

HOUSE

AND LEISURE

Vol. 1 : Autumn / Winter 2021

escape

A celebration of space



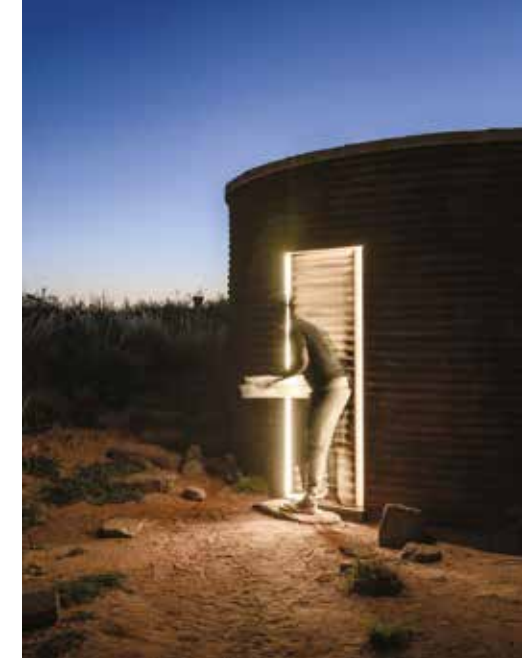
R130 (incl VAT)





the burrow

Located in the middle of the 114 000-hectare Tswalu Kalahari Reserve,
Klein JAN restaurant takes experiential dining to another level – underground

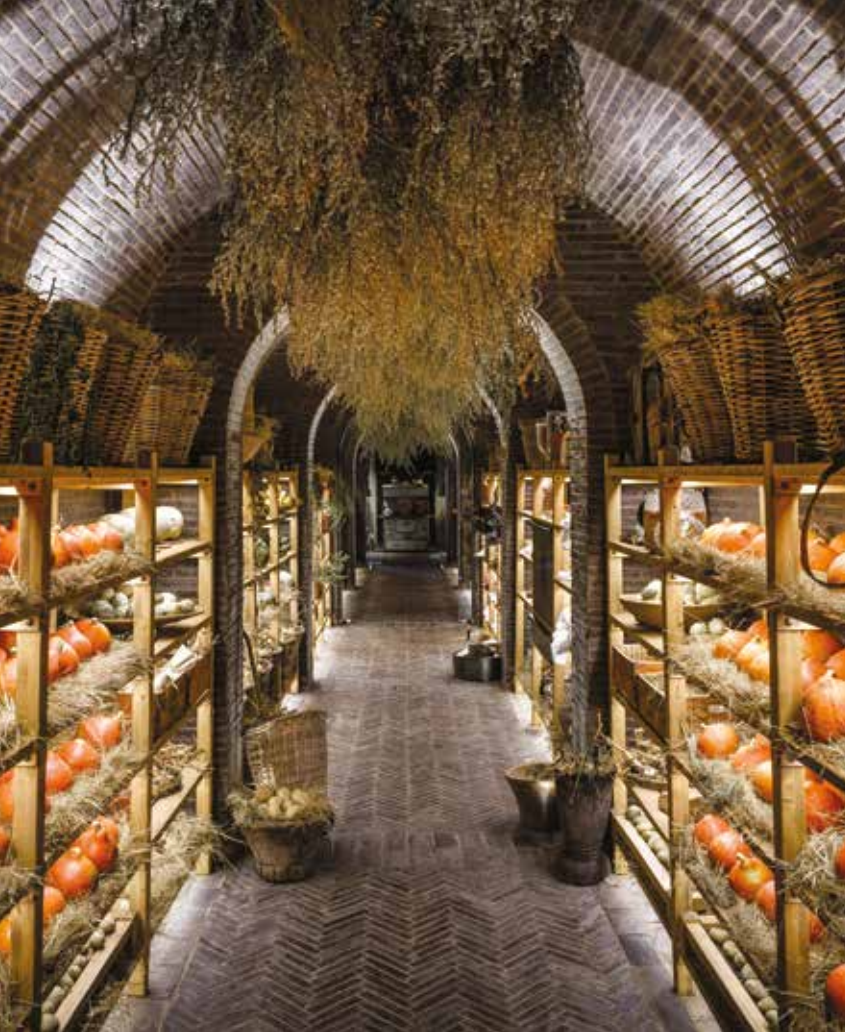


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'Would you come with me?' asks Jan. He begins to walk away and turns back to us with a glint in his eye. 'Bring your drinks.' We've been sipping on Kalahari Klassiek – an awarded Methode Cap Classique produced by Die Mas located near Upington – and enjoying canapés on the stoep of Boscia House. The unassuming 100-year-old property is the site of Klein JAN, Jan Hendrik van der Westhuizen's long-awaited landmark South African restaurant on the Tswalu Kalahari Reserve in the Northern Cape. This original tin-roofed frontier house has been restored and charmingly appointed with furniture and decor that takes you back in time. Intrigued, we follow Jan inside, passing through the delicious-smelling kitchen, the cosy domestic scene belying the sophisticated culinary setup cleverly concealed behind vintage kitchen doors. Outside the back door in the red-dirt erf stands a windmill, *plaasdam* (farm dam) and washing line, starched linen moving imperceptibly in the still Kalahari evening. Jan walks towards a rectangle of light visible in the side of the dam and beckons us over. (Continued on p144)

Previous spread Boscia House is named for the old Boscia or Shepherd's tree that stands in front of it. Great care was taken not to disturb the tree's roots in the restoration of the building and excavation of the restaurant. The land gives no clues as to what lies beneath the ground. **Left** Water storage is essential for a farmhouse in the Kalahari, and here the reservoir has been transformed into a mystical portal, named the 'petrichor', which allows guests to embark on a culinary journey into the earth.



