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CHANTEL DARTNALL: 'YOUNG CHEFS, THINK SUSTAINABLE'

Meet chef Chantel Dartnall, famous for her innovative take on Botanic Cuisine, mentor for the Africa and Middle East finalist at S.Pellegrino Young Chef 2016.

BY JAMES BRENNAN ON AUGUST 31, 2016

With inspired dishes like *Fungi on the Forest Floor* and *The Garden of Eden*, South African chef **Chantel Dartnall** has become renowned beyond her home country.

Trained at the *Prue Leith Chef's Academy*, and schooled in some of the UK's top kitchens, Dartnall's innovative take on Botanic Cuisine has made *Restaurant Mosaic* one of South Africa's top tables.

As mentor for young chef **Grégoire Berger**, who will represent the Africa and Middle East region at **S.Pellegrino Young Chef 2016** competition, she spoke to *Fine Dining Lovers* in anticipation of the contest.



Who was your mentor as a young chef?

The chefs that played prominent roles as mentors during my formative years in the UK were **Paul Rhodes**, **Nico Ladenis**, and **Michael Caines**. When discovering more about my personal style of cooking on my return to South Africa, I discovered one of the great pioneers of Botanical Cuisine – **Michel Bras**. I could relate to his style of cooking, and also find a descriptive name for the style of cooking I was interested in. Although I didn't work in his kitchen I studied his book, his recipes and his philosophy, and I made the "culinary pilgrimage" to his restaurant on two occasions. Later, I discovered chefs like **Martin Berasategui** and **Pedro Subijana** at *Akelarre* in Spain, **Pascal Barbot** at *L'Astrance* in Paris and **Peter Goossens** at *Hof van Cleve* in Belgium, to name but a few.



How important were your early experiences in London in shaping your career as a chef?

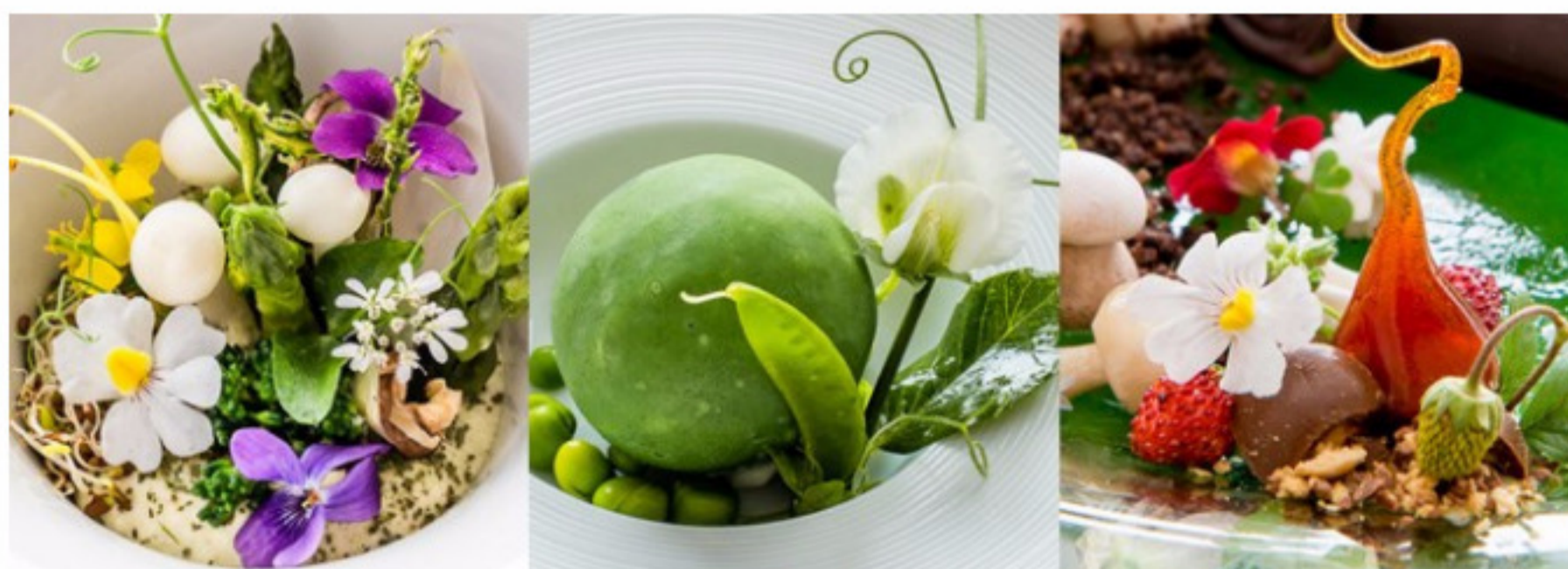
When I began working in London I was fresh out of college. I had worked in some wonderful kitchens in South Africa, but I was very excited to begin working in the Michelin-starred kitchen of Chef **Nico Ladenis** at *Chez Nico Ninety Park Lane* and thereafter with Chef **Michael Caines** at *Gidleigh Park*. Our working hours were intense and that taught me stamina, dedication and perseverance. The most important lesson I learned was consistency. The saying that you are only as good as the last plate you send out of the kitchen was drilled into us at every service.

Tell us about botanical cuisine.

For me it's about featuring Mother Nature on a plate. Each dish is designed to reflect the beauty, balance, harmony and purity that you find in nature. It's about capturing nature's nuances, but it's also about studying the medicinal properties of the herbs and flowers I include in the menu, to aid in digestion, promote blood circulation and a general feeling of wellbeing.

How important is it for young chefs to gain an enthusiasm for natural ingredients and the environment?

Very important. Responsible sourcing, sustainability and sensibility should be at the top of every chef's list. It's important for chefs to create a strong bond with suppliers and farmers, to visit farms and support local farmers who focus on sustainability, free-range and organic produce, even if it's a bit more expensive. We can take small steps towards helping to create awareness and pass this knowledge to our staff and our guests.



What aspects of a young chef's performance can a mentor improve?

Perspective and context. A mentor can guide a young chef, and assist to evaluate the composition, elements and components of the dish and offer recommendations and suggestions on how the dish could be enhanced. What is the story that you want your dish to tell? Sometimes something as simple as the cutlery can either make or break a perfect dining experience.

What qualities in particular will a young chef need to win this competition?

Passion, perseverance and perfection.

How important is it for the Middle East/Africa region for its young chefs to do well in this competition?

Can our region be taken seriously when it comes to fine dining? The answer is yes. Africa and the Middle East are seen as relative newcomers to the world of fine dining and in spite of the many exceptional restaurants we still need to prove to the world that we can continuously deliver young chefs with exceptional talent. If our young chefs perform well in this competition they gain valuable exposure and lay a strong foundation on which they can build their reputations.

Overall, are you hoping to see more female chefs in this year's competition?

It would be nice to see more female chefs emerging and entering the competition. I enjoy seeing the difference in the style of cooking and presentation between the male and female chefs, but for me there is no gender, cultural or racial boundaries when it comes to talent. It's crucial to find the best possible candidate with natural talent and enthusiasm for cooking, and who will be the best ambassador for our region, irrespective of whether they are male or female.

What are you currently working on and what are your plans for the immediate future?

Restaurant Mosaic will be celebrating its 10th anniversary this year, and we will create an exclusive *Decade of Decadence Degustation Menu* to commemorate this event and take our loyal guests on a trip down memory lane. This is also a time for me and my team to reflect on what we have achieved over the past 10 years and to continue building our reputation on the strong foundation and principals we have established, as we head into the future. I would also like to start working on my cookbook this year.



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