vineyards, orchards, riverside or mountain), distance and experience, sharing stories along the way. And if you're celebrating a special occasion, he'll add in a romantic picnic at a suitably idyllic spot. 082 963 8976, [robertsonhorseadventures.co.za](http://robertsonhorseadventures.co.za)

**Slow-food stories at Marbrin**

Tastings at Marbrin Olives are never conventional. Conversations with owners Briony and Clive Heymans are likely to expand beyond olives to flexitarianism, slow food, and beyond, topics they are passionate about as foodies and farmers. You'll taste their olives, olive pastes, extra-virgin olive oil, infused oils and a homemade balsamic reduction, all washed down with homemade limoncello, as you soak up mountain views. Tasting and lunch are by appointment only. 078 916 3606, [marbrin.co.za](http://marbrin.co.za)

**A spritz of palaeontology at Silverthorn**

A tasting with Silverthorn owners John and Karen Loubser at this small family estate on the banks of the Breede River is like visiting friends for a delightful chat. Two decades into their now award-winning cap classique journey, they pour you one delicious glass of bubbles after another, including their limited Prestige Cuvée Jewel Box (always highly rated by Tim Atkin). Stories weave from geology to history, mythology and palaeontology (ask John to show you his fossil collection), helped along occasionally by essential team members: puppy Mae and rescue Harry, the friendly rottweilers. Booking essential. 072 063 3609, [silverthornwines.co.za](http://silverthornwines.co.za)

**A sparkling adventure at Weltevrede**

Deciding where to start at Philip Jonker's family estate is a challenge. The Captivated by Chardonnay journey is an immersive one, delving into the history of winemaking (and leading you through candlelit caves). It's been described as "life-changing, leaving you with goosebumps". There's also a hands-on create-your-own cap classique experience, where you learn everything from disgorging and dosage to corkage and labelling – after which you take your creation home. 023 616 2141, [weltevrede.com](http://weltevrede.com)

**Superb country cuisine at Kapokbos**

One of the top-rated restaurants in the valley, Kapokbos (on Weltevrede Estate) is presided over by husband-and-wife chef team Juan Fourie and Samantha Morris-Fourie. Informal country kitchen in ambience, there's nothing casual about the outstanding flavours they coax from humble local ingredients, including the *kapokbos* (snow bush or wild rosemary) of their name. Exquisite, creative and generous dishes in a tranquil setting with the personal touch from the two chefs, this is one to plan your itinerary around. 023 100 4182, [kapokbos.co.za](http://kapokbos.co.za)



**Cultivar tasting at Rietvallei**

You're treated like a VIP from the minute you arrive at this historic estate that's been in the Burger family for six generations. Relax in the sheltered courtyard while enjoying a variety of cultivars (including cinsault and cabernet franc) that showcase the terroir through a different lens. There's also a muscadel made from the oldest vines in South Africa (planted in 1908), best accompanied by a generous cheese platter. 023 626 3596, [rietvallei.co.za](http://rietvallei.co.za)

1. Previous spread: The Breede River runs through the Robertson Valley
2. The gardens at Weltevrede
3. Superb country cuisine at Kapokbos
4. John Loubser of Silverthorn



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### Heavenly scents at Owl's Rest

The scents of lavender and rose geranium welcome you to Owl's Rest, set in an oasis of olive trees and herbs. Hedley and Patricia Manicom and their small team use a small distiller to extract essential oils, which you'll find in their natural beauty products. Pop into their shop after a farm tour where you'll discover the secrets behind the fragrant products and taste olives as you go (booking is essential). Or pop by the picturesque coffee garden for homemade cordials, coffee and muffins. 023 626 1284, [owlsproducts.co.za](http://owlsproducts.co.za)

### Bubbly and popcorn at Graham Beck

There's nothing small about the experience at Graham Beck, its luxurious tasting room home to some of South Africa's best known cap classiques. But the Sparkle & Pop popcorn pairing might come as a surprise. It sounds bizarre but the incredible flavours conjured up freshly for each tasting take you on a journey of quintessentially South African tastes and set off the four cap classiques to perfection. Book ahead so that your popcorn is popping as you walk through the door, and take time to admire the eclectic fine-art collection. 023 626 1214, [grahambeck.com](http://grahambeck.com)

### Fascinating cacti at Sheilam

You don't have to be a gardener to be fascinated by succulents and cacti. Established in 1954, Sheilam Cactus Garden and Nursery is home to almost 2 000 species from all over the world, including the stunning *Aloe dichotoma* (quivertree) from Namaqualand and a one-metre-tall specimen of the golden barrel cactus from Mexico. You're welcome to drop in and wander, but booking ahead for a guided tour (Tuesday to Thursday) guarantees you don't miss out on any of the fascinating plants and stories. 023 626 4133, [sheilamnursery.com](http://sheilamnursery.com)