Above The repetitive archways in the root cellar give it the appearance of a mirrored room. **Top right** Water cascades from an oculus at the top of the petrichor. **Right** Jan's grandmother's coal stove holds pride of place. **Below** A starter of flamed-grilled pumpkin, 'wors sauce' (braaied boerewors, blended with cream and reduced), grapes, pistachios and spekboom – all from the area. **Opposite** The main restaurant is one open-plan space with the kitchen island at its centre. The bar is stocked with hand-labelled bottles filled with home-made liquors and spirits that Jan has sourced from around the Northern Cape.





The sound of stirring classical music and falling water drifts out from the illuminated portal that Jan holds open for us. We enter the curious dam-turned-bunker and descend the evocatively uplit suspended spiral staircase, taking in the smell of wet earth as water cascades down from the oculus above into a circular pool. This is a full sensory immersion.

Adrian Davidson, design director of Savile Row Architects, worked with Jan to bring the concept to life. Challenged by the diminutive size of Boscia House and reluctant to alter it dramatically, the idea was born to go underground, thereby concealing a modern addition and preserving the historic Kalahari farm narrative. The question was how.

'We knew that whatever we built above ground to move guests from Boscia House to the main restaurant needed to look like it was part of the original farm,' explains Adrian. Water storage is an essential requirement on any remote desert plot and the idea developed to use a reservoir as the gateway underground. The structure has been named the 'petrichor', a term that describes the distinctive earthy scent produced when rain falls on dry soil. Adrian describes it as 'a spacial palate cleanser' preparing you for a new experience.

Following the lead of many burrowing desert creatures, to submerge the building had thermal benefits, too, promoting heat retention on chilly nights and keeping it naturally cool on sweltering days. Temperature regulation was an important consideration when it came to Jan's brief for a root cellar. While Adrian problem-solved around how to make the impressive 25-metre long 'infinity' cellar structurally sound, Jan spent time researching food preservation methods and indigenous ingredients. Adamant on sourcing as locally as possible, he travelled the Northern Cape to meet farmers and suppliers to establish relationships and sample their produce.

Beyond its practical application, the root cellar is the next part of the guests' culinary journey. As the music swells dramatically around us, Jan slowly leads us through the space, explaining the provenance of the colourful bounty that lines the shelves in various states of preservation. He points to raw ingredients that will eventually end up on our plates, such as potatoes that have been curing on a bed of Kalahari salt for three weeks, and dry-aged fillet. He intends on developing and changing the menu every six months.

The feast is not just visual. We're encouraged to close our mouths, which have been held open in perpetual wonder, around a juicy globe of a grape from the banks of the Orange River. It turns out to be filled with sharp goat's milk cheese from Upington. There are sweet, smoky dates to sample, too, stuffed with a crispy caramelised walnut. The final section of the cellar showcases boutique wines from the region, a noteworthy up-and-coming outlier in the South African wine world.

The pantry wonderland culminates in the homely 'sop-en-brood' (soup-and-bread) room with a vintage coal stove spotlighted at its centre. This is not just any stove: it belonged to Jan's Ouma Maria, one of his original cooking instructors. After the cathedral-like klompie brick archways of the root cellar – its produce reverently arranged for worship – it strikes me that we have arrived at the altar. 'Sitting in the centre of the building, this space represents the heart of Klein JAN in many ways,' says Adrian.

It's fitting that cooking classes will be held here in sight of the stove where Jan – or Klein Jan as he was called as a boy to differentiate him from the other Jans on the farmyard – performed his early apprenticeship with his grandmother. 'Mindful of the power of food to trigger memory, we were initially much more interested in defining the sensory elements; the primal thing that touches your heart,' Adrian explains of the collaborative design process. 'This allowed us to better imagine what emotion each unique space or moment on this journey should evoke.' Here you're enveloped in the comforting, nostalgic smell of freshly baked bread.

'You don't want to miss the sunset,' Jan prompts as two doors slide open to reveal what he calls the 'new Kalahari': the contemporary 20-person restaurant that opens up seamlessly into the landscape and a sky painted pink by the setting sun. 'Beyond the reference to my childhood name, "klein" is a play on words,' shares Jan. 'It creates an expectation of smallness, which is also what you believe when you arrive at a small little farmhouse in the middle of the Kalahari. But, like the setting, it's so much bigger.'

The experience continues on the plate with elegant yet honest dishes that celebrate South African flavours and showcase the thoughtfully sourced local ingredients, complemented by regional wines. 'As chefs, we tend to look too far for inspiration. All of the dishes have some kind of connection to my childhood. It's my style of storytelling.' Each course is a wonderful representation of this three-year-long project: an imaginative, transportive overall vision made up of considered individual elements and exceptional attention to detail, all woven together in a singular narrative. ●

Experience the magic of Klein JAN, Tswalu and the Kalahari for yourself. Visit houseandleisure.co.za/tswalu/ for details on current offers.

Klein JAN [janonline.com/restaurant-klein-jan/]; Tswalu [tswalu.com]; Savile Row [savilerow.co.za]

Right The dining chairs are an example of how Jan has intentionally married old and new in the main restaurant. They're made from French oak wine barrels and Kalahari cow leather, and are draped with local sheepskin. **Following spread** 'My brief was to ensure the restaurant nestles into the environment,' says landscaper Dawid Klopper. 'I recreated some dunes and "planted" the area with dead trees to provide perches for local birds. The seeds in their droppings will grow and establish a natural balance and beautiful ecology.'



