

SOUTH AFRICA'S ACCLAIMED CHANTEL DARTNALL MEETS GOURMET CHEF ANNE-SOPHIE PIC

She's one of the few women chefs who have taken the SA Chef of the Year title, so it was a meeting of kindred spirits when Chantel Dartnall of Restaurant Mosaic at The Orient met with Anne-Sophie Pic, arguably the world's most famous female chef.



Anne-Sophie Pic is justifiably known as a culinary trailblazer and a giant in the gastronomic world, a domain still dominated largely by men.

This passionate and dynamic French chef is best known for gaining three Michelin stars for her restaurant, Maison Pic in Valence in southeast France, and is only the fourth female chef ever to be awarded these three prestigious stars.

Anne-Sophie, who comes from a legendary food dynasty spanning more than a century, was also named the world's Best Female Chef by The World's 50 Best Restaurants in 2011. In the same year she was named a Chevalier (Knight) of the French Legion of Honour.

The softly-spoken Anne-Sophie is the daughter of the late renowned chef Jacques Pic and grew up in the kitchens at her family's restaurant, Maison Pic. In 1971 her father created what became his legendary signature dish, bass with 30g of Aquitaine caviar, which she continues to serve in homage to him.

Her grandfather, Andre Pic, was equally famous in his day for his crayfish gratin and was the first Pic chef who gained the restaurant three Michelin stars back in 1934. But there's also the female legacy to follow: In 1889 her great grandmother, Sophie Pic, established *the Auberge du Pin* above Saint-Péray.

What is remarkable is that Anne-Sophie had no formal training in cooking and only returned to the kitchen following the death of her father in 1997, regaining the establishment's "lost" third star in 2007.

She opened her second restaurant, Restaurant Anne-Sophie Pic in the Beau-Rivage Palace hotel, in Lausanne, Switzerland. It was awarded two Michelin stars in 2009. In September 2012, she opened her first Paris-based restaurant, La Dame de Pic.

Decorated with gold-gilded mirrors, plush sofas, a chandelier centerpiece and old black-and-white photos of the multi-generational Pic family cooks, Maison Pic radiates a quiet elegance that is on par

with Anne-Sophie's cooking, described by *The Independent* as "soft, feminine and respectful".

She's known as a specialist in fish with signature dishes including sea bass steamed over wakame kelp and served with gillardeau oyster bonbons, cucumber chutney and vodka and lemon butter sauce.

Anne-Sophie believes her success comes because of, not in spite of, being a woman. She considers the taste combinations she has pioneered to be an expression of her femininity: Diners at her flagship restaurant can eat turbot flavoured with jasmine, veal sweetbreads flavoured with lavender and oysters with sorrel jelly and licorice yoghurt.

She has been quoted as saying: "All my emotions are feminine, so I have this feminine way in my cooking. I think some men are able to make very feminine cuisine, but they are perhaps more focused on technique and less on developing the emotional part.



"My great-grandmother taught my grandfather how to cook so the family cuisine came from a woman and I'm carrying on this wonderful legacy. I'm very attentive to the women in my kitchen. I'm always acting like a mother, looking at their faces to see if everything is all right, because I know that physically, they can tire before men. Mentally, they are strong and they bring something uniquely feminine to the food they prepare."

Her dishes are exquisitely presented and, as with many fine dining restaurants around the globe, there is a focus on more exact and "feminine" plating with lots of natural components.

"I think women bring certain finesse and precision to their plating for which I attach a great importance," she says. Her sauces frequently take centre stage and are often unique. "Sauces used to be a cornerstone of French cuisine but then they were abandoned for other textures and experiences. For my part, I focus on sauces as they still provide the base for the dish and are a constant evolution of the cuisine. We have to continue to re-invent them."

"I have lived in Japan and I always loved their culture and cuisine. In my restaurant I serve my guests lobster in a dashi consommé with berries. Dashi is one of the foundations of Japanese cuisine that I love. It is a broth made with Kombu seaweed and dried bonito flakes. Dashi has a unique, ephemeral flavour that is the perfect expression of how I view fine cuisine; it is similar to chicken stock that is used in the French cooking. I like to use some Japanese technics but the basis of my cuisine is nevertheless French." explains Anne-Sophie.

Her food is often bold and sublime at the same time. An amuse bouche consists of marshmallow coated with peanut powder; its followed by a foie gras mousse ball coated with lemon jelly while warmed beetroot is served with Blue Mountain coffee cream. Turbot comes served with a green pea and green coffee sauce. A creamy warm Brie "foam" is scented with vanilla and served with a light crispy slice of toast and a drop of melted vanilla Brie while a lemon macaroon ball is served with a lemon panna cotta. Flavours are, at once, delicate yet complex with, at times, a strong contrast of acidity.

For Anne-Sophie everything starts with the product: "I work with fishermen, market gardeners and farmers who provide me, not only with fresh products, but also with their knowledge. I enjoy meeting new producers; each meeting brings me new ideas and new influences.

"Today consumers want to know what they eat and where the product comes from and who produced it. There is a real curiosity and a new food culture that is hugely positive for the industry. There is a desire by diners for the exotic and the discovery of new products while, at the same time, there is a return to the values of terroir."

She believes that you do have to reinvent yourself as a chef over a period of time.

"I am permanently searching for new contrasting textures and associations. And year after year, I am in the mood for stronger tastes: the combinations of flavours are more and more audacious but we still respect each ingredient. I like the challenge of cooking very simple products such as beetroot or carrots in order to make them gastronomic."



Chantel Dartnall has become renowned, not only in South Africa but in culinary circles around the world, for her innovative and meticulous approach to modern fine dining. She is the award-winning patron chef at Restaurant Mosaic, located in The Orient Boutique Hotel in the Francolin Conservation Area, Elandsfontein, Crocodile River Valley, Gauteng.

