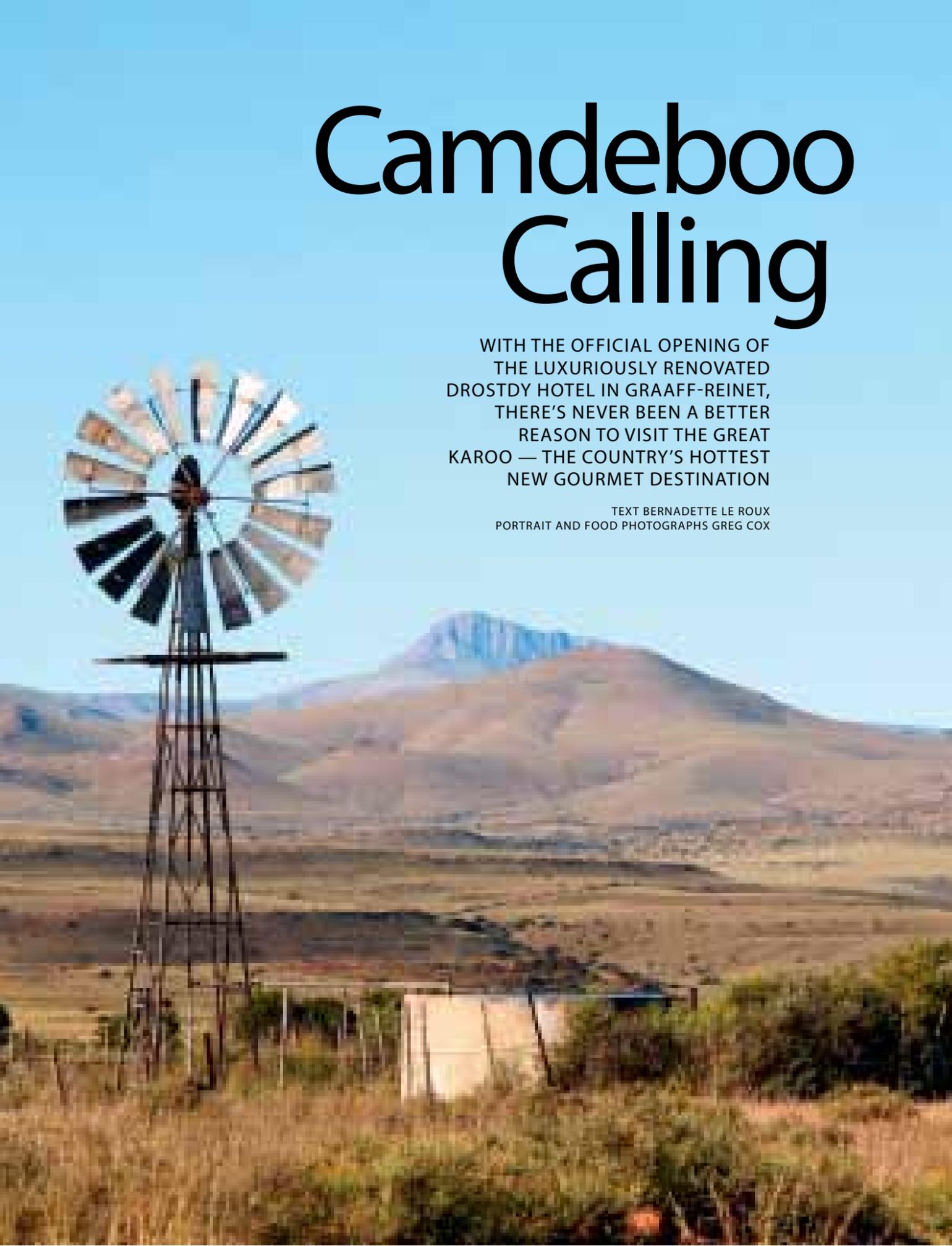


# Camdeboo Calling

WITH THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE LUXURIOUSLY RENOVATED DROSTDY HOTEL IN GRAAFF-REINET, THERE'S NEVER BEEN A BETTER REASON TO VISIT THE GREAT KAROO — THE COUNTRY'S HOTTEST NEW GOURMET DESTINATION

