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A STEALTH NEW EUROPEAN CULTURE HIT

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WHAT'S TRENDING FOR SKI THIS SEASON

**+
VICTORIA BECKHAM'S
JET-LAG FIXES**

**+
THE EDITORS'
FAVOURITE PUBS**

**+
THE HOTTEST OF
ALL THE HOT DOGS**



Ground swell

IT'S BEEN 20 YEARS SINCE BABINGTON HOUSE INVENTED A WHOLE NEW BREED OF HOTEL IN THIS COUNTRY. NOW A FRUIT-FILLED ESTATE IN THE SAME PART OF SOMERSET HAS TAKEN IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

BY JOANNA WEINBERG. PHOTOGRAPHS BY JENNY ZARINS







LIKE MOST COUNTRIES, ENGLAND FUNCTIONS at different levels of sophistication. There is world-class London with its world-class restaurants, theatre, art – well, everything really. And then there is the rest. The rest, by and large, is a long way behind. That's where I live. When the café in the village started serving flat whites, I cartwheeled down the high street.

Over the past few years, a lot more than good coffee has started to arrive in my little corner of Somerset: aside from Babington House, the grande dame of the area for two decades, there's been the blossoming of nearby Bruton. First came At The Chapel, an excellent conversion of a church into a restaurant, rooms and bakery (sourdough, hurrah!), then Hauser & Wirth with its rolling programme of international artists and events, Piet Oudolf garden and Friday-night discos. And now – drum roll – The Newt, and its attendant fanfare.

For if rural areas aren't always the most sophisticated, their rumour mills are nonpareil: that the wealthy new South African owners of the latter had bought the whole village (they haven't, quite); that they had also acquired the local train station (it's a nearby building that might be used as a welcome centre) and were predicting half a million visitors a year (there is no source for this rumour at all). Then building started and great walls of golden local stone became visible from the road; huge orchards

of small cider apples were established. Everyone wanted to know what was going on – and no one as much as me.

Because Karen Roos and Koos Bekker, the visionary husband-and-wife team behind The Newt, also own Babylonstoren, the *ne plus ultra* of hotel and garden restaurants, set in the winelands outside Cape Town in South Africa. Babel, the restaurant there, has been my greatest inspiration and to my mind its cookbook is the most beautiful ever published. I wanted to be first through the doors and I started calling to find out when that might happen about three years ago. I once got through to the project manager. It was the depths of winter and they had just discovered great crested newts, a protected species, in a pond. The build ground to a halt while the amphibians were safely rehomed – delaying progress by a year, and giving the project its tongue-in-cheek name.

'We never really had a plan,' says Roos. 'Koos asked me once where else in the world I might want to live and I said, "the English countryside."' On a visit to Bath, the couple fell in love with the area and began to search for a property nearby. As luck would have it, they found it in the pages of *Country Life*: Hadspen House, the estate of the Hobhouse family for 230 years, with 800 acres of park, farmland and grounds, and the former home of renowned gardener Penelope Hobhouse. Gleeful to have

Above, the Croquet Room. Opposite, clockwise from top left: a conservatory at The Newt; gardener's cottage; lilies in a pond; the henhouse; verbena in the gardens; caneleds with plum sorbet at The Botanical Rooms restaurant; flowers. Previous pages, from left: the drawing room; The Newt exterior





discovered the sort of classic country pile Mrs Bennet would have sold a daughter for, they snapped it up.

The story is a simple one. The resulting project, The Newt in Somerset, is not. It includes: hotel, gardens, orchards, farm, produce, cider, apple juice, bakery, gelateria, buffalo herd, restaurant, cafés, garden museum. This is the West Country rural idyll in its most spectacular form, a gift of the best of England made fresh by newcomers' eyes, wrapped up in a smart parcel of contemporary design and presented back to the visitor as a living, breathing exposition of husbandry made art.

For Roos, who grew up in small-town South Africa, England was the cultural mothership. She was brought up on a diet of Enid Blyton, Agatha Christie and Merchant Ivory films; fashion came from the pages of English magazines – from which her sister, an enthusiastic seamstress, would style fabric into the latest swinging clothes for them both. 'We must have looked a sight,' she says, smiling. The former editor of South African *Elle Decoration*, she is elegantly dressed in a long skirt, boots and neat, green military-style jacket, in tonal harmony with the sage-green drawing room in which we are sitting. Unusually for such a huge design project, Roos masterminded all the interiors herself, with an eagle eye for detail and a sharp sense of style that harmoniously layers playful and funky onto a classic canvas.

On the walls hang 18th-century portraits of the Hobhouses, which came with the property, first bought by the family in 1785.

