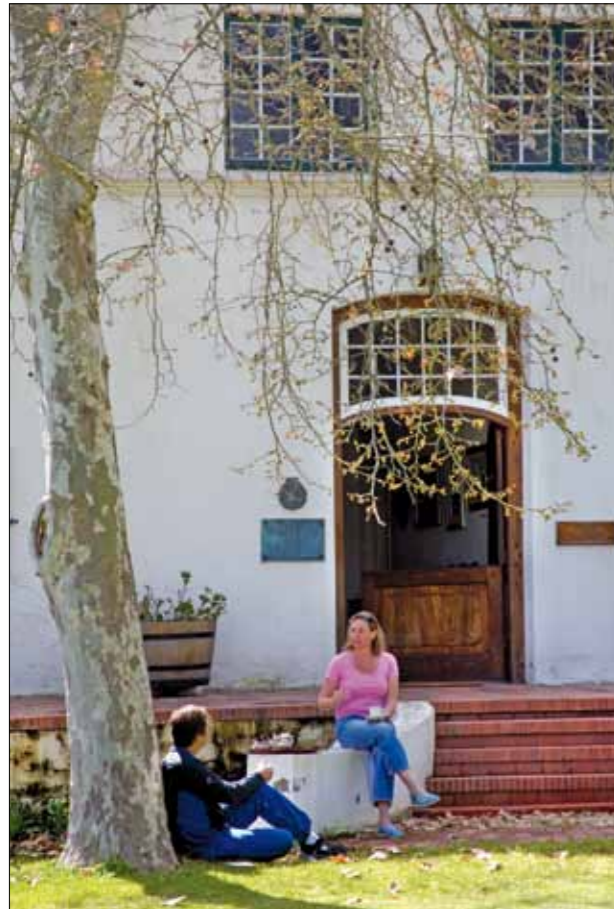


# CHERRY ON TOP

Named after the wild cherries found in the area, Kersefontein farm in the Sandveld has been in the Melck family for eight generations and is a model of refined living

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- When you live in one of the most beautiful old houses in the country it means your everyday life plays itself out against a backdrop that reaches well back into history.
- The layout of the buildings reminds you of a village street with both Cape Dutch and Victorian architectural influences.
- An old 'slave bell' on the farm that's still used to summon staff.

**T**HE EMBROIDERY ON THE CUSHION of the most lived-in chair in the cavernous drawing room of Kersefontein manor house said 'Julian's chair'. Grand piano, fireplace, antique furniture, books stacked high on a central table, glass vases holding giant proteas – all are bathed in the broken light filtering through the old glass panes of the high sash windows.

Julian Melck, the master of the chair, has gone in a search of tea and I, the intimidated journalist, sit Alice-like, waiting for the Wonderland of this historic home to reveal itself.

'Kersefontein'. The name conjures up romantic visions of an enlightened life on this 18th-century estate situated near Hopefield in the Sandveld, the

narrow strip of land between the West Coast and the Swartland. But it is not candles that the name refers to. Its origin is actually botanical. It refers to the wild cherries (*wilde kersies*) that grow in the Sandveld. However, life on Kersefontein would indeed prove to be very much enlightened.

"I studied law at Stellenbosch University, then went to Windhoek to do my articles. There I became interested in flying," Julian tells me after returning with the tea. When his father retired, Julian returned to the 7 000ha farm to continue the family's eight-generation tradition of wheat, sheep and cattle farming. But flying and travelling to destinations way off the beaten path are passions that still permeate his life. And they draw an ever-increasing circle of interesting, like-minded

people from all over the world to Kersefontein. People such as René and Jessica Schumacher and their two daughters.

Over a lunch of homemade viskoekies and a crisp Sauvignon Blanc from the Darling Cellars – food and wine from the kontrei – I got the Schumachers' story. They are Dutch, René is a Boeing pilot, and they love travelling. In fact they'd just returned from a long trip through Namibia. Years ago when searching the Internet for a place to spend their honeymoon, they chose Kersefontein – because it had a landing field! Thus began their long-standing friendship with Julian and a love affair with Africa.

