

“**L**ook what I was given at the fish shop when I went to buy the gurnard!” exclaims Noelle Bolton. In the wood-panelled kitchen of her Plettenberg Bay holiday home, she holds a poster indicating green, orange and red fish and seafood categories, with images of species for each. The Southern African Sustainable Seafood Initiative (SASSI) poster is designed as a guideline for fish consumers. Noelle’s white-fleshed gurnard fits the green category, which means relatively prolific populations are available. “We’ve got the green, sustainable choice in gurnard and local chokka (calamari) from Plett waters for today’s lunch,” she says.

Bolton Place has belonged to Noelle’s family for years, welcoming many friends during the holidays. While Noelle and Ara Manuelian, her partner of 13 years, live in Johannesburg, the couple spend much of their time travelling on business and for pleasure.

Ara describes himself as being “in the business of being in business”, as he dabbles in property, real estate and technology. A French national with Armenian roots, he has lived on and off in South Africa since 1976.

Entertaining friends, shopping and eating in far-flung places may be regular pastimes for this jet-setting couple, but getting involved in restaurants was an unprecedented move. Ara and Noelle are the energy behind the fu.shi and BoMa Bar restaurants that overlook a sunny Plettenberg Bay piazza. Their watering hole Chef’s Bar is on a lower level. Ara developed The Upper Deck lifestyle piazza where these venues are situated.

By all accounts, fu.shi and BoMa Bar are shaking up Plett with their modern fusion food and sushi offerings. “We never intended to be in the restaurant business. It’s not something you open to make money. You do it because you have a passion for it, and to have fun,” says Ara. “The intention was to upgrade the CBD of Plett, to give it a heart. It’s one of the most beautiful bays in the world.”

As curator of a gallery at the piazza, Noelle also supports and promotes artists from the region, while well-known chef Vanie Padayachee oversees the restaurant kitchens. “We were at a restaurant in Singapore when we came up with the idea of Asian fusion. A friend in Franschhoek knew Vanie was looking to move, and she’s a fantastic chef so we were keen,” says Ara.

Vanie usually spends most of her time in the kitchen, but she’s a guest at Noelle and Ara’s lunch on this occasion. The assembled group makes a beeline for the glorious terrace with its breathtaking views of the coastline. Guest and architect Paul Oosthuizen recently enhanced the deck and swimming pool area while applying a few aesthetic tweaks to Bolton Place. He also conceptualised The Upper Deck development.

Noelle and Ara’s other guests include Stirling and Vanessa Wilson, Paul Oosthuizen’s wife Claire, Rosie and Paul Deans, and Penny Smythe and her husband Charles Rathbone who have driven through from Knysna.

As everyone takes their seats, Noelle mentions her joy at using her new Balinese granite sala as a lunch table. Sunken seats provide a low, round experience, with scattered cushions and loungers for fans of vertical positions as the afternoon lazes on. Noelle’s home is always filled with flowers and a new variety of fuchsia stargazers play their role nicely on the sala. An unusual sauvignon bubbly – Bramon Sauvignon Blanc Brut MCC 2005 – made from Plettenberg Bay grapes by Graham Beck’s winemakers, partners Noelle’s summery starter of Plett chokka with salad greens.

“As you can see, I do big entertaining,” explains Noelle. “I used to be in PR so I enjoy it. We start off with 10 and land up with... well, many. I cook with my Zimbabwean chef Tarsie too. I bring him to Plett in December as we have tons of people staying.”

As the majority of Noelle’s guests previously lived in cities, talk turns to relocation experiences. “If you want to see Johannesburg friends, build a house at the sea. They’ll call,” jokes Paul Deans. Penny Smythe says she made the switch to Johannesburg after 22 years in Cape Town. “I don’t think I was supposed to, but I loved Joburg,” she laughs. The former TV presenter of *Sundowner*, *Agenda* and *Front Row* says she misses the deadline pressure at times, but is very happy in Knysna.

A platter of gurnard fillets makes perfect poolside fare with olive oil-roasted vegetables and basmati rice. “I’m not the braaiing type. I love platters of food, roast chickens or stuffed yellowtail. There were times when I baked my own bread, but now I take a few shortcuts,” says Noelle.

Dessert is decadent and kilojoule-filled: a dark chocolate tart served with homemade honeycomb ice cream and nutty foam (there are