THIS IS A GIFT OF THE BEST OF ENGLAND MADE FRESH BY NEWCOMERS' EYES, WRAPPED UP IN A SMART PARCEL OF DESIGN

Like so many large European estate owners post-war, they had battled, inventively, to maintain it, but five years ago the investment needed for its upkeep finally became too much.

Roos and Bekker then picked up the mantle and they have been investing passion and money into the place ever since, with both respect and sensitivity for its past and a sense of humour about its future. Around the room, in a clever melding of then and now, jewel-coloured velvet Chesterfields are draped with reindeer skins; on a side table there's a glass dome stuffed with birds and a striking light by Le Deun Luminaires. Shuttered sash windows frame a classic parkland view: black-faced sheep grazing in the shade of mature ash, chestnut and cedar trees. Blink and you can imagine Mr Darcy galloping over the hill towards you.

Breathing new life into old properties and sharing them is something Roos and Bekker have developed a talent for. At Babylonstoren, it was the restoration of a Cape Dutch farm into the exemplary working winery and garden-led restaurant that broke new ground in the farm-to-fork movement more than a decade ago. 'We had never heard of farm-to-fork,' says Roos. 'With Koos's farming background, growing our own produce to feed the kitchen and hotel just felt natural to us.'

Here in Somerset all roads lead back to the land. This is the place of Camelot and Avalon, myths and pagan celebrations

– from May Day's Beltane, when locals don ethereal white robes and pixie ears and parade to Glastonbury Tor to welcome the spring, to deep winter's Wassail, when villagers banish evil spirits from apple trees with sticks and songs. It is farming country. Herds of Friesian dairy cattle graze outdoors for most of the year, hand-crafted and cut local Cheddar is a table cheese and every garden is home to at least one apple tree.

At the heart of The Newt is a classic Georgian country house of deep honeyed stone, on a scale that is manageable: big, but not so big you couldn't imagine living here. It has been cleverly updated in partnership with Bath-based architect Simon Morray-Jones to make the most of its period features and at the same time create lofty spaces that let the land and gardens in. The handsome library and drawing room has been opened up so guests can admire the collections of books and paintings; the living spaces have original fireplaces, cornices panelling and shutters. A particular standout is the cosy, tiled-floor croquet lounge with woodburner, striped African swing seat, retro turntable and fun collection of Eighties vinyl to tempt a late-night dance-off. The dark green oak-panelled dining room, formerly the billiards room, is both glamorous and intimate, while its minimal glass extension creates a breakfast area studded with box hedge and orange trees in which to feast on the early-morning travails of the in-house bakery, including crumpets topped with poached eggs and devilishly tempting flaky Portuguese custard tarts.

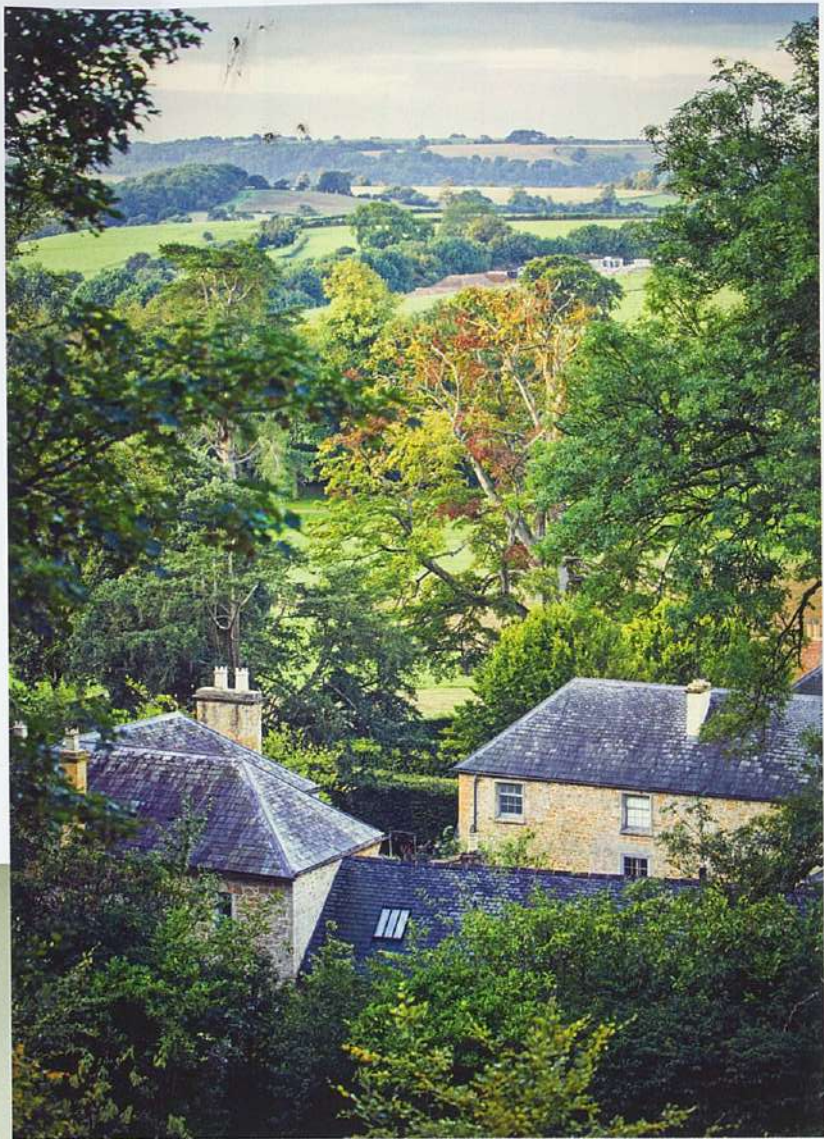
The outbuildings, barns and stables have all been converted, constructed and designed without ego to frame the landscape beyond. The bedrooms in the main house and the cleverly converted stables (note the original 19th-century hay feeders still in situ) are simple, with pale greys and whites, handsome four-poster beds and the best Italian bathware. Ask for a room with a view: number three has a private balcony overlooking the croquet lawn; number two, a long view over the Victorian pond; number one, across to the orchards and beyond. The calming atmosphere of the soaring stone spa makes a morning swim irresistible – the massages are top-notch, too. The glass-fronted gym looks out onto an intimate vegetable patch and greenhouse bearing the last of the season's tomatoes.

