FOOD & DRINK

WINE COUNTRY WITH A WILD SIDE

From a fynbos safari to a lagoon cruise, these Cape wine experiences pair exceptional wines with unforgettable landscapes

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By Jared Ruttenberg

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Wildlife, wilderness and world-class wine come together at Idiom Wines and Benguela Cove, where every glass is paired with extraordinary scenery. Picture:

Wine routes fan out from Cape Town in every direction, making it difficult to choose where to begin. Touching down from London after a few months abroad, I was in search of something unique, hoping to combine the three things I had missed most about home: wildlife, wilderness and wine.

Idiom Wines



The Idiom Wine Tasting Centre combines contemporary architecture with panoramic views. Picture: Jared Ruttenberg

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All that glitters:

With Idiom Wines, the approach is one of anticipation, as the road winds higher through farmland; every minute the towering mountains draw closer. Eventually, the impressive Idiom Restaurant & Idiom Wine Tasting Centre comes into view: an artwork itself, with stone arches as nods to the mountains and glass walls that surrender to the views. It's no wonder Idiom has clinched awards titled "Best Panoramic View" and "Best Wine Tourism Experience".



Guests can explore the estate on a guided eco-safari through the reserve. Picture: Jared Ruttenberg

I'm invited to start with a unique introduction to the terroir: Idiom Wines offers a two-hour eco-safari through its reserve, taking in pristine fynbos belts, wildlife and towering mountains. With just over 10% under vine, vast swathes of land sit at the foothills of the mountains. Our guide Andrew, boasting a master's in restoration ecology, was perfectly poised to give us an introduction to the flora and fauna that shared the land — including zebra, springbok, bontebok and blue wildebeest.

The drive includes a stop at a scenic vantage point. As the tails of sugarbirds ribboned past us as they flashed from protea to protea, we sipped on Idiom's Amphitheatre of Dreams Cape Red blend – a bold wine to celebrate the dramatic views surrounding us. Transfixed by the landscape, we returned to the restaurant for a 3-course lunch, paired with the farm's wines.




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Local ingredients feature throughout the restaurant's menu. Picture: Jared Ruttenberg

While you'll find several of the usual South African grape suspects, Idiom Wines hangs its hat on growing European — notably Italian — varietals and giving them a South African expression.

Rarer examples include Nebbiolo, Barbera and Sangiovese, and blends such as the Bordeaux-inspired Bordicon, Rhône-inspired Rodanico and Iberian-inspired Iberico.

Highlights were the Sangiovese with its ripe, jammy red fruit, paired with the ostrich carpaccio; the seductive, deep-red Barbera with creamy asparagus risotto; and the velvety, herbaceous Zinfandel served with lamb rack.

For a son of the soil, fresh off the plane, it's hard to imagine a more fitting first stop, where a celebration of wildlife, wilderness and wine comes together — grounded in South Africa but with a distinctive Italian touch.



A three-course lunch is paired with Idiom's award-winning wines. Picture: Jared Ruttenberg

Idiom's expansive library collection offers the opportunity to own older vintages, such as the Idiom "R" — Rodanico Blend 2016, Idiom SMV — Rhône Style Blend 2015, and Idiom Cape Blend 2015. These carefully preserved older vintages reveal layer upon layer of complexity. It's a confident gesture — one that speaks volumes about the estate's commitment to quality and reminds me that with my overdue trip home, some of life's finest pleasures are worth waiting for.

idiom.co.za

Benguela Cove

Following majestic mountains, I took the coastal Clarence Drive towards Hermanus, skirting the rugged coastline with towering cliffs. Just over an hour in, I turned into Benguela Cove — a regular feature on the World's Best Vineyards Top 100 awards. This time it was not in the modern tasting room where I'd be sipping wine but on a boat. Taking advantage of straddling the Botrivier Lagoon, Benguela Cove offers a tasting experience aboard "Lady Bonnie", their stylish pontoon that gently cruises the lagoon.

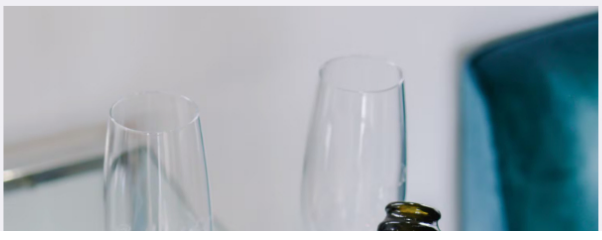
Guests can purchase any wine of their choice ahead of the cruise, so with a bottle of the sparkling Cap Classique Benguela Cove Cuvée 58 in hand, the skipper welcomed us onboard. Over the course of an hour, breathtaking lagoon vistas leisurely passed by — a biosphere beautifully shaped by its maritime presence. I'd opted to include a picnic lunch, and rather than disgorging the basket of its enticing treats midway, our cruise included a surprise stop.



Guests can enjoy wine tastings aboard the Lady Bonnie pontoon. Picture: Jared Ruttenberg

We docked alongside the sandbank that separated the lagoon and ocean and, after taking our shoes off, could walk onto the sand for a little excursion. From both the boat and the sandbank, the passing southern right whales are easily spotted as they hug the shallow waters of the shoreline. The Ramsar-protected wetland is also home to an astounding near-400 bird species.

Returning to the boat again, the picnic was laid out, and it was time to enjoy the spoils. Accompanying the generous spread was my long-time favourite, the Benguela Cove Chardonnay: a benchmark of the variety with a balance between stone fruit and orange zest and creamy shortbread.





Benguela Cove's Cuvée 58 Cap Classique is served during lagoon cruises. Picture: Jared Ruttenberg

Back at the restaurant, the tasting experience continued with bottles of their cool-climate wines — with dining at Moody Lagoon Restaurant if you didn't eat on board. The boat trips run from Wednesday to Sunday, weather permitting.

An insider's tip if you didn't know: Benguela Cove has a sister estate in England, Leonardslee Gardens, where owner Penny Streeter OBE has poured the same amount of energy and excellence into the hospitality offerings. It's certainly worth adding to your UK wish list.



Picnic cruises combine local food with Benguela Cove wines. Picture: Jared Ruttenberg

In the late afternoon, we watched as the sun and clouds shaped a phantasmagorical show across the distant Overberg mountains. I was savouring the last few sips of Benguela Cove Joie De Vivre Brut. After 36 months on the lees, it was a Cap Classique with enough complexity and beauty to match the dramatic surrounds. Taking a deep breath, I exhaled slowly with the privilege of being home: possibly the only wine region in the world that so wonderfully takes in wildlife, wilderness and wine.

benguelacove.co.za

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