



ENTERTAINING

# Master chef

The original celebrity chef Albert Roux is a legend in the culinary world. It was with great anticipation that FIONA MCDONALD met him on Vondeling wine farm where he showcased classic Le Gavroche dishes

Photographs by DANIE NEL



Albert Roux



### Menu

*Salted salmon Claudine (salted salmon and trout mousse parcels)*

*Gratin of lobster, langoustine and prawns*

*Herb crusted rack of lamb with its juice, potatoes dauphinoise and green beans*

*Stewed pears with crisp biscuit and raspberry coulis*



Albert Roux and Pete Goffe-Wood



Albert Roux has received some of France and Britain's highest honours, holding both an OBE and a French knighthood. But that didn't stop him from smuggling in organic salmon, new season spring lamb, unpasteurised Reblochon cheese and a few other key ingredients on a recent visit to South Africa.

Albert, the founder of London's famed Le Gavroche restaurant with his brother Michel – the first UK establishment to be awarded, firstly, a Michelin star and then the ultimate three Michelin stars – felt the subterfuge was necessary to replicate a few of the restaurant's signature dishes at a recent lunch at Vondeling wine farm.

"I used to be very anti-South Africa," he candidly admits. "I wanted nothing to do with anything South African – not the beautiful food, the people or the place, nothing!" As a young man who also once considered the priesthood as a vocation, Albert abhorred apartheid. But the love of a good woman and the transition to democracy changed that. Albert's wife Cheryl is an ex-Zimbabwean who used to live in South Africa. "She often spoke about how beautiful the country and the people were, and

it's easy to understand Matthew's passion for this relatively unspoilt area. It's covered in fynbos and the Paardeberg towers over Vondeling. "The Paardeberg is like an island surrounded by wine farms; on that mountain are plants that are found nowhere else." One of those plants is *Babiana noctiflora*, which gave the wooded white blend of chenin blanc (54 percent), vignier (20 percent) and chardonnay (16 percent) its name. The shiraz was also supposed to have a complicated botanical name, but cool heads prevailed and it became Erica Shiraz.

"The starter is a very simple salmon and trout mousse wrapped in organic smoked salmon. It's one of the first specials offered at Le Gavroche 42 years ago and it goes very well with the Vondeling Petit Blanc," Albert says. Matthew explains that the Petit Blanc is an uncooked blend of chenin blanc (50 percent) with a touch of vignier and chardonnay (20 percent each).

"I used some local seafood for the second course. Lovely prawns and langoustes – you call them rock lobster here – could not possibly have been fresher," Albert says. Local chef Pete Goffe-Wood assisted Albert in the preparation of the meal and admitted picking up some useful tips from the master.

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after the political changes I wanted to experience that beauty."

Albert Roux is regarded as the original celebrity chef who is responsible for giving the British an appreciation for good food – and also for training some great chefs: both Marco Pierre White and Gordon Ramsay trained under him.

He set up Le Gavroche in 1967 with six investors who each contributed just £500. "There were only about three or four restaurants in London – and they were all for the upper class. There wasn't a culture of dining out, certainly not for the middle class. Food was simply viewed, much like we view petrol, as fuel for the body to keep it going," he explains. He attributes the change in British attitudes to both food and wine to their love of cheap travel: it exposed them to different flavours and they searched them out once home.

Albert's current visit to South Africa is his third in two years. "My first trip was on a cruise in 2006 – most enjoyable because our dogs could join us. The ship called in at Cape Town for a few days and I thoroughly enjoyed that. There is no doubt that Cape Town has become a world destination."

His second visit was last year with his son, current Le Gavroche chef patron Michel Jr., to cook some of the dishes featured in the book *Vin de Constance*, the collaboration between Michel and Klein Constantia. It was named the best book on food and wine pairing at the Gourmand World Cookbook awards in 2006.

This time around, he's at the winery of good friend and Vondeling co-owner Anthony Ward, replicating a few of Le Gavroche's signature dishes and pairing them with Vondeling wines.

Lunch kicks off with crisply chilled Vondeling Sauvignon Blanc 2007 in the pool house, with its spectacular views of the undiscovered Voor Paardeberg region. "I can't understand why more people don't know about it," muses winemaker Matthew Copeland. "It won't remain undiscovered for much longer, because it's producing some fabulous wines."

"The rack of new season lamb – lovely spring lamb – well, there's no need to elaborate. The lamb must speak for itself so we kept it simple with a herb crust and the classic accompaniment of haricots vert, French green beans, and potatoes dauphinoise.

Before serving the cheese Albert quips that if anyone is pregnant they should not partake as the cheeses were unpasteurised – "but if it only happened last night, not to worry..." Even the dessert, another Le Gavroche classic, is accompanied by his wry humour. "We've simply poached your wonderful local pears in sugar syrup and served them on bavaresis cream and with raspberry coulis. I wish we could get these wonderful green pears in London. They're magnificent for juicing and also for throwing at the police during demonstrations because they are so nice and hard!"

As the afternoon winds down, Albert shares a glass of wine and an anecdote or two. This is a man who has cooked for such diverse personalities as the Queen, Winston Churchill, Muhammad Ali and too many movie stars to recall, and Le Gavroche is renowned for offering one of the greatest value lunches in London at just £48.

One lunch was particularly memorable from a wine perspective. A couple entered the restaurant and started with a bottle of Krug Clos de Mesnil, about £500 a bottle. Then a bottle of Montrachet followed at around £1,000; followed by a bottle of Romanée-Conti La Tache at about £4,000. "They called the sommelier over and said the wine was too young, so they requested that it be sent to the chef with their compliments... and asked him to bring another older vintage!" Albert exclaims. They finished off with a bottle of 1967 Chateau d'Yquem – one of the greatest vintages of the Sauternes on record. In all, that lunch cost £16,500 for two people. "The most important thing was that they had enjoyed themselves, having wonderful wine with their lunch – as we did today," he concludes.

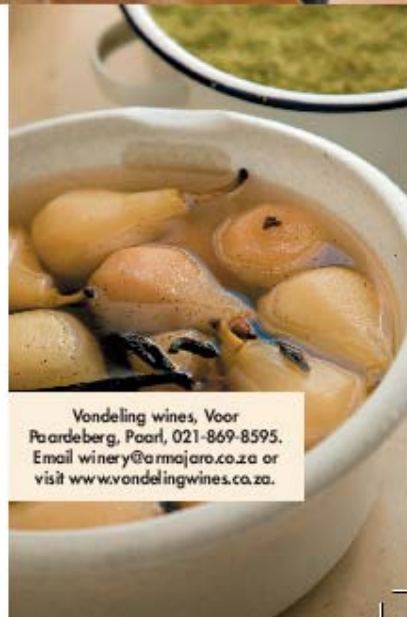


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Vondeling viticulturalist Julian Johnston, Cheryl and Albert Roux and Pete Goffe-Wood



Pete Goffe-Wood



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