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Winter is delicious in Cape Town

From May to December enjoy deeply discounted specials at the world's best restaurants

BY SANDRA MACGREGOR, SPECIAL TO THE VANCOUVER SUN JULY 7, 2012

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La Colombe is listed at No. 12 on the 2010 San Pellegrino list of the World's 50 Best Restaurants.

Photograph by: Submitted , Special To The Vancouver Sun

I'm not sure if I'm looking at an art display or a meal - either way it's divine. Kudu tartare, beetroot tart with goat cheese fondant, rib-eye sous vide ... each course is more beautiful and delectable than the last. Of course, I would expect nothing less here at La Colombe; in 2010 the restaurant came in 12th on the respected San Pellegrino list of the World's 50 Best Restaurants. But the meal's real coup de grace is the bill: five courses with wine pairings at one of the world's top culinary destinations for less than \$60 a person. Welcome to winter in Cape Town.

Though the city might not top travellers' lists as a cold-weather destination, it should. Cape Town can't offer skiing, snow-capped chalets or sleigh rides - the traditional fare of winter retreats - but despite its lack of snow, when the cold arrives (and cold is indeed a relative term,

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winters here average 7 to 20 degrees Celsius) Cape Town undergoes an important and tasty transformation as the city pays homage to all things culinary. From approximately May to September, deeply discounted winter specials grace the menus of restaurants throughout the region and every weekend is blessed with at least one festival celebrating food or wine - or better yet - both.

Under the radar as a foodie destination, three of the world's best restaurants (according to the San Pellegrino list) can be found in or around Cape Town. And there are countless more establishments - ranging from casual to high-end - offering dining specials for a fraction of what a similar meal would cost in other cosmopolitan capitals of the world.

"Summer is for the tourists, winter is for the locals," explains our waiter at La Colombe. "Winter specials are a restaurant's way of saying thank you to the locals who put up with us during the busy tourist season when maybe they couldn't get a reservation or had to wait for a table."

I can't think of a better way of saying thank you - especially if you're a tourist in a city where a cold-weather visit is not just rewarded with afford-able world-class meals and decadent festivals, but also with a dearth of crowds. Winter is the only time of the year when getting to the top of the iconic Table Mountain doesn't mean a long wait in line, and the preening penguins lounging on the shores at Boulders Beach outnumber the tourists. Off-season accommodation rates are another welcome inducement; from five-star boutique hotels to basic B&Bs, most offer enticing discounts for the winter tourist.

Time-strapped tourists looking for the best meal deals have but to turn to the Internet for up-to-the minute gastronomic guidance. Starting in late fall, (that would be April for those in the Northern hemisphere) a plethora of local websites and foodie blogs turn their attention to finding the best winter specials with intrepid (and well-sated) reporters posting extensive pieces praising a respective restaurant's culinary prowess.

"Of course we celebrate winter," says a neighbouring diner at Aubergine - another of Cape Town's hot culinary picks - as he overhears me marvelling at the restaurant's winter special deal. "For some places in the world every-thing stops growing but for us here, it's a time of plenty." Pointing to the food on his plate, he adds proudly "all of this is seasonal and locally grown." A quick stop at a local supermarket proves him right: shelves are overflowing with locally-grown winter produce like avocados, guavas, kiwis, oranges, eggplants and tomatoes, to name a few. All of which make their way into the kitchens of restaurants where the 100 Mile Diet would be considered about 50 miles too far.

Cape Town's ode to all things edible also extends to the nearby wine regions (most of which are less than an hour from Cape Town). Many of the respective regions' most celebrated restaurants offer winter specials; some of the most popular and best deals being Terroir, Tokara, Jordan Restaurant, Reuben's, Cuvée at Simonsig, Grande Provence, and



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Bosman's. A favourite among bar-gain-hunting food hounds - and the restaurant most responsible for my winter weight gain - is the winter special at the Greenhouse Restaurant in the nearby Constantia wine region. Forty five dollars gets you wine pairing and a five-course fantastical feast that begins with a mousse with edible soil and concludes with a post dessert truffle and macaroon tree.

But the city's cold weather love affair with food doesn't stop with restaurants. Capetonians stay warm by supplementing their restaurant-hopping with a bevy of affordably priced, culinary themed events. "In the summer, we spend all of our free time outdoors at the beach, or hiking the mountains," explains a fellow festival-goer as we sip the sparkling wine the restaurant 15 on Orange has kindly provided to those of us waiting in line to sample some of their food at the Taste of Cape Town festival. "Come winter we explore Cape Town and take the time to enjoy our city's gastronomic side."

Of course, a winter visit to Cape Town does have one unforeseen cost. But it's your waistline not your wallet that will pay.

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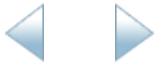
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