TEXT BERNADETTE LE ROUX  
PORTRAIT AND FOOD PHOTOGRAPHS GREG COX



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP The Drostdy Hotel in the 1900s photographed by William Roe; executive chef Justin Pillay; shaved beets with beetroot dust, beet pesto and chevin spring rolls



WINDMILL PHOTOGRAPH: MARK SENEKAL — GRAAFF-REINET; HOTEL PHOTOGRAPH: WILLIAM ROE COLLECTION, THE GRAAFF-REINET MUSEUMS

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## he last time I went to the Drostdy Hotel in Graaff-Reinet was while visiting my late grandmother Sita Palmer.

We sat in the fading glory of the tea garden – she in her trademark mohair beret, pale-blue linen suit with buttons of mother-of-pearl and white gloves—and nibbled on day-old scones and jam. Temperatures soared to 40 degrees as the waiting staff scuttled around in black pinafores with frilly aprons that were so starched they would have been better off used as fans, or to ward off low-flying wasps.

Today you'll find a very different Drostdy. The small town is abuzz with news of its recent refurbishment (thanks to the backing of Dr Johann Rupert) into a five-star luxury

hotel that falls under the umbrella of Newmark Hotels, Reserves and Lodges.

Its location in a far-off village in the deep Karoo makes the hotel seem a strange investment for the esteemed group (it's a dull equidistant eight-hour drive between Cape Town and Johannesburg), but the Ruperts have a deep-seated historical connection with the town.

Johann's father, Dr Anton Rupert, was born in Graaff-Reinet, the fourth oldest town in South Africa, and was a major player in the restoration of its historic buildings. And who wouldn't want to visit the region where the ghosts of Karoo

literati – Olive Schreiner, Guy Butler, Eve Palmer – abound, not forgetting off-the-wall artists Walter Batiss and Helen Martins? It's an inspiring landscape of solitude, where wide, open spaces are accented with rocky kopjes and distant, shimmering mountains.

The building itself is steeped in history. Originally designed by French architect Louis Thibault to serve as the magistrate's office, it first opened its doors as a hotel in 1878. And, although there have been many changes over the years, none have been as radical as this most recent transformation. The hotel now boasts a 120-seater restaurant, an Africology spa, a state-of-the-art vinoteque, art gallery, cigar bar, whisky lounge and a variety of accommodation options with interiors by renowned decorator Stephen Falcke.

For the first time in history, both well-heeled travellers and khaki-clad Camdeboo farmers will have the opportunity to experience fine dining at the end of their dusty driveways. It's apt, then, that newly appointed executive chef Justin Pillay is no stranger to remote areas. 'I've spent the last two years at Tswalu Kalahari, near Kuruman, where my nearest supply source was Kimberley, some 300 kilometres away. So I'm comfortable with great distances – and quiet,' he says. But this is no small-town boy. Justin's list of achievements is long. Having spent 10 years at Buitenverwachting under the apprenticeship of legendary Austrian chef-patron Edgar Osojnik, Justin's time there included studying at the then Elsa van der Nest Culinary Academy. He elbowed his way up the lines to head chef and travelled to Germany for a short stint at Vendôme, currently number 12 on the ▶

### 10 THINGS TO SEE AND DO IN GRAAFF-REINET

Visit the historical Reinet House and throw your arms around the still-growing grapevine planted in 1870. % 049 892 3801

Admire the architecture of the Dutch Reformed Church in the centre of town. % 049 892 2422

See the artwork of famous contemporary South African artists at The Hester Rupert Art Museum, housed in the fifth-oldest church building in South Africa. 8 www.rupertartmuseum.co.za

