

Gluttonous gallivanting

KATY CHANCE learns a thing or two about eating, drinking and the delights of a gourmet getaway

IN SITU cooking courses are nothing new. You can spend a week in Tuscany learning how to make Italian classics; or you could spend three days in the heart of Paris, up at dawn scouring the markets for produce to be taken back to a restaurant or private kitchen to learn how to prepare it *parfaitment* – to perfection.

Unfortunately, these types are likely to warrant taking out a second bond. Just three days in Paris for one course would have set me back R25 000 – before flights and accommodation.

So here's a better (and considerably more fun) plan: go local – as many overseas visitors are doing. SAMP & Soufflé is a South African outfit that have perfected the gourmet getaway – a weekend not only about standing, stirring and hoping there isn't an exam, but also about sitting back enjoying a glass of excellent local wine, watching a professional do all the hard work as you nod approvingly and make the occasional note.

SAMP & Soufflé organise events from a simple interactive lunch with a top chef anywhere in the country – these are great for corporate workshops because you can gang up and force the MD to peel the potatoes – to one night of feasting in the Karoo or a two-night weekend in the bush, in the heart of Cape Town or in SA's food and wine capital, Franschhoek.

I joined them for a "grape-stomping and interactive cooking weekend" – really a "gluttony and sheer indulgence weekend" – in Franschhoek.

Specific venues, chefs, restaurants, producers and wine estates may change with every trip, as they like to mix things up and sample the best the country has to offer, and as SAMP & Soufflé customise weekends or events, some may never be repeated. However, a few

weekends are guaranteed, and one around the grape harvesting in Franschhoek and other parts of the Cape winelands is one of them.

Our host hotel for the two nights was Le Franschhoek which holds an enviable, elevated position in the Franschhoek pass. The rooms are compact but excellently designed, and the views and service are outstanding.

The hotel is surrounded by mountains, with no sign of other civilisation. There are no banjo-playing mouth-breathers, however, just a white, minimalist sense of serenity and G&T on the verandah before supper.

The first evening we ate at the famed Reuben's in Franschhoek – and transfers to venues throughout the weekend are arranged, which means you can drink and get really merry.

Reuben Riffel has rightly claimed his place among the country's top 10 chefs and the evening's meal didn't disappoint. It's a great way to start the weekend, with absolutely no work required on the part of the paying guests.

Come Saturday, we were expected to be a little more proactive. Our first stop was the Vineyard Brasserie off Franschhoek's main road. Here we tasted the area's finest cheeses while sitting under a shady tree enjoying wines from La Petite Ferme (the oaked Semillon and Chardonnay were superb). Of the cheese the Ash goats cheese and Truckles Gorgonzola were a hit. Much spending ensued.

After that we were on to Rickety Bridge Winery for grape picking, stomping and more drinking, eating and purchasing.

AFTER being shown our allocated rows of vines, handed a well-oiled pair of secateurs and our own crate, we were off. It's amazing how soon one is an expert. Within minutes I was discarding entire bunches as too "verlep" or trimming individual grapes from a bunch I considered worth saving. Throwing our crates into the back of a truck, followed by ourselves, we soon found ourselves ankle deep in grapes we had picked. (If the Rickety Bridge 2008 Merlot turns out to be a little gamey, you'll know why.)

We then had lunch and a wine-tasting outside with the vines we had plundered in front of us. SAMP & Soufflé ensured some of our favourite cheeses from the morning's sampling were included on the platters at lunch.

That evening, our favourite wines from the tasting at Rickety Bridge accompanied our evening meal. Life, and its enjoyment, is in this kind of detail.

It was a tiring day, in a spoilt,



EATING ODYSSEY: Above, stomping grapes at Rickety Bridge, better than a foot massage; below right, a rapt audience at Waterfall River Farm; below left top, the elegant calm before the eating storm; below left bottom, the frantic workings of a commercial kitchen. Pictures: KATY CHANCE and SAMP & SOUFFLÉ

INFO CENTRE

SAMP & Soufflé organise customised interactive cooking events from chocolate or chilli workshops to gourmet getaways around the country. A weekend tour for eight to 12 people costs between R2 000 and R8 000 a person and a single-day event between R500 and R1 000 a person, depending on the itinerary. Prices include all meals and ingredients, tuition, wines, accommodation and information packs with recipes.



over-fed kind of way, yet with a few hours free in the afternoon some still found the energy to charge around Franschhoek raiding its stores of truffle oil and assorted dips. Others took advantage of Le Franschhoek's excellent air-conditioning to refresh themselves before the evening's "interactive dinner" with chef Craig Cormack at Allée Bleu's Café Bleu.

We had the small, bistro-style restaurant to ourselves. With three courses to be made – Mushroom tortellini followed by Linefish with Waldorf risotto, finishing with Chocolate torte – Craig demonstrated preparing each one before dividing us into groups of three, each assigned a course.

Despite there being "only" 12 of us, the small kitchen with Craig and assistant chef, Greg Friend, the place was a riot.

THE chaos of producing food not just for fun but to be eaten by others, in a working kitchen, was thrilling. It's easy to see why the F-word of Gordon Ramsay fame is so prevalent in professional kitchens, where if one breakdown in the chain of events that is a gourmet meal occurs, everything hits the fan.

At times the place sounded like a whiney classroom, with plaintive cries about flames expiring and pasta not complying.

Craig or Greg would calmly re-light the gas – my risotto required it – which would momentarily engulf their hand in flames, taking the hair off their knuckles. It was a long, late night and working so close to the heat, the sharp edges and the low-grade panic behind the scenes made me rethink the way I respond to eating out at a restaurant that gets it right. I shall be more deferent in future.

Sunday went from a fast roil to a slow simmer, slowing ultimately



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to a chilled and languid lunch at Waterfall River Olive Farm, which won the Consol Trophy for the Best Olive Oil for 2006. The private farm and residence is set a few kilometres back from what is, in comparison, the madcap world of Franschhoek proper.

Owner, olive-oil maker and foodie Silvana Atkinson has the exotic accent of an Argentinian woman brought up by Italians, and has the envious ability to create magnificent food without a hair daring to fall out of place.

One person at a time was expected to lazily stir something or sieve something else, but if you felt compelled to sit and watch Silvana do the work in her gorgeous kitchen, you could.

But we all got stuck in stuffing the quails, which was even more

visceral than stomping grapes. One woman managed to stuff the legs back inside the quail; even the dead bird seemed shocked.

The meal of an idiosyncratic gazpacho, stuffed quail with pomegranate then cream caramel, was perfection.

SAMP & Soufflé are constantly evolving their itineraries but I hope that Waterfall farm is one place they return to; it was incomparable.

And, of course, you could buy award-winning oil and the Waterfall River Shiraz from the farm.

The weekend was an orgy of eating, drinking and shopping. What more could one ask for?

■ The writer was hosted by SAMP & Soufflé, (011) 728-4032 www.sampsouffle.com