

DÉCOR AND FOOD

# La crème de la crème

Combine French owner Jessica Rushmere's vision and Haldane Martin's interior flair and you have a coastal destination café that is ahead of the curve

WORDS: KIM MAXWELL :: PHOTOS: MICKEY HOYLE AND PETER MALTBIÉ



Fifteen years ago, ex-Parisian model Jessica Rushmere created and ran La Petite Tarte. It was a cosy French café in Cape Town's De Waterkant suburb. She later sold up, started a family, and offered a service as a personal wardrobe shopper and stylist.

In 2018 Rushmere decided that Cape Town was ready for a new project. "With Swan I needed to create again ... something that had not been done yet in Cape Town," she says. The airy, modern French crêperie serves sweet crêpes and savoury galettes, alongside locally roasted coffee and her own blend of loose leaf teas.

Swan Café opened a few months ago in the East City precinct, a cosmopolitan section of the city's downtown that is busily reinventing itself with tenants including a bagel shop, cocktail bars, specialist stores and trendy tattoo shops.

scrawled above the crêpe counter during one visit. For Rushmere, the café's corner location in art deco The Harrington building was non-negotiable. She watched the site being renovated while she lived in a loft apartment in Barrack Street opposite. "I wanted the feeling of town. But I was very specific, I wanted this corner and nothing else," she says. The decision paid off: glass entrance doors stack open wide to cleverly allow the city's gritty downtown daytime inside.

## SPIRIT ANIMAL

Greek mythology features in the wallpaper, with swan and bird-feather motifs in custom wall and floor tiles – Rushmere calls the swan her spirit animal – and in wallpaper in the bathroom. Bronze birdcages modified into lights add a delicate touch. "They are about effortless grace," says Rushmere. "At one stage in my life I also felt like a bird in a cage with its wings primed for flight."

In sweet crêpes, try caramelised apple smeared with oozy salted caramel, homemade of course.



Fresh thyme with a drizzle of lemon curd is another sweeter homemade delight.

Savoury galettes use buckwheat flour – the Croque Monsieur is ideal for brunch: Gypsy ham, melted Gruberg and Emmenthal, a drizzle of béchamel sauce, fresh chives. Lemon and herb chicken breast with mushrooms, plus truffle oil, is heartier. Or there is classic smoked trout with cream cheese, baby spinach and smashed avo. swancafe.co.za

**"I wanted the feeling of town. But I was very specific, I wanted this corner and nothing else"**

Jessica Rushmere, owner, Swan Café

## Haldane Martin on commercial interior design

**Jessica of Swan Café is very stylish in her own right.** She brings a wonderful energy to her café. She might not have the hard skills of interior design, but she knows what she likes. It makes the design process really effective and fun. She gave us her functional requirements. She also employed a great graphic designer to create the brand identity. Then we all shared ideas and inspired one another.

**As you enter the space there is a tile feature on the floor.** The graphic designer had created two swans with a heart shape from their necks. We used that logo and created a custom tile of blue and white swans inside a hexagon shape. And we also created swans as wallpaper in the bathroom. The tiles on the bar have a teardrop shape, but remind you of feathers layered on a bird. It references old traditional cafés in a contemporary tile pattern.

**One of our strengths is that we do a lot of bespoke furniture.** It creates novelty for our interior design clients. The world has become so globalised that shopping centres anywhere are almost identical. So when you walk into a space that has bespoke furniture and unusual finishes, you wake up and become present. It makes for a memorable experience. It helps our clients' businesses become better.

**With Swan Café we went more feminine.** The main mural, in blue-grey wallpaper, is based on Leda and the Swan, by Leonardo da Vinci. We settled on an intense dark blue in the bar area, the toilet door,

and on the ceiling above the couch (the holes are for acoustic absorbent ceiling boards, but also have a design element). The use of French café blue was also very strong.

The birdcages were something that Jessica wanted. Birds ... swans. We found second-hand cages and painted them copper.

**The chairs are our designs.** We took traditional bistro furniture, especially armchairs, and created a contemporary version. Ours are made with metal instead of wood. It's a new expression of a classic bistro chair.

**I used to design for design's sake.** Now I still like being creative, but there is a commercial goal at the end. Good design gives our clients a competitive advantage. People want a more curated lifestyle. Businesses that don't invest in design, especially where it touches their consumers, are going to start slipping behind. The hospitality sector is very competitive. There are lots of great restaurants and cafés all over the world.

**I used to be sceptical about Cape Town's East City Precinct but I've been proven wrong.** It is a commuter thoroughfare for working-class people, yet we can have great cafés and lifestyle shops in the area. That is a positive development. We're learning to become a more integrated city. I think there will always be that gritty element, with Mavericks, Home Affairs and the police station nearby, which makes it more authentic.

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