

HEAVEN IS A PLACE ON EARTH

THE HEMEL-EN-AARDE VALLEY IS A LITTLE PIECE OF HEAVEN NEAR HERMANUS, WITH ITS BOUTIQUE ROUTE OF COOL-CLIMATE WINERIES SPECIALISING IN PINOT NOIR AND CHARDONNAY
BY **JAMES BAINBRIDGE**



The Hemel-en-Aarde Valley is home to one of the Cape's foremost collections of boutique wine estates. But, once upon a time it would have taken more than a few glasses of Pinot Noir to imagine a dozen wineries climbing these slopes. Following the Onrus River inland from Sand Bay, just west of Walker Bay, the biblically named 'heaven and earth' valley climbs the Cape Fold Belt mountains to Shaw's Pass, named after the 19th-century Scottish military officer who introduced merino sheep to this agricultural area. It's a scenic drive beneath the crenulated rock faces with their green haze of fynbos, which inspired 19th-century Moravian missionary Brother Schmidt to comment that 'so high are the hills, which closely embrace the valley all around, that they seem to touch the sky and you cannot see anything but heaven and earth'. However, despite this rousing landscape, the valley was once known only as the site of a long-vanished leper colony, which transferred to Robben Island in 1846.

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IN THE BEGINNING

Still, Tim Hamilton Russell must have been encouraged by the area's poetic name, possibly derived from Brother Schmidt's description, when he arrived in search of a southerly wine-growing site. He purchased a 170-hectare plot (previous owners: the Moravian Mission and a Scottish vaudeville dame stranded here by the Anglo-Boer War) in 1975, laying the roots of Hamilton Russell Vineyards and today's wine route of around 15 farms.

Hamilton Russell was intent on turning noble grapes into cool-climate wines, harnessing the breezes off the nearby Atlantic Ocean. When his son Anthony took up the baton in the 1990s, he conducted a soil analysis that identified 52 hectares of stony, clay-rich, shale-derived





soil as optimal for producing origin-specific, terroir-expressive wines. He also narrowed the range to Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, which have since become Hemel-en-Aarde's signature varieties. Taste them with a view of the estate dam, alongside their olive oil and fynbos honey, and Southern Right and Ashbourne Pinotages, Sauvignon Blancs and red and white blends.

CONSERVATION AND CYCLING

Next up the valley is another double-barrelled viticultural pioneer, Bouchard Finlayson, where Pinot Noir master Peter Finlayson exploits the valley's maritime mists to produce slow-ripened Pinots with strawberry characteristics and soft tannins. Try a selection of his three Pinot Noirs, three Chardonnays and four blends among bottles and barrels in the cellar tasting room, where tours are available (book ahead) alongside deli platters of ciabatta, salami, cheeses, estate olive oil and more. The farm is also a WWF Conservation Champion for its sustainable farming practices and promotion of biodiversity, with just 22 hectares under high-density vines and 330 fynbos species flourishing on the property. On three hiking trails – optionally guided by the estate botanist – you can see everything from the *Witsenia maura* iris ('Bokmakierie's tail'), previously thought extinct in the Hermanus region, to one of the valley's few surviving patches of Afromontane forest.

I began a recent weekend jogging up a track on the border of these two wineries, earning the day's planned indulgences and enjoying views across the rolling hills of dewy vineyards. It was a glorious morning and the only signs of life, apart from my pace-setting wife and a few lofty farm cottages painting an idyllic picture of wine-country life, were two mountain bikers

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puffing up the hill. Visit hermanusadventures.co.za for details of the valley's four colour-coded mountain-bike trails, which range from an easy 7 km to a 65 km challenge for experienced riders. Permits are available for R60 (R30 for students and trail runners) from Village Cycles and Wine Village in the Hemel-en-Aarde Village complex, just off the coastal R43 at the southern entrance to the valley. GoBike Hermanus rents out bikes.

