

# Take a Walk on the Wine Side

Who says exercise and drinking wine are mutually exclusive? EVAN NAUDÉ does the wine walk through the Robertson Valley and finds out why this alternative way of hiking is gaining in popularity

WORDS AND PICTURES EVAN NAUDÉ

A cover of mist hangs over the Robertson Valley as we set off from the graceful Cape Dutch Excelsior Manor Guesthouse at dawn. The surrounding vineyards are bathed in the warm glow of the sun's low-angled rays and the dewdrops on the leaves look like amber crystals. It is springtime and the vines are small, but if you look closely you can imagine where a grape that will one day contribute to a delectable bottle of wine is about to grow. We'll soon be getting a taste of the fruit of these vineyards on our first wine tasting of the day because this is, after all, a wine walk.

In recent years the number of so-called wine walks in the country has increased. They are offered in Wellington, Stellenbosch and Hermanus, and it is easy to see why this alternative way of hiking is gaining in popularity. As the name suggests, the excursions are part hiking, part wine tasting. The walking distances and number of wine tastings vary from walk to walk, but here in the Robertson Valley there are plenty of options.

The Excelsior Wine Walk is a three-day excursion with daily distances of between 14 to 16 kilometres. It stops off at half a dozen prominent wine estates and there are some non-wine-related surprises along the way.

The stately Manor Guesthouse is the starting and ending point for the hikes. It has been in the family for four generations and

accommodates guests in nine beautifully renovated suites. Breakfast and dinner are served at the Manor, while lunch is enjoyed at a venue along the route. What makes this walk unique is that it is guided by the owner of Excelsior, Freddie de Wet, a man who has spent his life amid these vines, valleys and mountain peaks. Who better to explain the ins and outs of wine production in the ultimate show-and-tell manner?

Our first stop is the grandiose House of Chardonnay, the tasting room at De Wetshof. The building's facade is a replica of the 1971 Koopmans De Wet House in Cape Town's Strand Street – a nod to the first De Wets who settled in the Cape in the late 1690s. We're still cautious about the combination of wine tasting and walking, and pace ourselves. But we can't resist ordering a few cases of wine to be shipped home. Before long we're out on the trail again and it's a short but brisk walk to the nearby Van Loveren Family Vineyards. The tasting room here is set in a lush garden which has been lovingly cultivated over generations.

With two wine tastings done before 11am, Freddie sets a stiff pace so we can work up a bit of a sweat before lunchtime. As we make our way towards the Breede River, the vines give way to orchards of nova mandarin, plum and prune trees. After crossing it, we climb a ridge on the foothills of the Elandsberg mountains for a sweeping view of the valley below. Then down again to board a barge from Viljoensdrift



CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE ABOVE: The stately Excelsior Manor Guesthouse – our home from home on the wine walk. ● We set off at a brisk pace through the vineyards. Closer to the Breede River the vines give way to orchards of mandarin, plum and prune trees. ● Freddie de Wet, the owner of Excelsior and our guide on the walk, explains the intricacies of viticulture. ● The House of Chardonnay at De Wetshof where we stop for our first wine tasting of the day.



that transports us to our lunch spot and, unsurprisingly, another wine tasting. Luckily for us, it's only a short walk back to Excelsior.

The next morning I awake with slightly stiff muscles and an equally persistent headache. But a hearty breakfast sorts out both, and I welcome the crisp mountain air and the smell of fresh soil and spring blossoms as we head out to Klaasvoogds, a small ward of the Robertson Wine District north of the R60 between Robertson and Ashton.

We ramble past groves of nectarines, plums and the pink, peach-tree blossoms. Close to a farm dam, river reeds tower above our heads, and flashes of bright orange reveal Southern Red Bishops. Our trail follows the back roads through vineyards, along citrus groves and past farmyards of chicken and geese.

