



Interview: Chantel Dartnall of Restaurant Mosaic

By Joseph Mosselson | Thu, 17 Nov 2011 15:00

In the run-up to the [DStv Food Network Eat Out Restaurant Awards](#), we're chatting to some of the chefs in the running for the awards.

Today: Chantel Dartnall a former winner of the prestigious Chef of the Year award and head chef of [Restaurant Mosaic](#), located at The Orient Boutique Hotel in the Francolin Conservancy

Area, just outside Pretoria.

To start, could you tell us a bit about yourself and about the restaurant?

Restaurant Mosaic was established five years ago, we are in the Francolin Conservancy just west of Pretoria. The style of the restaurant is in the *belle époque* Parisian *art-nouveau* style, so beautiful, elaborate *art-nouveau* decoration and the style of cooking is, let's say, botanical. We love to cook with flowers and my approach is very classical when we consider what we are creating on the plate.

And how did you end up here? What has your journey been like?

Well I actually grew up in Pretoria and studied here. Then I went and travelled a little bit and worked in London for two years before returning back to South Africa and then establishing Mosaic.

And when did you first know that you wanted to be a chef?

Well I have to say it was embroidered in me, so from a very young age I've always had this urge to get into the kitchen and create something. So it's always come rather naturally and I've loved exploring food and different tastes and textures. But I think the final decision point came when I went to high school and then I knew that that was the only thing I'd love to pursue.

You mentioned flowers earlier. What are some other ingredients that you're really enjoying at the moment?

Well, we have such beautiful produce in South Africa, so just sourcing some beautiful local lamb. The vegetables that are growing at the moment – there are some beautiful sweet wild radishes, wild herbs, day lilies, of course, getting back to the flowers - form a very strong feature in this current summer and spring menu. But just keeping it natural and fresh is very important to us.

Is seasonality important also?

It is. We change our menu every three months and what we have done is we've looked at the older rituals and we change over with the solstices and the equinoxes, which only occur later in the months. So my spring menu was launched on the 22nd of September to ensure that we have the optimal

seasonal produce at that moment.

And is there a relationship between the *belle* Parisian style of the hotel and the menus that you prepare?

There is. My training was classically French and I draw a lot of my inspiration from the great masters of Europe. So I don't really follow the latest food trends in South Africa. I have to say you get a lot of that European influence that comes through in the food.

What would you say is a signature dish?

I have to say the slow-roasted duck leg *confit* has always been one of the dishes that keep the guests coming back for more. We have a beautiful quail that we brush with raw Acacia honey and it's served with sautéed Shitake mushrooms, which is definitely the signature dish on my current menu.

Now in terms of the restaurant itself, you're sort of off the beaten track in terms of fine dining in South Africa. Yet you've received a lot of recognition. Do you feel like you have to work extra hard to get noticed, being located where you are?

I think it actually came a lot quicker than we anticipated. We thought that the restaurant would grow over a 10-year period and within the first three years we've been recognized. We just can't keep up with all the customers bringing back their friends to experience what we have at Mosaic, because it is a bit of a destination restaurant.

Guests love the fact that they can escape for a little while, it's literally 30 minutes from Pretoria or Johannesburg and you're in this serene location with no traffic jams or sirens going off. It's just peace and quiet.

You mentioned regional produce. As one of the few Gauteng-based restaurants in the Eat Out top 20 do you feel a responsibility to represent the region?

I do and I think it's very important for chefs to support the local producers and farmers, because, without us, the chances that will survive are very little. So I think that if we actually encourage all the chefs to go to the local producers in their areas, then there would be a much greater awareness of what is seasonal and what is available.

And, speaking of the awards themselves, how important to you think they are, both for the restaurants and for the industry as a whole?

It is always an honour to be considered as one of the top 20 restaurants in South Africa and a lot of people do look at the awards as a benchmark of quality. But each and every chef has such a unique style and flair that it's very difficult to compare one restaurant with the other. It comes down to a very personal taste and I think there's a lot of restaurants out there that are not in the top 20 but are equally good and create very memorable dining experiences.

