



The Jewels of the Sea.



# FOOD gasm

## MY FOODIE FAIRY-TALE

Food that translates passion onto a plate is what you can expect, writes **Nidha Narrandes**

**I**n a magical forest, about 45 minutes away from evil Gauteng traffic, lies a castle of Moroccan magnificence.

As the gates open, you are swallowed by greenery, elegance and the unexpected world of the Orient. The grounds are beautifully landscaped, and there is no doubt that you have arrived in a far, far away land.

Everyone needs a fairy-tale every now and then, a place that jerks you out of reality and thrusts you slap-bang in the middle of pure indulgence.

Well, such a place does exist, it is called The Orient. And the Mosaic, its restaurant, has sent tongues wagging.

Created by warm smiles, we walk through massive curved doors at the hotel in Elandsfontein.

It could easily be mistaken for a museum. Spectacular artwork, sculptures and eclectic furniture frames the entrance rooms. In one glance, you could have visited at least 10 countries.

We are ushered to our "room" by Mari, the Queen of the Orient. And by room, I mean suite. Welcome to my fairy-tale experience.

Mosaic at the Orient is the worst kept secret, and that is a good thing because such food porn should be shared.

Ranked seventh in the top-10 list of restaurants in South Africa and home to multiaward-winning chef Chantal Dartnall, known for creating magic in her woman-only kitchen, Mosaic is a gem.

After meeting Dartnall and indulging in her potions and concoctions, I am not sure which is more beautiful, the lady or the food? I conclude that both are equally baffling.

Dartnall, her mom Mari and dad Cobus du Plessis dreamt up the Orient soon after the chef returned to SA from the UK.

Having completed her studies at

The Love Potion dessert.



Prue Leith, she immediately faxed through her CV to the Michelin Star restaurants in London.

It took only 20 minutes before she got a reply from Chez Nien, thus beginning her foray into the world of food.

A composed, dainty and completely down-to-earth Dartnall tells us of her journey.

"When I got back to SA, we decided that Elandsfontein was the spot where we needed to open up a restaurant. I was very young, but I knew what I wanted."

There is construction of a second museum on the property under way. Promoting local artists is important to the trio.

"We opened in August 2006, and never looked back. We wanted to present an environment where people could relax for the day, unwind and then have all their senses stimulated. And what better way than with beautiful art and food," said Dartnall.

"We are focused on giving our guests a complete experience, and are passionate about art, food and conservation."

So, why the Orient?

"With three very different personalities, the only possible way to merge them was to look at the East," says Dartnall.

"And because the ancient continent of the orient encompassed so many different elements, a little bit of Morocco, Italy and Spain, we could bring together all these

architectural influences, and it would make sense.

"Everything you see around you is an extension of who we are. We didn't want to make it snobbish, but rather a special feeling from us to you."

And that's exactly how it feels, a personal mix of whimsical and serious personalities.

Once seated for dinner, the real magic unfolds. The restaurant is an intimate 40-seater room, with private dining rooms and areas for special occasions.

Dartnall greets every one of her patrons and pays close attention to their input.

The Dégustation menu is truly something of ethereal origin.

The term Dégustation means careful, appreciative tasting of various foods and a focusing on the gustatory system, the senses and high culinary art.

It is the sampling of small portions of a chef's signature dishes in one sitting.

You can choose between an enthusiast's and a connoisseur's wine pairing.

The wine cellar headed by sommelier, Germain Lehodey, expertly matches wines to compliment the chef's dishes. A master collaboration, the cellar boasts some of the most rare wines from SA and the world.

Lehodey's knowledge on wine is astounding, he has a story to tell with every glass poured.

Dartnall seasonally changes up the menu to reflect the time of year. The Autumn menu is called Roots and Shoots. It is a play on fresh garden ingredients, and although the dishes are complex, the ingredients are cooked in a simple way to showcase their intense flavours.

My fickle heart was won over by the very first dish, dessert.

That is how you start with a bang. Dartnall knows that instead of the race to dessert, one should be teased first and left wanting.

Each course plating is a piece of artwork, and it was at this point that I realised this was going to be an extraordinary experience.

According to Dartnall, she conceptualises her dishes from her

travels and every day life.

One of her most famous dishes, the millionaires nest egg happened when she was in the garden and came across a nest lying on the ground.

"I thought, this is just brilliant. I'm so fortunate to have a lot of really talented people work with me," says Dartnall.

"So, I called my glass blower, Retief van Wyk, who I continuously create new plates with, and told him, I have this idea, I need you to make a nest for me."

"Your mind immediately starts going on this journey to make all these elements come together. And the quail egg and truffle dish was a huge success, plated in a beautiful nest."

The unusual plating adds so much to the taste of every course. The Jewels of the Sea was plated in a glass resembling an Oyster. The delicate flavours and rich taste leave you hankering for the next course.

And you won't be disappointed, course-after-course, you are taken on this journey of unexpected twists and magnificent turns.

Although French-inspired, her cooking incorporates so many cultures and sprinkles of influence from around the world.

From salt-crusted beetroot and heirloom salad to Irish scallops with the indulgent Sterling White Halibut, no ingredient is too expensive for her guests and no meal is too simple.

It is a whirlwind of bewildering combinations.

And just when you think she could not pull off another surprise, dessert happens.

Dartnall shared

her secret to a romantic evening. "The love potion I have to mix it for myself. The ingredients are deceiving, and it's the egg in shell that is actually passion fruit, sugar cubes and a few other ingredients, which is the love potion in a bottle. Mix them together and it is an incredible dessert."

We wobbled up to our room after the decadent supper and could not move.

Dartnall and her family have carefully and intimately put together this magical experience for

their guests. When

you leave the

following

morning,

the castle

in your

review

mirror,

you can't

help but

feel like

you got

your

happily ever

after. Until

you want

your next

fairy-tale.

