

# a newt thing

Barely two months ago, I was driving through the gates of Babylonstoren before finding myself entering those of the farm's overseas sister, The Newt in Somerset. A beautifully reimagined country estate, I would soon come to regard it as England's veritable garden of Eden. The Newt has garnered a devoted global following, and just days after my stay it was announced that the hotel had been awarded the top spot for the second consecutive year on the UK's prestigious Top 50 Boutique Hotels list.

Named after the native salamanders once discovered on the estate, The Newt spans about 800 acres of Somerset's beautiful – and mystical – countryside and includes woodland, farmland, and orchards. From the farm, a glance at nearby Cadbury Castle reveals one of the three plausible sites believed to be King Arthur's Camelot, adding to the area's sense of myth and majesty.

Arthur Cole, head of programmes at The Newt, takes me on a tour of the estate to contextualise the farm's soil-to-table philosophy. Standing on the elevated walkway of the beautifully designed roundhouse barn, we admire the pedigree-registered British White cattle herd; around 10 percent of the world's population is in front of me. This is in addition to the 400 breeding sheep, a herd of water buffalo, and 600 acres of arable crops. "In all honesty, our desire with all this is to leave a legacy," says farmer Cameron Knee. "Much of this involves a focus on regenerative agriculture, enabling The Newt to produce food in the most sustainable way."

Alan Stewart, head of food and the estate's head chef, continues the journey at the butchery, where I witness not only traditional skills and methods in action, but also an active apprenticeship programme aimed at reviving the declining art of butchery. This emphasis on training and the sharing of valuable skills applies to all departments on the farm.

OWNED BY SOUTH AFRICAN HOTELIERS KOOS BEKKER AND KAREN ROOS, THE NEWT IN SOMERSET HAS BEEN NAMED THE TOP BOUTIQUE HOTEL IN THE UK. HERE'S WHY...

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## COUNTRY LIFE:

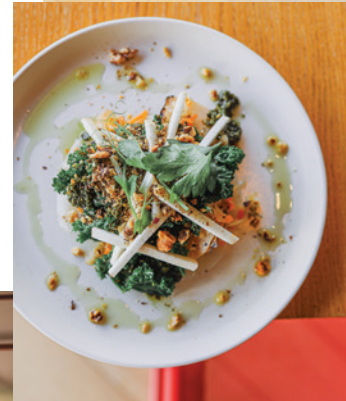
Treasures to be found around The Newt's gardens include the hotel, restaurants, the Roman Villa, and even local wildlife



**BACK TO BASICS:**  
The Newt's soil-to-table philosophy was evident on the farm tour, where guests are able to pick, touch, and taste just about everything they see



Our last stop is a meeting with head gardener Harry Baldwin, whose career has been meteoric. A degree in horticulture, six-year tenure at Kew Gardens, and private garden experience have more than equipped him for this vital role. The daunting task is made easier, of course, by his team of 37 fellow gardeners. Harry's vision is to continue The Newt's ethos of blending hospitality and learning, with the gardens serving a purpose beyond mere aesthetics. This is because the boundaries of horticulture for guest experience are evolving: visitors can now move from simply looking to picking, touching, tasting, or nibbling. And yes, everything tastes better; the reason lies in the minimal time from picking to the tastebuds, which in my case, while nibbling through the nurseries, was mere seconds.



While undoubtedly impressive and expansive, the gardens are surprisingly minimalist, employing texture, shape, and form to create a cornucopia of outdoor space without being imposing. Additionally, there are no signs or set paths, and getting lost has never been as enjoyable or beautiful. Like Babylonstoren, the gardens offer plenty to discover and explore, including a Beezantium, museums, a farm store, the House & Garden Shop, and a treetop walkway. On the culinary side, there's The Garden Café, and The Station Café at The Creamery.



Somerset is cyder country (a small etymological shift from the usual cider – the older term emphasising intentional craft production over mass production). While the South African property enjoys hectares of fruit-laden vines, The Newt is home to 3 000 apple cyder trees, and 60 heritage Somerset varieties are cultivated in order to safeguard their gene pool. As such, a visit to The Newt would be incomplete without experiencing the comprehensive tasting. You'll sample a wide range of cyders, including The Winston, a champagne method cyder, and impressively an Ice Cyder – one of only two in the world.

Paying homage to the Roman ruins discovered on the site, the reimagined Roman Villa Museum breathes life into history with geo-

triggered headsets and virtual reality goggles. Another essential stop is the immersive Story of Gardening museum, which explores the history of botany and takes visitors to the world's most beautiful gardens throughout time using virtual reality pods.

*“A visit to The Newt would be incomplete without experiencing the tasting”*

Hotel rooms are spread across the Farmyard and Hadspen House – the original 17th-century

Georgian manor house. Hadspen also houses The Botanical Rooms, an elegant dining space offering modern British cuisine made with seasonal produce from the gardens, local markets, or the nearby port in Dorset. Dine inside on chilly days or in the glass-enclosed conservatory, where Sunday roasts with all the trimmings are offered too. There are several lounges, a bar, an underground cellar for cyder tastings, or the Farmyard Kitchen located in an old threshing barn where you can order a cheeseboard or snacks to share.

Once you've taken a moment to breathe in all the beauty, one thing remains: to don a gown and saunter through the farmyard and on to the spa. ■

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