### Charcuterie platters at Kleinhoekkloof

Not content with handcrafting award-winning small-batch wines from the wisps of vineyards on the slopes of the Langeberg Mountains, owner and winemaker Theunis de Jongh makes his own charcuterie from Glen Oakes pigs. Curing and smoking a smorgasbord of cuts and styles, from *coppa* and *culatello* to mountain ham and *saucisson sec*, he showcases them on superb platters that accompany his by-appointment-only wine-tastings perfectly. It's an experience wellworth winding your way to the top of the long kloof for (take the road from Ashton). 064 678 8804, [kleinhoekkloof.co.za](http://kleinhoekkloof.co.za)

### Cellar tour at Springfield

Springfield's reputation for beautifully crafted minimal intervention wines is far-reaching, Life from a Stone and Miss Lucy just two that beguile wine-lovers near and far. The Bruwer family offer wine-tastings on the lawns overlooking the farm dam, where guests are welcome to linger over their tasting glasses. Don't miss the free cellar tours (weekdays only) for further insight into their wine philosophy. 023 626 3661, [springfieldestate.com](http://springfieldestate.com)

### Personalised tastings at Arendsig

Winemaker and owner Lourens van der Westhuizen has poured endless passion into the family farm where he grew up as fifth-generation vine grower (and first-generation winemaker). He's focused on making site-specific wines from single vineyards that relate to the honesty of the terroir. Stories aplenty are what you get at the personal wine-tasting with him (by appointment), and tastings often segue into sitting out by the river and soaking up the views. 023 616 2835, [arendsig.co.za](http://arendsig.co.za)

1. Graham Beck's impressive tasting room
2. The coffee garden at Owl's Nest
3. A fine display of cacti at Sheilam
4. The wine cellar at Springfield



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### Garden tour of Van Loveren

The oasis of a garden planted by founding matriarch, Jean Retief, is something guests glimpse after a tasting while enjoying lunch on the terrace of Christina's Bistro at this popular family-friendly wine estate. But the garden has so many stories to tell those who get up and explore. Jean planted the now venerable trees to commemorate family and historical occasions, from the end of World War Two to Nelson Mandela becoming South Africa's president in 1994. Take a guided tour with a glass of bubbly, or ask for the explanatory leaflet and wander on your own. 023 615 1505, [vanloveren.co.za](http://vanloveren.co.za)

### Scenic river ride

Floating lazily down the smooth waters of the wide Breede River from Viljoensdrift Fine Wines on a flat-bottomed river boat (named *Uncle Ben 2*) reveals the magic of the valley from a new perspective. Birds darting in the reeds, yellowwoods and wild olives backed by mountains, a light river breeze and a picnic basket of goodies that you fill for yourself in the farm deli along with a bottle of wine or two. It's 50 minutes of laidback, family-friendly delight. 023 615 1017, [viljoensdrift.co.za](http://viljoensdrift.co.za)

### Wine-blending at Excelsior

Channel your inner winemaker and let your palate loose on blending your own wine. The starting wines (a cabernet sauvignon, merlot and shiraz from the De Wet family wine estate) are so good, you can't help but get great results. Start off by tasting the individual components from the barrels, guided by the tasting-room staff. Decide on your blend, bottle and cork it, then design your own label. After that, you're free to explore the old manor house and wander the rose garden maze. 023 615 1980, [excelsior.co.za](http://excelsior.co.za)

### Vintage train ride

Puffing away through the vineyards and hills of the Langeberg valley, the New Cape Central Railway is a steam-train ride with a difference. Each of the four restored carriages is home to a different wine-tasting experience, with one coach devoted to wood-fired pizzas, platters and craft beers. Over the course of the three-to four-hour journey, taste your way through the Bonnievale Wines, La Verne Wine Boutique and Robertson Winery coaches. There are stops to take photographs and stretch your legs at Graham Beck and at Nuy station, where a collection of old vintage tractors keeps up with the old-world theme. 083 440 7868, [nccr.co.za](http://nccr.co.za)



### The dawn of a new wine

The ancient lime-rich soils of the Robertson Valley, so perfectly suited to chardonnay and cap classique, have inspired a handful of visionary producers to establish a brand-new wine category: Calcrete, a project that began in 2022. Some call it Robertson's answer to Chablis... in that it's a terroir-specific style of unwooded chardonnay distinguished by an elegant minerality and crystalline clarity. Only grown in the Bonnievale-Robertson region, aspiring wines are tasted and judged each year by the *Calcrete Custodians* panel of producers, who bestow the honour of including the Calcrete name on the label. Look out for Calcretes from Weltevrede, De Wetshof, Rietvallei, Excelsior and Van Loveren on your tasting journey through the valley. Or design your own itinerary to get to know these beautifully crafted wines in person.

