

PART OF NEW INNER CITY VIBE

# The Big Easy opens at the Hilton – so relaxed

Colleen Dardagan

**T**HE “Big Easy” is in town. No, not the man himself, but the golfing superstar’s signature “The Big Easy Winebar & Grill” which opened at Durban’s Hilton Hotel at the weekend.

With produce garnered from all corners of KwaZulu-Natal farmlands and wines from his own estate, Ernie Els has opened the first of an international franchise to go on to launch in Malaysia and Miami, just for starters.

And why Durban? you might ask. Markus Fritz, general manager at the Hilton, said the lifestyle on the East Coast suited Els’s vision of a relaxed, warm atmosphere where South Africans could enjoy the great cuisine, including his favourites, such as Ernie’s Burger, Bunny Chow and Tomahawk steak, all with a haute cuisine twist, of course.

“The restaurant – which was a functions room before – now reflects Ernie’s personality: it’s warm and relaxed. It’s very South African,” Fritz said.

He said the restaurant was the cherry on the top of the Hilton’s R200 million refurbishment. “This restaurant is about bringing Durban people back to the centre of town. There is a vibe now in this city. We are really excited about it.”

Therese Virserius, owner of New York interior design company Virserius ([www.virseriusstudio.com](http://www.virseriusstudio.com)), who was in town to finish the space, spoke to Network about Els’s “non-negotiable” design require-

ments. “The braai and fire pit outside, the copper sheeting on the bar, they were a must. He wanted items of furniture that were reflective of what he had in his own home. He wants people to feel as though they are at home in here. The space reflects his personality.” The Swedish-born designer, who spent six weeks travelling the country to discover “what is South Africa”, said the room was inspired by that experience.

“South Africa is so earthy. There are such incredible textures. The hospitality and genuine friendliness of the people stood out for me. That is reflected in the warmth of the interior,” she said.

Indeed, the cement floors, wood panelling and hard top tables surrounded by chairs covered in stretched suede are irresistible to the touch. The open-plan kitchen, finished with deep blue tiles, the chef’s table with its stone, wood and leather finishes tell a story of “rustic sophistication” or perhaps South Africa at its world-class best.

Ah, and the most important non-negotiable, 200 bottles of wines from Els’s own estate in the Western Cape, all chilled to perfection. “Even the red wine,” said Fritz. “Because of the humidity we make sure it is kept at the perfect temperature.”



Interior designer Therese Virserius, the mastermind behind ‘The Big Easy Winebar & Grill’ at Durban’s Hilton hotel, which featured non-negotiable design requirements.

PICTURE: COLLEEN DARDAGAN