

Exclusive Books decides to add food to the mix

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It's a social experiment and a commercial adventure, an 'experiventure'," says, Exclusive Books CEO Benjamin Trisk of the bookseller's new store in Hyde Park Corner, Johannesburg.



Image credit: [SandtonCity.com](#)

In fact, it's hard to call Exclusive Books a bookseller now. The Hyde Park Corner store is the second in the Exclusive Books stable to transmogrify into a restaurant with books.

"We've done half of the Waterfront (store). We need to finish, and we need more space there," he says of the 800m² space. "We've also got to redo (the store at) Cavendish (Square). I want more space, it's a very successful store, we need to do something that honours our customers there," he says.

It is just over two years since Trisk and a group of investors bought Exclusive Books from the Times Media Group. It is one of South Africa's largest bookselling chains, with stores in many shopping malls and one in Gaborone, Botswana.

First came the revamp of the store in Rosebank, Johannesburg, which now incorporates a fully-fledged coffee shop selling its own blends, and a variety of light meals, cakes, chocolates and tarts. Now the Hyde Park Corner store incorporates a restaurant run by Australian chef Russell Armstrong, who has worked at three three-star Michelin restaurants in London and Roanne, France. There is also a tapas bar, and a coffee shop.

"Of course I know that people are going to damage books," says Trisk, shrugging his shoulders. "But I always knew that if we just have a space from which we sell books, why should someone come. It was absolutely essential to create an experience."

The Hyde Park Social Kitchen & Bar is simply glorious in its industrial chic. It was specially designed by architects Silvio Rech and Lesley Carstens, who usually design homes and tourist lodges.

Books flow into the restaurant, similarly to the style at the Rosebank store. "Rosebank taught me a lot, what to do and what not," says Trisk. "It's a smaller space, so we couldn't do this. I am happy to sell nonbook products, but I don't want to sell crap. This will be filled with beautiful product."

The idea was to lure people into the shops who may never have stepped into a bookstore before. "Whether we sell more books, we'll see. It's an experiment. It's about how books comfort our lives, and about how food gives us comfort. That's why I brought in Russell Armstrong. He's from Brisbane, recommended by (Irish-born Spier chef) Liam Tomlin."

Trisk describes the Hyde Park Social Kitchen & Bar as a place where "all of the senses are reduced to one, and the one is the space you are in. As well as creating a huge commercial enterprise, I wanted to give Johannesburg a space."

Creating the space involved buying the part of the mall's car park that lay beyond the original Exclusive Books store and incorporating it into the retail space. "I thought it was insane that the car park had the most beautiful view, probably, in Johannesburg," says Trisk.

He then showed Armstrong the car park, and the Australian agreed to relocate and establish the restaurant. "It has all the main ingredients for something special," says Armstrong.

The view is encapsulated by an enormous picture window that sets the tone for the airy restaurant, decorated with mismatched Moroccan tiles, and with white tiles cracked after setting and filled with gold leaf, treatment inspired by an Argentinian restaurant in Paris. Trisk wanted "less regularity, something that spoke of imperfection and bohemian style".

Armstrong, whose career has seen him work at The Connaught hotel in London's Mayfair under head chef Michel Bourdin, now retired, and brothers Michel and Albert Roux, who operated Le Gavroche, the first restaurant in the UK to gain three Michelin stars. He also worked at Les Frères Troisgros in Roanne, near to Lyon in France.

"I showed him the car park, and he said, "Count me in." This is food you will recognise. If it is short rib, it is the short rib of your dreams, short rib as God described it," says Trisk.

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