

MONOCLE

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THE CIDER HOUSE RULES

The Newt in Somerset is both a fetching hotel and a boon to local culinary tradition. We meet the South African team behind the turnaround.

WRITER *Lewis Huxley* PHOTOGRAPHER *Harry Mitchell*

"If you're in a Georgian building you have to honour it," says Karen Roos, founder of The Newt in Somerset, as she takes a seat in the drawing room of Hadspen House. The former editor in chief of South Africa's *Elle Decoration* and her husband revived the estate, which dates back to 1689, and opened it to the public in August 2019. Limestone from a nearby quarry has lent the house a distinctive burnt-orange exterior but the interior, designed by Roos, is modern and elegant. "There is so much culture here and so much history," says Roos. "It was important to be aware of what was here before but to bring a new approach."

The Newt in Somerset – named after the amphibians, an endangered species, that live on the estate – is modelled on Babylonstoren, Roos's hotel and vineyard near Stellenbosch in South Africa, which opened in 2010. Both have exquisite guest rooms and a spa, plus gardens that supply produce to two onsite restaurants. The 23 bedrooms are split between Hadspen House – all cream linen and freestanding bathtubs – and a former granary and stables that have been refurbished to reflect their past uses. The nearby village of Castle Cary is less than two hours by train from London Paddington, making this an easy weekend getaway from the UK's capital. But stay longer and you can pay a visit to the delights of the West Country: the Georgian splendour of Bath is less than an hour's drive away and you can be in nearest town Bruton – with its Hauser & Wirth gallery and high-end dining options – in minutes.

For guests who prefer to stay in one place – or day visitors – The Newt in Somerset's restaurants rival anything in Bruton. Fruit, vegetables and herbs grown on the estate are used in The Botanical Rooms, a fine-dining establishment in Hadspen House, and the less formal Garden Café. "Having fresh produce gets me excited," says Rich Townsend, sous chef at The Botanical Rooms. "Even those little things you take for granted – that you have every day – taste a million times better when they're

fresh." And it's not just fruit and vegetables: wood from the estate is used to fire the kitchen's grill. "We've just used our first load of oak; we're now on to birch," says Townsend. "The smoke that is let off really penetrates the meat; it benefits from that smoky flavour."

As well as adding life to the old buildings and making use of indigenous crops, there's another agricultural undertaking afoot. While wine is Babylonstoren's most celebrated product, The Newt in Somerset specialises in cider-making. The parabola, which sits within an egg-shaped walled garden, pays tribute to the estate's most valued crop: apples. Teased around spiralling wire frames, they are grown using an unorthodox method. "We do things that the Royal Horticultural Society [the UK's leading gardening charity] tell you not to do," says Arthur Cole, head of programmes. "We're the punks of the fruit-growing world."

When it comes to using those apples, the approach is more refined, resulting in "cyder", a spelling that cellar master Greg Carnell says harks back to "the golden era of cider, between 1650 and 1750". "At that time an English gentleman would sit at his fine-dining table and drink a bottle-fermented sparkling cider in fine champagne flutes," he says. The drink was spelt "cyder" to differentiate it from cheaply made working man's variety.

Carnell's passion is infectious. "One of our aspirations here is to raise the perceived value of cider," he says. "I want the apple to be treated in the same way, with the same value and worth, as a grape in wine-making." As such, the cider press was designed as an artisan boutique winery by Gerard de Villiers of Kleinood Wines in Stellenbosch. "We are combining what we learnt from wine-making to bring in something new," says Roos. "But in the end it just tastes good." The 36 tanks in the cellar can store up to 60,000 litres. The fermentation process takes six months, which allows The Newt in Somerset to produce 120,000 litres of cider a year. The resulting products include blends and single-variety versions. Best

of all is the tippie that replicates the English gentleman's sparkling cider: it tastes like a fine champagne.

As with all produce here, nothing from the cider-making process goes to waste: pomace from the cellar is used by head baker Karen Pretorius as a key ingredient in sour-dough. The South African is discovering the recipes of the region – and putting her own twist on them. Her seasonal take on a Cornish pasty is made with pumpkin, buffalo ricotta, peppers, coriander, honey and harissa.

Back in the drawing room, Roos points to portraits of Hadspen House's former occupants on the walls. "They were all packed away and hadn't been seen for years," she says. But the paintings were the starting point for Roos's playful design of the interior, which includes stuffed boar heads with patchwork fabric in place of drab skin and bright-green Jieldé floor lamps. It's this combination of respect for the estate's past and the vision that makes it relevant to the present that sets The Newt in Somerset apart from other country-house hotels. Would it be the same outside the UK? "My husband was interested in apples and looked all over the world," says Roos. "I swung it this way because we knew England and loved it. When we came here, there was no question: the Georgian house was everything we could have dreamed of."

thenewtinsomerset.com



Clockwise from top left: *Cellar master Greg Carnell inspecting cider fruit in the orchards; morning light illuminating the drawing room of Hadspen House; preparing Cornish pasties in the bakery; bitternut-squash risotto at The Garden Café; Hadspen House dates back to 1689*



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**How to
get here:**

*Nearest station
Castle Cary is
served by direct
trains from London
Paddington.
Alternatively, The
Newt is a two-and-
a-half-hour drive
from London or
an hour's drive
from Bath.*