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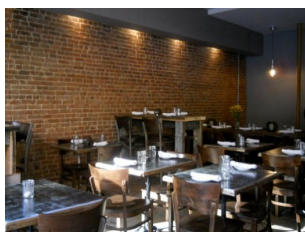


South African Cuisine Brings Exotic Air to the Upper East Side

by The Experimental Gourmand



Combining new world wines and craft beers, including some from New York State, along with plates of food with South African names and flavors, [Kaia Wine Bar](http://www.kaiawinebar.com/) (http://www.kaiawinebar.com/) seems to have found a warm welcome on a stretch of the Upper East Side more generally known for frat bars and takeaway joints. It is the brainchild of Suzaan Hauptfleisch, formerly at La Grenouille and Sfoglia, who wanted to create a place with items that are "locally acquired, South African inspired." Walking by the full front windows and seeing it buzzing with activity on most weeknights and weekends, it is evident that this spot has quickly become a favorite with the local neighborhood residents, just as Suzaan had hoped and intended.



From the minute you step into Kaia, which means "hut," with its rustic touches such as tables made with reclaimed zinc and wood, water served in Ball jars, an antique stove, bouquets of colorful wild flowers, and South African music playing in the background, you feel that Suzaan has captured the energy of a classic New York hangout while keeping the warm, relaxed atmosphere of growing up on her family's farm in the Free State. With Josh Levin, formerly of Babbo, behind the bar, there is a knowledgeable guide to assist you with selecting the appropriate beverage for your mood and their food, which you should definitely sample as Chef Ivan Giani has created a variety of dishes using South African-inspired tastes and local ingredients to entice you to explore this cuisine.

Once you've decided what to drink, a platter with bread, dipping oil, and a mix of spices, including sesame and mustard seeds, will be brought to you to whet your appetite. My favorite thing to start off with is the Cheese Peppedews, hot/sweet peppedew peppers filled with smooth, creamy cheese. They provide just enough punch and heat to make you crave another plate. Use some of the bread to sop up the tangy, hot sauce left behind.



One of the dishes that has been on the menu since day one is the Kaapse Sout Pannekoek (Cape Malay pulled pork pancake with mango chutney). Josh said that it is very similar to what his host family would serve, and for Ivan it is a personal favorite. A soft pancake a little thinner than a crêpe is stuffed full of tender, fragrant pulled pork with hints of cinnamon and dotted with carrots. The sauce is a bit sweet compared to a traditional American pulled pork dish but it is lovely and delicate all the same. This is definitely big enough to share.

Don't pass up the Samosas, if you see them on the menu. These are not at all the overly-doughy fried things that you might have tried before. At Kaia, they are light and crispy, filled to bursting with seasoned chicken or vegetables and served with a slab of sour-tart mango pickle, which adds a pleasant contrast to the



Another addictive small plate is the Rooi Snapper Ceviche. When I went to Kaia with friends, I wished I hadn't promised to share this with them. On a hot, steamy July night, it was the ideal refreshing starter. Perfectly textured fish with a punch of citrus and flecks of hot peppers made this dish colorful as well as delightful to eat.



Or, you could be more adventurous and chow down on the Ostrich Slider. The meat is sourced, like many of the ingredients they use, from a New York producer. The best way to describe it is that it is like the most beefy steak burger you've ever eaten. It is moist and hearty, with notes of the cumin and coriander mixed within. A handful of arugula adds a peppery bite while a slice of cool avocado and slather of spicy mayo round out this satisfyingly flavorful sandwich.



If you decide to check out Kaia for their Saturday or Sunday brunch, ostrich makes an appearance there as well. The Ostrich Benny has slices of the meat along with perfectly poached eggs over a toasted English Muffins with peri peri hollandaise sauce drizzled on top of all of it. Hollandaise is often an afterthought on brunch dishes, so it was really nice to see it actually play more of a starring role here with citrus notes to balance out the sauce's richness. The peri peri itself had a long finish, rather than hitting you up front and overwhelming all the other tastes, and the kick it added kept me going back for bite after bite.



Hopefully, you aren't too full by this point to enjoy the signature Malva Cake. Their most popular dessert is part cake, part English-style pudding. It is super moist and buttery with a generous soaking of syrup at the bottom. The apricot cream cuts through the sweetness to give it balance and makes each caramelly bite just melt on your tongue.



If she's made a batch, don't pass up Suzaan's Beer Bread. Made using whatever beer seems right that day, this creation is soft and light with a slight wheaty-hoppy flavor. The crisp crust is where you really taste the beer. Get it with the butter and the house-made seasonal preserves. I had the tart-tangy strawberry-lime version on one visit.

In developing the menu, one of the things that Suzaan had wanted to convey is the wide variety of cultures that make up the country of South Africa, with its long and sometimes turbulent colonial history. As she put it, she would "rather represent [it] on the plate with the food" than overstate it with presentation. I wish that every country could be displayed so flavorfully and tastefully as what Kaia has brought to the Upper East Side and look forward to more exploration of South African cuisine

plate by plate.

Kaia Wine Bar

1614 Third Avenue between 90th and 91st Streets
212-722-0490

The Experimental Gourmand is the story of a blogger, food writer, and experimental home cook. She enjoys exploring the local food event scene and finding fresh ingredients at her farmers markets with which to make great meals.

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