1. Blend your own wine at Excelsior
2. Christina's Bistro at Van Loveren
3. Beautifully restored Penhill Farm
4. The Grand Hotel in Robertson
5. Black House's rich interior decor



### Where to Stay

#### Penhill Farm

A country retreat in the Nuy Valley, this is Karoo farm living with an authentic deluxe spin. The beautifully restored Cape Dutch Manor sleeps eight, with four more two-bedroom cottages around the farm. Breathtaking views, gardens and swimming pools, plus a farm dam for kayak play, and trails for hiking and biking, make it an enchanting escape for families. It's also home to The Cellars Restaurant, a renowned local dining destination for long-table feasts. 078 800 5155, [penhill.co.za](http://penhill.co.za)

#### Black House

An old Victorian home in the quiet residential heart of Robertson has undergone a sympathetic and eye-catching stylish transformation into a captivating holiday home. Antiques, Art Deco, Africana and contemporary design pieces create a homely but visually rich ambience. With three bedrooms, a well-equipped kitchen and lush garden (home to weaver birds, fruit trees, outdoor shower and swimming pool), and beautiful welcoming touches such as lemon meringue pie and fresh fruits, it's a blissful spot for a relaxed getaway. 072 444 8972, [blackhouserobertson.co.za](http://blackhouserobertson.co.za)

#### The Robertson Small Hotel

In the heart of Robertson, this stunning five-star property radiates carefully considered design at every turn... from the Michael Chandler-designed bar to beautiful artworks and high-end features and finishes. Eleven ensuite rooms include pool suites in the serene gardens and airy rooms in the Victorian manor house with its wide, shady verandah. An impression of space and light prevails, on an intimate scale with a personal touch and unforgettable service. Sip an innovative cocktail at the Em Bar, dine at the Small restaurant, and relax at the Zest Spa. 023 880 0611, [thelivingjourneycollection.co.za](http://thelivingjourneycollection.co.za)



**The Grand Hotel**

An historic landmark of the Robertson townscape, the Grand is fresh from a complete renovation that has preserved the late Victorian heritage (think high ceilings and beautiful fireplaces) and added layer upon layer of contemporary comfort. The nine spacious rooms, and a two-bedroom cottage, are named after Robertson wine farms (your stay includes a ride in the owner’s London black taxi to the estate that inspired your suite). Then relax on the patio beside the swimming pool in the internal courtyard and dine at the on-site restaurant. **023 100 0522, thegrandhotel.co.za**

**Mo & Rose**

The stunning Soekershof cactus garden (with towering 100-year-old cacti) is just one of the beauties to delight in at this charming guesthouse in the Klaasvoogds valley just outside town. It’s a nature-infused sanctuary where a sugarbird might flit across the garden just outside your private patio (all eight spacious suites open out onto the botanical gardens or the swimming-pool lawns). Be sure to book in at the restaurant, which celebrates local ingredients in fresh and innovative combinations. **071 512 6197, moandrose.co.za**

**Middelpunt Branch**

Spaced far apart on a family fruit-and-vegetable farm surrounded by the Langeberg Mountains, two solar-powered cottages (one-bedroom Salt Cottage and two-bedroom Pepper Cottage) take in the scenic views, fresh air and utter tranquillity. The interiors are simple, subtly luxurious and sleek, with nothing superfluous or distracting. The “art” on the walls comes from windows framing natural landscapes. The daily rituals of rural relaxation can be enjoyed at dining tables indoors and out, beside the braai fire, from your morning shower, and from the perfectly positioned hot tub. **082 314 4997, middelpuntbranch.co.za**

- 1. *The Robertson Small Hotel*
- 2. *Boutique guesthouse Mo & Rose*



**Beuld**

Whether you’re looking for a destination wedding venue or a tranquil weekend retreat, Beuld has everything you need (and a few things you didn’t know you needed until now). Nestled on a view-drenched flower farm in the Robertson Valley, the picturesque property boasts two luxury two-bedroom

cottages – Cellar 1947 (which has its own underground cellar) and the more intimate Cellar 1980 (with a wood-fired hot tub) – as well as eight luxurious pods in the new Cellar District. There’s also Ragazzi, an Italian-inspired fine-dining restaurant, and all the wide open space you could ask for. **076 391 1814, cellarrobertson.co.za**

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