Walk the succulent plant labyrinth at Obesa Nursery, host to one of the largest collections of cacti in the country. 8 www.obesanursery.com

See films and live shows at the historical John Rupert Theatre in a restored former Mission Church. % 082 779 1044

Stop for the best coffee in town at Polka Café and watch village life pass you by. 8 www.polkacafe.co.za

Browse Reinet Antiques and see what is said to be the oldest fruit cake (it was found in the attic while renovations were underway). % 049 892 4221

Take a drive out to neighbouring Nieu Bethesda and see Helen Martins' Owl House. % 079 070 8988

Take a stroll through the showroom at Karoo Taxidermy. % 049 892 6151

Walk up the Valley of Desolation in the Camdeboo National Park and watch the sun go down over Graaff-Reinet. % 049 892 3453



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The Drostdy in 2008; the hotel pool; snowfall in the Karoo; Justin working in the kitchen; a private lounge; Spandau Kop, a Graaff-Reinet landmark; Karoo lamb two ways — herb-crusted loin and rump with ratatouille jus and spinach-potato 'piccato' OPPOSITE PAGE The Drostdy as the magistrate's offices in 1880



MAGISTRATE AND 2008 HOTEL PHOTOGRAPHS: WILLIAM ROE COLLECTION; THE GRAAFF-REINET MUSEUMS; POOL, SNOW IN THE KAROO AND SPANDAU KOP PHOTOGRAPHS: MARK SENEKAL — GRAAFF-REINET



esteemed World's 50 Best Restaurants list.

The question is whether a chef of this calibre's food will appeal to the globe-trotting tourist as well as the simple sheep farmer. 'Although I live for the intensity of fine dining,' says Justin, 'I use basic tools and techniques. My food is fine but not to the point of molecular. What I'm doing at Drostdy is a contemporary take on farm food.'

With a laid-back lunch menu promising the likes of Karoo lamb sliders on traditional roosterkoek and a fine-dining evening menu where Justin's riff on the Drostdy's once-famous boontjie sop is a butter-bean velouté, the answer is a case in point. There is something for everybody – a café menu, breakfasts on the terrace, haute cuisine in the evenings and, of course, room service. 'I'm not a food snob,' Justin says. 'If you really want a toasted sandwich, I'll give you one.' Then there is 'location cooking' – with the hotel's extensive grounds offering a number of dining experiences, guests can request exclusive, personalised meals served in the garden or beside the pool.

It's simple, really. As a guest at Drostdy, you'll wake to an epic hotel breakfast of thick slices of hot bread, bejewelled

## 'I'm not a food snob. If you really want a toasted sandwich, I'll give you one' Chef Justin Pillay

bowls of muesli with farm yoghurt, plump sausages, hard-boiled eggs... You'll fight the urge to return to your suite for another nap and instead navigate the quaint streets of Graaff-Reinet in search of quirky taxidermy and antique shops before returning for a gin and a poolside lunch of local venison or Karoo lamb cooked on an open flame. You'll have that nap before visiting the epic Valley of Desolation with a basket packed with local cheeses, sweet preserves and Nieu Bethesda craft beer to sip on as the day drains away over the plains of Camdeboo. Later on, you'll file into the Drostdy's fine-dining restaurant filled with gilded tourists and gussied-up goatherders and choose between the ostrich carpaccio with a pumpkin sorbet, (more) Karoo lamb, but this time 'served two ways', and a plate of white- and dark-chocolate cones with centres of Amarula-flavoured crème anglaise to finish. In short, even granny would approve.

Newmark Hotels, Reserves and Lodges [www.newmarkhotels.com](http://www.newmarkhotels.com); % 049 892 2161

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP** Light- and dark-chocolate cones with centres of amarula-flavoured crème anglaise and marinated strawberries; the Dutch Reformed church is the focal point of the town; one of the standard rooms, which were decorated by interior designer Stephen Falcke; horses striding through the Karoo veld