

STAR CHEF FINDS A BOLT-HOLE BY THE SEA



There are some business decisions that make perfect sense. Opening a Reuben's restaurant in the West Coast fishing / holiday village of Paternoster is one of them.

Late October last year saw the opening of the fourth restaurant to bear the name of Franschhoek-born Reuben Riffel. Situated within the funky five-star Abalone House boutique guesthouse, the new venue (the others are in Franschhoek, Cape Town and Robertson) offers bistro-style dining with an emphasis on sourcing and preparing quality local produce.

"It's something I've wanted to do for a long, long time," admits the genial Riffel. "I have a 'connection' with Paternoster: I went there often as a kid and have always found it to be a very special place... somewhere I can switch off and enjoy time with my young family."

Tongue-in-cheek, he insists that the new restaurant "will not try to be the best in Paternoster. We just want to add to the dining experience." *Reuben's at Abalone House* is run by 26-year-old Aviv Liebenberg. The son of a sculptor,

Liebenberg grew up in Wellington and, just after matriculating, joined at Silwood Kitchen although he had already been accepted by the electrical engineering faculty at the University of Cape Town.

"During my first year at Silwood – it was in the June holidays of 2005 – I did my three-week in-service practical at Reuben's restaurant in Franschhoek.

"It was the first kitchen I'd ever worked in. To be honest, up until then I wasn't even certain that I really wanted to be in

this industry. Then I felt the adrenaline... getting ready for service, being on your feet for 12 to 14 hours at a stretch, getting one day a week off work if you were lucky ... and I started getting excited about the life."

Further in-service placements at Terroir at Stellenbosch's Kleine Zalze, and the Alphen Hotel and Cape Grace in the Mother City during his second year confirmed his passion. While working at Bouillabaisse in Franschhoek, Liebenberg resumed his friendship with Reuben

Riffel. It was about the time the latter was considering opening a restaurant in Robertson.

Riffel asked Liebenberg to oversee the project from scratch in June 2009. Reuben's at the Robertson Small Hotel opened its doors less than three months later with Liebenberg as executive chef.

A year later, Riffel asked him to assist in opening at One&Only Cape Town.

"Of course I said 'yes'," laughs Aviv.



Grilled crayfish and mussel risotto with chilli and basil





Clockwise from bottom left: Chef Aviv Liebenberg; Dark chocolate pavé, ginger mousse with strawberry and mint granite; Biltong-spiced beef tartar, yoghurt, cape Malay dressing with a caper and sultana salad.

"It was a whole different operation coming from a 10-room boutique hotel where the restaurant only seated 30 people. I worked as 'second-in-command' to Maritz Jacobs but found myself working almost exclusively on the operational side of cheffing – managing people. It was hectic and I didn't really enjoy myself."

Now, following a successful stint working with Richard Carstens at Tokara Restaurant in Stellenbosch, Aviv finds himself teamed up with Riffel again.

"This is a very similar set-up to Robertson," he says of Reuben's at Abalone House.

Liebenberg's cooking style tends towards subtle complexity; multiple layers of flavour and experience without being over-complicated or overpowering. It's a style, he believes, that perfectly complements both the Reuben's bistro-style menu as well as West Coast produce.

"This is not a place of big, bold flavours."

Paternoster's distance from Cape Town – 150 kilometres – is a challenge as well as a boon to Liebenberg. "There's no way suppliers from Cape Town can deliver daily, which makes me very reliant on what I can source locally. Portion-control is critical but it also means that the menu is extremely flexible."

Liebenberg says Riffel gives him "lots of leeway" when it comes to drawing up

the menu but insists he closely follows the strict guidelines of cooking style and presentation.

There are a number of Reuben's signature dishes on the menu – chilli salted squid and soy-braised pork belly, for instance – but others are rapidly becoming identifiable as Liebenberg's own specialties. "I do a double-baked aged cheddar soufflé on top of a smoked snoek cream and accompanied by a pickled tomato and onion salad that I think is quite spectacular.

West Coast mains are "a lot more challenging: you can't offer denningveis [Cape Malay-style lamb knuckles] on a Reuben's menu but you could do local side-dishes prepared with our own twist".

Unsurprisingly, Reuben's at Abalone House tends strongly towards seafood ... and not just the West Coast rock-lobster and mussels that are synonymous with Paternoster. Liebenberg is particularly pleased about sourcing stompneus and smoked mackerel from Saldanha, and farmed kabeljou right on the restaurant's doorstep. "Whenever we run out," he quips, "I send a waiter across the road for another."

His personal favourite, however, is smoked mackerel with apple, horse-radish, daikon, potato and walnut. Another local delight is Alta Nel's Altwic

Cottage organic cheese range. Made from both goat's and cow's milk, the range includes Gouda, cheddar, blue cheese, gruyere, chevin, camembert, labnah and feta. "They're wonderful for use in summer salads with beetroot, cumin and oranges."

Liebenberg has also struck up a friendship with Kobus van der Merwe, owner of Paternoster's Oep ve Koep bistro, from whom he has learned the art of foraging for "veldkos" such as samphire, wild radish and soutslaai. "I sometimes use these to add local integrity to a dish," he says. "There's also veldkool, which is a type of wild asparagus that can be pickled or sautéed."

While Reuben's at Abalone House caters predominantly for tourists and residents, Liebenberg says "locals" are beginning to show their appreciation by travelling from Langebaan, Saldanha and Vredenburg. "We give them a no-frills, value-for-money dining experience that they won't find anywhere else on the West Coast."

For Abalone House & Spa restaurant and accommodation bookings on (27) (22) 752 2044; email info@abalonehouse.co.za or visit www.abalonehouse.co.za.