



A selection of Darnall's whimsical wafer chips on a washing line

THE RESTAURANT

As fanciful as fairies

Chantel Darnall is that rare thing, a chef who makes sauces. By **Andrew Unsworth**

SOMETIMES, after long stretches of cooking for yourself, you have a craving to be spoilt by white-tablecloth-fiddly-fine-dining food with all the stops pulled out. Too easily it can be disappointing, all about presentation and forgetting about taste.

But I had heard nothing but raves about Mosaic at The Orient in Elandsfontein east of Pretoria, and set off for lunch there expecting a treat. I got one. The occasion was a pairing of wines from La Motte estate with food by Mosaic's Chantel Darnall, with one course prepared by Michelle Theron of Pierneef à La Motte.

The wines, introduced by La Motte cellar master Edmund Terblanche, moved through their sparkling wine, signature sauvignon blanc and chardonnay to the reds, including the superb Hanneli R 2011 which was served with the main course.

The venue sets you up for indulgence; a delightful Boer-Moorish baroque fantasy of a hotel set in a koppie-top conservancy. There is nothing else like it. The restaurant has stained-glass windows and Art Nouveau-type tiles everywhere. Tienie Pritchard's figure of Salome in the hotel foyer could not be more Belle Époque if he had tried. It's all somewhat recherché, but it works.

To say we played our way through four courses and endless amuse-bouche hardly describes it. Wafer chips hung on a washing line with tiny clothespins, vegetable-

flavoured macaroons, a tiny carrot-shaped carrot sorbet, single basil leaves in tempura batter, slices of chocolate ganache and wafers arranged to make a tiny cart loaded with tiny balls of pear; it's not away with the fairies, it's inviting them in, presumably to do the prep in the kitchen.

It could all be intensely irritating but Darnall's "botanical cuisine" is what it sets out to be: playful, fresh and very colourful. It's fun, but it's also serious: seriously tasty, so she can get away with it all. Presentation is not everything; it's a justified overture to what is to come.

Darnall's food lies squarely in the

tradition of classic French cuisine and she excels at what far too many chefs shy away from these days: sauces. We have missed them in fine dining for decades.

The "simply shoots" first course was a spring-inspired mousse covered with organic shoots and slivers, served with a creamy warm green sauce that complemented it perfectly. Most chefs would have skipped that touch. Again, the main "birds of a feather" course of deboned quail and goose, and a little tortellini, would have been fine, but it was brilliant with the braised sweet onion and red wine sauce.

Each course was plated as a mini work of art with wafers of this and tiny bits of that, cause to pause before you destroyed it. Theron's contribution, a plate of Franschoek charcuterie (ham, biltong and salami) came with a little loaf of sweet aniseed-flavoured *mosbolletjies*.

I went home inspired but not full, and some hours later managed a piece of chicken, half a potato and half a baby cabbage for supper. It was a return to reality, but it filled a hole in my tummy. Perhaps it's best that way.

THE LOWDOWN

Vibe: Posh, early 20th-century Art Nouveau, sort of.

Price: Current Roots and Shoots Menu: R1 100 per person, plus R450 to R550 for wine pairing.

What to Wear: Smart casual.

Who will like it: Gourmets who look to be thrilled more than filled.

SCORECARD (OUT OF 5)

Food: **5**

Ambience: **4**

Service: **5**

Value for money: **4**

Total 18/20

RESTAURANT MOSAIC,
The Orient Hotel, Crocodile River Valley, Elandsfontein, Pretoria,
012 371 2902, restaurantmosaic.com
Open Wed to Sun for lunch;
Wed, Fri and Sat for dinner