

CREAM OF THE CROP

When nothing but the perfect pairing of wine and food will do, these four restaurants should be at the top of your list, writes **Alan Cooper**

As restaurant patrons grow more discerning, so culinary awards must adapt in order to keep pace, and the Diners Club Winelist awards have been leading the way in this regard.

The awards, which are currently in their 23rd year, honour the best wine lists in the country. This time around, 225 restaurants from Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Western Cape, Eastern Cape and Southern Cape entered menus for judging.

The wine lists are evaluated according to their content, balance, suitability and presentation. Judges are all experts in the restaurant and wine business, including leading reviewers, members of the media, chefs and sommeliers. The judging panel for this year was headed by *Platter's by Diners Club South African Wine Guide* publisher Jean-Pierre Rossouw.

Awards are presented in Silver, Gold, Platinum and Diamond categories. For 2017, there were 13 Diamond winners in Gauteng, nine in the Western Cape, seven in KZN and three in the Southern Cape.

'This year, we tightened the standards and set expectations higher - so kudos to the restaurants that rose to the challenge,' says Rossouw. 'The Diamond award is becoming a more and more prestigious achievement and we congratulate the entrants that offer diners high-quality wine lists.'

The four overall winners this year - Restaurant Mosaic (Gauteng), Bushmans Kloof Wilderness Reserve (Western Cape), The Oyster Box hotel (KwaZulu-Natal) and Henry White's restaurant (Southern Cape) - represent the very best of the Diamond winners, placing them at the pinnacle of South African food-and-wine pairing.

WINE & DINE

RESTAURANT MOSAIC

There are loads of reasons to visit The Orient hotel – from the striking Moorish architecture and opulent interiors to the art museum housing arguably the most extensive collection of Tienie Pritchard sculptures in the world.

But aficionados of fine food and wine are drawn to this Arabian Nights castle in the lush Crocodile River Valley by the bounty of its restaurant and wine cellar, a veritable Aladdin's cave of viticultural treasures, crammed with over 75 000 bottles under 5 500 different local and international labels.

Award-winning chef Chantel Dartnall and internationally accredited sommelier Germain Lehodey preside over this huge cornucopia of culinary and oenological delights and, between them, they have

notched up an enviable Diners Club Winelist award tally: Diamond Status between 2010 and 2013, Diamond Status and Best Overall Wine List in South Africa in 2014, Diamond awards and best in Gauteng for 2015, 2016 and, now, 2017.

Founder and co-owner of The Orient Mari Dartnall – Chef Chantel's mother – describes the Winelist awards as among their most prized accolades. 'It is a great honour to be recognised when you put so much love and effort into something this close to your heart. It makes us proud to be able to offer our guests some of the more scarce and unique wines from around the world.'

She credits their success to 'the variety of wines we offer – both international and local – and the fact that our cellar team –

together with Chef Chantel, her team and our front-of-house team – will taste three to four wines presented by the cellar team to ensure there is a true marriage between the dish and the wine, and not merely an intellectual pairing.' Mari adds: 'As our sommelier Germain loves to say, "wine is the second sauce of the dish."'

Pressed to pick her favourite pairings, she says: 'From our current Tabula Rasa menu, The Tidal Pool (salmon ceviche, verbena aspic) paired with the Bourgogne Aligoté from Domaine A & P de Villaine, one of the most respected wineries in the world, is definitely up there. Another is 36-month-matured comté cheese from the Jura Mountains alongside a Vin Jaune 2008 Domaine Rolet, also from the Jura – a true benchmark classic and simply an incredible pairing. The wine enhances the cheese and the cheese elevates the wine.'

For Mari, the allure of The Orient and Restaurant Mosaic goes beyond the food and wine to what she describes as a magical journey of the senses. 'Our guests come to experience art, nature, space and quality, but most of all, they leave feeling that every staff member's love, passion and joy in looking after them is real.'

restaurantmosaic.com

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