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The Labotessa Café & Terrace invites you to pause and enjoy a menu of South African classics influenced by Dutch cuisine – and it's open to the public.

NO FINER PLACE FOR SURE, DOWNTOWN

THERE IS A REFINED CORNER IN CAPE TOWN'S CITY BOWL WHERE HISTORY BLENDS WITH THE PRESENT, SAYS **LORRAINE KEARNEY**





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ABOVE The swish double-storey Presidential Suite at Labotessa has a roof-top plunge pool and three en-suite rooms with a view of Lion's Head.

TOP RIGHT The lounge at Labotessa.

BELOW The sole Diptyque Boutique in South Africa is at Labotessa.

It's something of a labour of love – and deep respect for heritage – to restore an old building into a beautiful repurposed new present.

There are other options: gut it and rebuild with no link to the past; cannibalise the good bits; leave it to crumble to dust; tear it down and build a gleaming modern edifice. But none of those were entertained by Hotelier Johan du Plessis when he bought one of the oldest buildings in Cape Town and turned it into the magnificent Labotessa Luxury Boutique Hotel.

AN OLD AFFAIR

On a corner of Church Square in the City Bowl, it murmurs sophistication. The hotel is in a national heritage monument and is one of South Africa's oldest buildings, dating to 1677.

After several years of negotiations with the City of Cape Town, restoration and renovation were done with extreme sensitivity, and more than a nod to the history of the building and the Cape.



Although he is South African by birth and spent his formative years on the family farm in the dusty Free State, Johan has spent much of his life in Europe, where he studied. His career managing luxury hotels has spread across Europe and the US for one of the world's most respected luxury hotel corporations. In the early 2000s, he brought his global expertise to Cape Town.

In Labotessa, he has given a home to that European sensibility, charm and understated elegance, yet his South Africanness is also celebrated. You can see it in the small details, in the art, the history and the joy.

SMALL BUT PERFECT

The hotel is intimate – just six rooms and a swish two-storey presidential suite at the top, with three en-suite rooms and a plunge pool on the terrace. Below, Church Square is one of the city's oldest public spaces and was once the site of slave markets. Across the square is the old Slave Lodge. Today it is a moving museum with human rights at its core.

The square eventually became a neglected car park, but with Johan as one of the driving forces behind its restoration, it is again a public space. The hotel opens onto it, with a relaxing green, treed oasis complete with a water feature. Chairs and tables from its Café and Terrace spill out and brunch, lunch or drinks here is a special experience (the café is open to the public).

There is a decidedly Dutch influence on the menu, which includes *stroopwafels* (waffles with a sweet cinnamon and caramel filling) and *bitterballen* (breaded and fried meat). From the Cape, there is a fragrant Bo-Kaap bobotie.

Also opening onto the square is Labotessa's Diptyque Boutique, and Diptyque amenities are in all the rooms: candles, soaps and lotions. It is the only Diptyque store in South Africa. Diptyque is almost a cult. The luxury Anglo-French fragrance brand was founded in 1961 in Paris. It makes eau de parfum, eau de toilette, scented candles and perfume oil diffusers.

Notice how the word 'luxury' crops up so many times in relation to Labotessa – this is not a coincidence.

To the rooms: the lift from the ground floor opens directly into your well-appointed room, where the view is of Lion's Head. They are massive, and gorgeous, with a kind of simplicity in their decor, top-notch furnishings, appliances and amenities that quietly whisper good taste.

There is a stocked minibar, with drinks and snacks, microwave and the like, hidden inside a bespoke wall unit. There is a lounge, table and chairs and a ginormous bed. The hard choice of your day is: stay in this comfortable bed and restful space, or go out and do.

Your room must be a quiet and uncluttered refuge, says Johan, who specifically chose not to make art a significant part of the decor (though the art dotted around the hotel is arresting). All the better to relax.

OUT ON THE TOWN

Labotessa does not serve dinner but the concierge service will recommend restaurants and make bookings for you. They will also suggest activities in and around Cape Town.

FYN (***fynrestaurant.com***), that internationally renowned tour de taste led by Peter Tempelhoff, Ashley Moss and Jennifer Hugé, is around the corner. Its **Ramenhead** (***ramenhead.co.za***) sibling is next door. A few easily walkable blocks away is **The Cousins Trattoria** (***thecousinsrestaurant***), one of Cape Town's most authentic and beloved Italian eateries.

Besides the Slave Lodge, the walk towards the mountain takes you past the statue of Jan Hendrik Hofmeyr, affectionately known as *Onze Jan* (Our Jan), the cabinet-maker of the old Cape; the Groote Kerk at the intersection of Parliament and Spin Streets; and St George's Cathedral. The name Spin Street, by the way, comes from a short-lived silk-spinning factory established in 1704 between Plein and Parliament Streets.

And up Government Avenue in the Company's Garden, there is much to see: Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town Holocaust & Genocide Centre, Iziko South African Museum and Iziko Planetarium and Digital Dome.

The new memorial to the black South African soldiers (they were not allowed to bear arms and fight, so they were in the Labour Corps, working as stretcher carries and the like, and were in the midst of the battles) who died in the First World War was unveiled in January in the Company's Garden, named the Cape Town Labour Corps Memorial. It's a big deal. More than a century after they died, after being dismissed and ignored by successive British and South African governments, they have finally been recognised and honoured, with their names engraved on the 1 600 or so wooden markers.

The Company's Garden itself is the oldest garden in South Africa and was created to grow fresh produce for the area and for passing ships of the Dutch East India Company.



Some Capetonians may be hesitant to visit downtown, but Labotessa's foreign guests are not, and neither should locals. It's a splendid place to spend your time. **G**

From R12 600 pn for two (including breakfast)
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ABOVE A Labotessa Signature Suite.

BELOW LEFT Labotessa invites you to sit and converse in its elegant communal spaces.

BOTTOM Owner Johan du Plessis has turned this patch of Church Square into a green oasis.

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY IMAGES; PRICES CORRECT AT TIME OF PRINT AND SUBJECT TO CHANGE