We stop at Mark Dom's place to see his blueberry plantation. He explains how these tasty navy nuggets are grown and how their popularity has led to more diverse cultivation. "Traditionally blueberries were grown small, soft and sour, but in the past ten years there

has been a shift. Now we go for big, firm and sweet berries. You'll find these quite crunchy, almost like eating an apple." We sample the berries right off the bush and they are indeed in a league of their own.

Kranskop is our first wine-tasting stop of the day. We're getting the hang of this wine-and-walk ramble. Shortly we are on the move again and the trail leads through carpets of brightly coloured wildflowers to our next stop, Marbrin Olive Farm. We are welcomed by Clive Heymans who introduces us to his partner Briony Coetzee, and it's not long before she has us captivated by her passion and knowledge of all things olive.

We taste several different virgin oils, vinaigrettes and tapenades before moving on to the scrumptious olives harvested from the trees outside the tasting room. My taste buds have been experiencing some of the best wines in the country, but here I am left stunned by the nuances in the taste of the humble olive.

"Good quality olive oils are beautiful on their own," Briony explains, "so you don't



TOP LEFT: Waiting for the barge from Viljoensdrift to take us across the river for lunch and our third wine tasting of the day. TOP RIGHT: Briony Coetzee of Marbrin Olive Farm is passionate about all things olive. ABOVE: After three days of sampling some of the best wines in the Robertson Valley, we accept Freddie's challenge to blend our own in Excelsior's tasting room. BELOW LEFT: Lively discussions about in the Van Loveren tasting room. BELOW RIGHT: We head out to Klaasvoogds, a small ward of the Robertson Wine District.

## After three days of sampling some of the best local wines, we accept Freddie's challenge to blend our own wine

need to make dressings with them or add balsamic vinegar. That would be like adding Coke to single-malt whisky." The more I taste the more I understand what she means. "Olive oil is not like wine, it doesn't get better the longer you keep it," Briony cautions. "Make sure you get the freshest possible oil for the best flavour."

Our lunch is a spread of home-made Italian-style pizza prepared by Clive in an oven on the patio. The couple's pièce de résistance is a dangerously delicious limoncello which, together with a couple of bottles of wine, rounds off the Mediterranean experience.

Our limoncello-induced merriment makes light work of the hike back to Excelsior where we have the chance to sample our host's own

wine selection. Freddie's forefathers have been making wine on this patch of earth since 1859 and their collective, passed-down experience is evident in the Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Shiraz, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Rosé. This time we throw caution to the wind as we're done hiking for the day and our guest house is just across the road.

We wake up to a crisp morning on our final day. I see steam rise from the water as we pass a farm dam and when I breathe out into the fresh air, a puff of vapour mimics the motion. But we soon shed our jackets as Freddie leads us in a south-easterly direction up to the foothills of the Langeberg mountains. Our climb is rewarded by a stunning panoramic view of the sweeping valley below and Freddie,

in a Google Earth-esque way, points out our route of the past few days. Finally, he points out our next stop, Zandvliet Wine Estate, which mercifully lies downhill.

At Zandvliet I learn that the Robertson Valley is famous for another export: racehorses. Zandvliet is the birthplace of the famous Pocket Power, the nearby Arabella Wine Estate has a long-standing affinity for thoroughbred race horses, and Excelsior has produced champion horses for almost 100 years. As we head to Arabella, we pass lush green paddocks where more than a dozen elegant mother-and-foal pairs are grazing.

Leaving Arabella behind, we set off for the final stretch of our weekend-long wine walk and head back to Excelsior for lunch. It's a fitting way to end what has been a unique and fulfilling experience, both for our Fitbit metrics and our taste buds.

After three days of sampling some of the best local wines, we accept Freddie's challenge to blend our own wine. In Excelsior's tasting room, we all pretend to be master winemakers and everyone seals the cork of their unique keepsake. I decide to save mine, a blend of 40 per cent Cabernet Sauvignon, 40 per cent Shiraz, and 20 per cent Merlot for a dinner with friends. And when my mail-order boxes of wine arrive at home, perhaps I will go for a walk around the neighbourhood before pouring a glass. ■

Map reference F2 see inside back cover

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