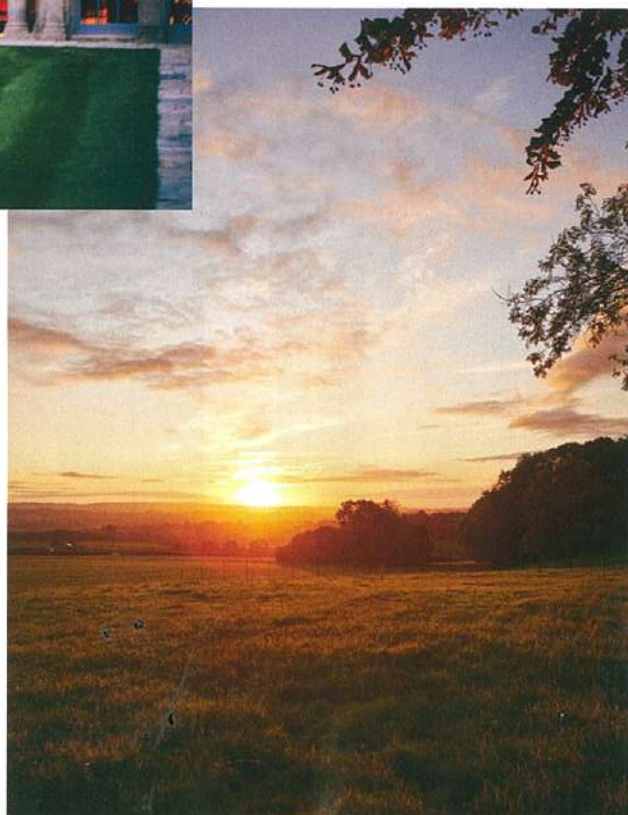
A walk past the stumpery, a magical sculpture garden of felled trees, leads to a cleared mound with three views across the rolling country: one towards King Alfred's tower, one across Camelot, the third over the detailed gardens. Here, this kingdom was all mine for a minute – or was it perhaps an hour? The carefully constructed ornamental grounds below – arguably the most ambitious new garden project to be established in the country since World War II – will be the biggest draw for day visitors. Created by French designer Patrice Taravella, they tell the history of the estate through plants. The famous parabola-shaped walled garden has

Opposite, clockwise from top left: entrance to the gardens; Llamrei stable room; ducks in the gardens; wild grasses; gold-framed paintings in the Croquet Room; crystal vases in The Botanical Rooms. Previous pages, from left: apple tree in the walled garden; The Botanical Rooms









been laid out to baroque rules: intricate paths and careful metal-work structures cut through primarily evergreen beds that include rosemary and thyme. Espaliered around the walls, every spur trained with precision, are a collection of more than 250 varieties of pre-1930s eating apples interspersed with crab apples to increase the length of the pollinating season. Look down to see the geographical area of each group carved into the stone edging.