Do you have any personal favourites you'd like to share?

Linger Longer was one of our personal favourites - we really enjoyed visiting Walter. But also down in

the Cape – Margo from Le Quartier Francais has always been one of my food heroes and I've always looked up to her. But there are so many wonderful places to eat: the local pastaria around the corner has great food that always creates wonderful memories.

Does being recognized as quickly as you were add to the pressure of running a top-class restaurant or does it inspire you to be better?

When I won the award, you sit back and recollect what you have done over the past few years. And it did come very, very early for me. But I find that it opened my mind to new possibilities of what is possible and where I can go and what I can create. So it formed the platform to say "from here on, you can have a blank canvass and just put all these new images out there." So it does make you aspire to keep creating new experiences for the diners.

Would you say this is hard-won creative freedom as a chef?

Absolutely.

Chefs are fairly competitive by nature. Do you think that the awards add to the spirit of competition in the industry?

I haven't really found that chefs compete with one another in the competition. We all have a very unique style and approach to what we do at our restaurants. So for each and every one of us it's important just to stay true to your vision and your style and keep consistent in quality, irrespective of what the other chefs are doing.

What is your vision for the next few years for Restaurant Mosaic?

I'd love to establish botanical cuisine in South Africa and to bring the art of nature closer to clients by putting it on the plate. Just to create that little escapism where you can completely forget about the hustle and bustle and just return to the roots.

Would you say that that is something that is lacking in South African food at the moment?

I'd say that a lot of people are opting for good quality but quicker meals because of their rushed lifestyles. I hope that there will be a return to the slow world society where people can just sit back and enjoy good conversation, good wine and good food.

Are you looking forward to the Eat Out Award ceremony this year?

We are. It's always a great event and it's fabulous to see how all the chefs get dressed up. This is the one time in the year when we can leave our chef whites at home.

I work for DStv, so I have to ask about celebrity chefs on TV and shows like MasterChef. What sort of impact do you think they've have on the restaurant industry in South Africa?

Talking to the people around me having watched the latest MasterChef, it's incredible what awareness the show has created amongst people who generally weren't really interested in food. So it seems like everybody goes home and tries to experiment with some of the dishes that they've seen. And I think there's a bigger awareness of eating good food and just getting away from the average hamburger.

I always find it fascinating how hard chefs work. What is an average week like for you?

Monday is my sacred day where I just spend the day at home and relax and think about new inspiration and new dishes. But pretty much from a Tuesday through to a Sunday it's from seven in the morning until the last guest decides to retire for the evening. So it pretty much takes up the full day, at least 18 hours a day.

Do you get much time off?

We try and break away during the year and it generally coincides with the quieter times in Gauteng. Then I love to travel and go and explore different cultures and see what the world has to offer.

Where have you been lately that's struck you?

I've just returned from Cambodia and I love their natural and clean approach to food – the freshness; the vibrancy – and also their very healthy style of eating. But just prior to this I spent a bit of time in France at the Paul Bocuse institute and it was just truly inspiring to see what the chefs in Paris and in France are creating at the moment, how they have returned to a lighter style of cooking, literally a more earthy way of presenting food.

Do you think it's important for chefs to keep learning and getting out there and experiencing what's going on?

I think it is very important, for the chef and the restaurant. Because you have a lot of diners coming through your door and a lot of them returning for their special occasions, you need to keep the experience fresh and new. And thus, the only way for chefs to stay creative is if you are in touch with your environment and stay in touch with your environment and communicate with them. We have so much to learn from one another that you can never come to a point where you can say "I've learned enough". It's a continual process.

And for any aspiring chefs out there, what advice would you give? Especially with MasterChef South Africa coming up on the horizon.

I have to say, and this is something that Frank (Dangereux) said when he was at La Colombe, is that you must always create and cook food that makes you happy. Stay true to your own vision, you will find a lot of people who will enjoy and share this with you. There will occasionally be people who don't but at least you will be a happy person.