GASTRONOMY AND GREEK PHILOSOPHY

The promised wine-land christened by Brother Schmidt counts a few heavenly names along its route, and our first stop on that divine day was Creation. We booked well ahead to score a table at this popular estate, which has earned a reputation for exquisitely pairing gastronomy with its four ranges of 'earthy wines from a heavenly source'. In the contemporary tasting room overlooking the mountain-backed dam, their wines can be complemented by delectable edibles including velvety chocolates, small

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brunch plates, weekly changing small plates that incorporate local ingredients, and the six-course taste exploration of the versatile, food-friendly strengths of a particular cultivar or blend. With its sheltered fynbos garden dotted with Nanette Ranger's nymphlike figures, Creation expresses its commitment to balance in its mix of art, food and wine, as well as sustainable farming practices approved by the Biodiversity & Wine Initiative, EnviroWines, the Integrated Production of Wine scheme, and the predator-friendly Landmark Foundation. Its green-seal, modern Burgundian wines, including the site-specific Art of Pinot Noir and Art of Chardonnay, seem to magically express the terroir of breeze-caressed clay loam soils and decomposed shale on the slopes of Babylon Toren.

The white dot surfing a grandiose sweep of mountain, visible from Creation's terrace, is Ataraxia's shrine to the vine, a chapel-like tasting room that attracted us with its boldly original

architecture. With couches facing the winery's lofty home of Skyfields Farm through arched windows, the whitewashed building in the vernacular Overberg style lulls tasters into a serene state of mind, free from worry and preoccupation – the definition of Ataraxia, a Greek philosophical term. The wines play a part of course: the Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Serenity red blend are produced from 12 hectares of predominantly south-facing slopes in the valley's highest section, with roots in the area's ancient soils, comprising millennia-old Table Mountain sandstone, Cape granite and Bokkeveld shale deposits. Every wine route needs one or two maverick genius winemakers – our Pinot money is on Ataraxia's Kevin Grant, based on the staff's wide-eyed descriptions of his burning dedication to expression of terroir, as well as the elegant and pensive wines themselves.

UPPER VALLEY

The valley is divided into three appellations: Hemel-en-Aarde Valley, Upper Hemel-en-Aarde Valley and Hemel-en-Aarde Ridge. In the middle lies Spookfontein. Its intriguing name, derived from the 19th-century myth that a spirit can be discerned in the swirling spring water, clearly influenced the Phantom,





ROADSIDE HEAVEN

Conveniently, road trippers heading for Hermanus don't have to detour halfway to Caledon to get a taste of Hemel-en-Aarde wines.

At the bottom of the valley, just off the main road into town, the Hemel-en-Aarde Village complex has the Wine Village shop and The Brewery's lively beer garden, where you can enjoy a burger and a taster of locally brewed craft beers. It's a welcome stop after the thirsty slog from Cape Town. Also here are the tasting rooms of Whalehaven, offering Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and four other wines, and Hermanuspietersfontein, which specialises in blends and hosts a Saturday morning food-and-wine family market.

For padkos in a more rustic setting, head 5 km up the valley to Die Plaaskombuis farm stall, for hearty breakfasts, light lunches and the likes of bobotie, oxtail, and lamb curry. This being Hemel-en-Aarde, right behind is the excellent Bosman winery, where the contemporary Frame House is the venue for tastings, platters, and barista-made coffee, while hiking trails explore the mountain and wetlands. If you would like to stay longer, there is plenty of accommodation in the valley, including the equestrian Hemel-en-Aarde Farm and Spookfontein's two self-catering cottages.

a Bordeaux-style red blend and one of nine wines to taste. An olive-tree-lined drive climbs through the vines and fynbos to a curvy, brick tasting room and restaurant, Hemel-en-Aarde's answer to Dornier, and the contemporary country cooking makes it one of the valley's best lunch stops.

Alternatively, nearby Newton Johnson's restaurant offers a winning mix of views and a seasonal two- or three-course menu, which uses ingredients grown and foraged on-site in dishes from farm salad to Chalmar sirloin. Founder Dave Johnson, whose sons now run the winery, is a Cape Wine Master with a thesis on Pinot Noir. Across the R320, Sumaridge has the equally compelling credentials of one of the valley's best views, with distant Betty's Bay visible beyond the dam, which is bordered by a sweeping lawn with tree-shaded tables and a playground.

ENDING ON A HIGH

After experiencing Creation, we continued heavenward to the realm of the gods, Domaine des Dieux – less to continue the holy theme than because my wife loves bubbly. Nestling beneath the highest point in the Hemel-en-Aarde Ridge, the estate alchemises the cool climate into brut and brut rosé MCCs, both made from Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, as well as half a dozen still wines. It's a crow's nest of a tasting room, tiny and casual with outside tables and the valley spread out below – the perfect spot to toast the joys of heaven and earth, especially when the latter produces wines as good as these. *etc*