Beyond the walls, the gardener's cottage, set to become the gelateria (head here for buffalo-milk ice cream made from the property's herd), has traditional planting, while a collection of red, blue and white garden rooms reference the 'Colour by Design' scheme made famous by the garden's 1980s tenants, horticulturalists Nori and Sandra Pope. A more contemporary display of wild grasses and meadows is very much The Newt's own. Visitors need to be nimble walking up through the cascades garden – a series of square overflowing ponds with newt fountains spouting water from their mouths – as some are motion-triggered and will project a stream at your ankles.

But what sets The Newt apart is that it exists in opposition to the majority of lifestyle projects, where brand is king and everything kneels before it. Here, the skills and patience of the craftspeople involved are at the service of the land. 'It's not about me, it's about the gardens/the apples/the produce,' I heard time and again from those working here. Never is this so clear as in the immaculate kitchen gardens and orchards, and the food and

signature apple-waste sourdough loaf, for which fermented pulp from the press is a starter, to the 3,000 cider apple trees of 70 different varieties planted with eight feet between each one to allow them to grow to full potential, and the serious collection of eaters.

Yet perhaps the greatest impact The Newt will have on the country's food culture will be down to its ambitions for cider. The old English spelling of the word is used here as a mark of its quality – 'cyder' is how the purest version is referred to – made only with fermented apple juice, no concentrates or additives. At weekends during the pressing season, the great machinery whirs into life and apples tumble down into the simple square-cut rill that threads its way around the open-sided Cyder Bar, to be washed and pushed through the press. The guest becomes part of the story. While there are already bottled single and house-blend sparkling varieties available, later this year will see the addition of the Champagne-method ciders. But it is this barely sparkling cider now maturing in huge, state-of-the-art oak vats and destined for the wine list a couple of years down the line that could shift the perception of cider to a drink that's taken seriously again.

Serious cyder needs serious food and the hotel's restaurant, the Botanical Rooms, has all the toys an ambitious chef could want, including a *braai*-style grill built into the chimney of the original Georgian kitchen. At its helm is 28-year-old Ben Abercrombie, a local chef whose commitment to cooking is in

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drink they supply to the hotel and restaurants. This is exemplified at the all-day Garden Café, under the lead of chef Alan Stewart, who has returned home after years in Barcelona and rural France to follow his dream of cooking directly from the land. Here is the best of the West Country showcased with the humility of a talented chef using glorious garden produce.

Every detail of the menu changes seasonally, down to the small pat of buffalo butter flavoured with herb, spice or fruit peel – currently beetroot with juniper and rosemary – that comes with the brown paper bag of house-baked sourdough. Autumn sees celeriac on the barbecue with pears, sage and crispy chicken skin; sharp pickled apple and horseradish cut through silky smoked mackerel on toast; grilled mushrooms (from The Newt's own mushroom house) are brushed with confit garlic oil and served with beef braised in red wine. Ripe fruit from the gardens ooze from pretty-as-a-picture tarts and cakes in the bakery or perch, poached, atop a bowl of just-set custard. Along the pass that divides the kitchen from diners sit glass jars of brightly coloured rhubarb pickles and tomato ferments that will see the garden haul on the menu throughout the winter.

If you were to distil The Newt down to a single idea, it would be to glorify the humble apple. This runs from its logo and the

his very skin, in the shape of beautiful bunched beetroot and ruby chard tattooed onto his forearms. His is a young, creative kitchen with plans to take its place amongst the greats and whose food – from the sous-vide coddled duck egg with rabbit to the salt-aged ribeye cooked over fire – is rare to find outside of the city. His skill and passion combine most rewardingly in the puddings, and you'll want more than one: the whipped bitter chocolate with beetroot and milk ice vies for space with baked sticky *canelés* served with roasted seasonal fruit.

In the end, it's hard to single out one element from an experience that successfully sets out to be so immersive. Some people will come here for the gardens. Some for the spa. Some will visit to take inspiration from the vegetable planting, or the menu, or just to slow down time and sit under a tree with a book. Others will return, nostalgic for an era of detail in craftsmanship that is mostly long gone, and a picture of contemporary England that we might all wish would show itself more often. Me? I'll come back for the bread and butter. 🍞

The Newt in Somerset has doubles from £255.
thenewtinsomerset.com

Opposite, clockwise from top left: fireplace at reception; the Granary Room; grill at The Botanical Rooms; sunrise; apple cake at the Cyder Bar; the main house. Previous pages, clockwise from top left: a Hadspen Room; tomatoes in the greenhouse; grasses; apple tree in the walled garden; The Newt rooftops; chard; bedroom with rolltop bath; beetroot with buffalo-milk curds at The Garden Café; flowers; radishes at The Botanical Rooms