"Waterblommetjies. We'll go and find waterblommetjies for dinner tonight," says Julian. "I also want to show you the hundreds of flamingoes

that have arrived since the rains. And the spring flowers are beautiful this year."

With that we exit the Cape Dutch manor house and jump onto the back of a bakkie. The Sandveld is normally arid but the heavens have been generous and there's water everywhere. The wheatfields are a lush emerald green, seamed with fynbos and carpets of colourful wildflowers, liberally daubed with the mauve of *bessiebosse*.

We find the dam covered with white waterblommetjies and Julian and the farm children wade into the hip-deep water, floating an enamel dish into which handfuls of the traditional delicacy are scooped. René hovers on the edge, but eventually succumbs to the challenge of joining in. A hum of complete bliss envelops the scene, a hum that gains >>



## IT'S BEEN VOTED ONE OF THE FIVE BEST FARM STAYS IN THE WORLD



- **The view from the stoep of the African Cottage is over the lavender-filled garden.**
  - **There's evidence everywhere that this is still a working farm.**
  - **A lone cedar watches over the Melck family cemetery.**
  - **Kersefontein's Cape Dutch manor house is a National Monument and dates back to 1744.**
- >> decibels when four Silver Falcons, flying in perfect formation, swoop low overhead in a salute. "Friends saying hello," says Julian.
- Every car we meet on the dirt road back is an excuse for a stop and a social event – greetings and news are exchanged and invitations to drinks extended. "This is a big area with a small community. I wouldn't want to live anywhere else in the world," says world traveller Julian, paying tribute to this tiny speck on the globe.
- Back at the homestead, the women and children are dropped off while the menfolk prepare to do some serious farming. "Explore the place all you want. Drinks are at seven and we have wild boar for dinner," is Julian's parting decree.
- Aha! Time to discover this place which *Frommer's South Africa* describes as "one of the most authentic, unusual experiences to be had in this country", and *The Independent Traveller* voted as one of the five best luxury farm stays in the world.

Kersefontein features in Graham Viney's book, *Colonial Houses of South Africa*, as one of the 23 grandest houses in the country, and it was on Graham's expertise as historian and interior decorator that Julian called when he decided to restore the manor house and some of the outbuildings. The stamp of "newly revamped and redecorated" is nowhere to be seen. With a velvet hand, the long history of the Melck family has been coached into a living and breathing house where the grandeur seems to be treated incidentally.

In the 1830s, a southern front wing with gabled facade was added to the original homestead that Martin Melck bought in 1770. The living rooms occupy this whole wing. The interior of the dining room was inspired by an old watercolour painting of the dining room at Balmoral in Queen Victoria's day. Here and there a quirky relic, such as a mangy stuffed lion, jumps right out at you. Mmmm, a sense of humour – or



- **Watching the sheep come home...**
- **The magic hour paints long shadows into a scene bathed in golden light.**
- **Julian and the farm children picking the waterblommetjies for dinner.**

glimpses into the lives of the many characters who have lived under this high thatched roof?

A long, wide passage leads to the original west wing where there are other beautifully decorated rooms filled with family heirlooms. The outbuildings that used to be the cookhouse, school and jonkmanshuis (house of the eldest son) have been transformed into Victorian and African-styled cottages, seamlessly merging these cultural elements into Kersefontein's rich tapestry.

Losing my way, I enter the kitchen. The happy conglomeration of staff, busy around the waterblommetjies and boar, welcome me with an offer of tea. But the sounds of the sheep literally coming home lure me outside, where the magic hour sheds its divine light on children playing on the grass, horses trotting to the water trough... life being lived on this amazing farm.

The slightly surreal cadence of the day gains tempo at the pre-dinner gathering, which Julian conducts with great aplomb. The pub's interior is a tribute to aviation. We toast twin sisters who flew all the way from England to celebrate their birthday. We relish tales of the pilot who flies the lights and cameras deep into Botswana where *No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* is being filmed.

After we've assembled around the long dinner table, gleaming under a candlelight chandelier, and the boar has been savoured, Julian opens the grand piano and the notes of Chopin's *Nocturne* drift into the night. □

**Map reference F2  
see inside back cover**

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**Kersefontein Guest House**  
022 783 0850, 083 454 1025,  
info@kersefontein.co.za