

HUNGER GAMES

Sbu Mkwana recently pitched two Gauteng restaurants — one on the East Rand, the other in Johannesburg’s northern suburbs — against each other, and recounts the outcome of this culinary duel

At face value, it seems there is not much you can compare when it comes to the East Rand and the northern suburbs of Johannesburg. The more affluent north is a playground for high-net-worth individuals and home to pointy-shoed tenderpreneurs, whereas the East Rand is known for OR Tambo International Airport, low-suspension VW Golfs and Charlize Theron’s hometown, Benoni. Yet upon further inspection it turns out that both areas, contrary to popular belief, do have something in common: world-class restaurants. But which node boasts the best offering?

THE NORTH

SOLO RESTAURANT

Cnr Gwen Lane and Fredman Drive, Sandton

What do you get when two friends, Tumelo Maepa and Hlompho Chauke, start a restaurant in Sandton? A contemporary dining space that doubles up as a culinary experience.

The upmarket establishment is all about celebrating all things South African, but always with an intriguing twist added, just for good measure. This ranges from décor details that include aged brassware, vintage mirrors, dried botanicals and timber wall cladding that reminds you that you’re in Africa’s richest square mile.

The twist comes in the form of unexpected and elegant graffiti – a touch you would not ordinarily associate with such a swanky restaurant and bar. The look is perfectly rounded off with art pieces by local artist African Ginger.

The dining area is made up of three distinct sections: a formal sit-down area, a trendy sushi bar and the Nest Lounge – a dimly lit nook where you can get up to mischief, like impressing a date with your knowledge of Cuban cigars.

Resident chef Ashley Murison-Johnson took the kitchen reins almost three months ago, and his straightforward yet playful personality comes through in the recently revamped menu.

The idea of blatantly mixing African tastes with European influences and plating is one that pays off in every dish. This is most evident in the fish of the day (R265), which happened to be a buttery and meaty Australian barramundi, balanced with a broth, bok choy and peas. Believe it or not, the best part of this dish is the pickled shimeji mushrooms. This is the definition of distilled flavours.

As part of the Spanish-inspired tapas offering, the prawn kataifi (R140) topping is one that mixes Europe and Africa more seamlessly than terminal A at OR Tambo. The bunny chow tapa (R115), constructed using slow-roasted lamb neck curry, mango atchar, mojito yoghurt and dombolo (better known as dumpling), is one you have to try.

Solo’s speciality dishes include a pork belly (R260) that is multidimensional: it is silky smooth, while the pork crackling is perfectly crispy, complemented by bright orange butternut bits, acidic apple slices, a sweet celery chutney jus, all topped with crunchy walnuts. It’s like biting into the very best of every sensation there is.



PICTURES: SOLO RESTAURANT



Solo restaurant’s arched wine cellar, above, and ???????? what dish???

For something to tingle your tastebuds, the salmon and tiger prawns offering (R360), complete with morogo (wild spinach), raw garlic dressing and a lemon and mustard remoulade is for you. This is the type of soul-stirring cuisine that will make you wish you had a bigger stomach, just so you could consume more.

solosandton.co.za
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PICTURES: LEVEL SEVEN

Level Seven Restaurant, below, and ?????????? XXXXX info needed here please

THE EAST

LEVEL SEVEN RESTAURANT AND SKY BAR

OR Tambo Radisson Hotel, Cnr 3rd Avenue and Sixth Road, Bredell, Kempton Park

You would think that Level Seven Restaurant and Sky Bar would be perched on the seventh floor of the OR Tambo Radisson Hotel. It is on the sixth floor, which happens to be the top floor, so the views are majestic.

Johannesburg restaurateur Desmond Mabuza – owner of the fine-dining eatery Signature in Morningside, Sandton, has transplanted the same class and opulence to the Bredell area in Kempton Park.

As soon as you exit the lift, you are greeted by décor that described by the designer, Bilala Mabuza, as “a meeting of design, art, flowers and butterflies”. Photography pieces also welcome you into the airy space, ensuring that you forget you’re in an area that is not synonymous with luxury.

With the exceptional level of culinary

delights on offer, chef Loyiso Mdzulwana has to be one of the finest cooks in Joburg, not just the East Rand. His duck leg confit (R325) is simply unmatched, as is his beetroot goat’s cheese and ostrich carpaccio (R165).

Mdzulwana is an artist whose medium happens to be edible. When he plates dishes such as the grilled sole (R245) – seasoned with sea salt, served with sautéed new potatoes, pea and red onion ragout and salsa verde – he entices your sense of sight and smell. The delicately balanced taste pushes you over the edge, leaving you wondering if you have been short-changed your whole life when it comes to parties in your mouth.

The coffee-rubbed fillet (R325) – beef rubbed in a coffee-infused blend of spices, twice-baked potato, asparagus, fried exotic mushrooms and creamed mushroom sauce – showcases the creativity that is part of every meal.

And just when you thought the main courses were the pièce de résistance, Level Seven has a most comprehensive dessert menu, and when laid out the delights resemble a layered art exhibition. From the trio of crème brulee (R115), mascarpone cheesecake (R120) and soufflé (R135), to the semifreddo (R135), panna cotta (R140) and chocolate spheres (R130), you crave more after each tasting.

levelsevenrestaurant.co.za
010-541-1300.

THE VERDICT:

It’s a tight call, as you cannot go wrong with either of these establishments if you’re looking for finesse, sophistication and elevated food, drinks and desserts in Johannesburg – one in the north, the other in the east, so take your pick.

While Solo is a visual treat, especially the Instagram-famous arched wine cellar and cool art on display, Level Seven Restaurant takes the honours by a hair’s breadth. The defined attention to the art of taste is simply unflawed. And every dish leaves one feeling that it receives never-ending TLC. Their comprehensive wine offering and their knowledgeable sommelier sealed the deal.

