

# Escape into another world, with Gauteng's culinary Scheherazade

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PRETORIA – The story of the Orient Hotel and Mosaic restaurant reads practically like a fairytale: it's set on a vast, lush nature reserve, where the king of the exotic castle curates an astonishing wine and art collection, while the queen and princess roll out the red carpet for their guests and weave their magic in the kitchen.

That's the simplistic version but the Orient Hotel is indeed a special place: a mélange of Moroccan architecture, Baroque art, colonial Indian and the romantic belle époque, where guests can escape to another world for the finest gastronomy, art and wine, on both the African continent and the Middle East.

## Enchantment

Owners Cobus du Plessis and Mari Dartnall have certainly cast a spell at their conservancy in the Crocodile River Valley, where they built the Orient Private Hotel themselves and employed some of the best designers to fit out the interiors.

They also constructed an art museum on the vast 280-hectare property to house their extensive Tienie Pritchard sculpture collection – works that Cobus started collecting in his youth.

One of the sculptures, a contemplative work featuring the elfin Mari caressing her beloved pet cheetah Nandi (a disabled cat she cared for at a sanctuary in Hoedspruit), takes centre stage in the museum.

The hotel is sumptuous: inspired by the Moorish designs of the early 19th century, it's furnished with antiques and collectables the family have collected from around the world, mostly from the East.

Each of the 10 rooms is themed on a romantic city along the Spice Route, including Marrakesh, Rajasthan and Constantinople.

## Romancing the senses

Restaurant Mosaic is Chantel's baby. Designed as a tribute to her love of Paris' Belle Époque restaurants, it has intimate, romantic booth seating and two private dining rooms.

Renowned for her voluminous degustation menus and wine pairings, Chantel presents each course, personally, to her tables. She's a Scheherazade, seducing her guests with tales of dainty flowers, aromatic herbs and exotic spices.

Of course, it's all part of the magical theatre of the fine dining experience, which has almost become a lost art form – the immaculate plating, the textures, the flavours, the wine pairings, and in particular, the service.

It's certainly a help to have access to some of the best local and imported produce available as well as their multiple award-winning wine cellar, which is stocked with in excess of 75,000 bottles from more than 5,500 South African and international labels.

Germain Lehodey, their internationally accredited sommelier, is a giant in the industry and has worked in top establishments on the continent.

## A celebration

To mark their magical decade, Chantel is showcasing her most memorable dishes, reimagined, in her Celebrations menu until January. These dishes, still focused on "botanical cuisine", are as whimsical as ever but far more assured.

We were recently treated to the Celebration.

Inspired by the ancient Greek Earth goddess, Gaia, each dish is described poetically as a "journey through the elements of Mother Nature".

Her Celebration began with an amuse bouche of spring – an "Ode to Michel Bras" (one of France's greatest chefs and an inspiration) – showcasing the season's fresh marinated young vegetables.

Next up was "Genesis", a layer of lemongrass and Japanese miso set around a sphere of rainbow trout, surrounded by pomelo.

The Mousse de Mer is without question one of Chantel's signature dishes: so precise and pretty you almost don't want to disturb it for fear of ruining the moment.



Chantel explained she was inspired by a walk on the beach in Nature's Valley and wanted to recreate the foam of the ocean, shells, bark and seaweed on the beach on a plate.

For this, she combined the sweet, tart flavours of a tomato with rooibos tea to create the "beach sand", filled a single langoustine with a rich risotto and whipped up the "mousse de mer" for the creamy sea foam.

It reminded me of one of [Heston Blumenthal](#)'s most acclaimed dishes, "The Sound of the Sea", which featured sashimi served on a glass-covered box filled with sand. Guests were given a sea shell with a hidden iPod playing the sound of crashing waves.

An ebullient Blumenthal told me a few years back, while on a visit to this country for British Airways, that the idea behind "The Sound of the Sea" was that you eat the fish while listening to the sea and are thereby transported back to a childhood day at the beach.

Next was the Millionaire's Nest Egg, served in a recreated "weaver bird's nest" under a glass dome, with quail eggs, black truffle paste, truffle-infused mushrooms and courgette tagliatelle.



The palate cleanser was a sweet “garden pea” – inspired by fresh sugar snap peas from their gardens. This was the only element that didn't quite work for me: I wasn't convinced by the sweetness of the little green meringues, nor did I find it refreshing.

A delicious bouillabaisse, the famous fish stew from Marseilles, followed though. Made with fresh, seasonal line fish and braised vegetable mirepoix, the soup was served with a creamy saffron rouille (a slightly spicy Provençal sauce made from red chillies, garlic, breadcrumbs, and other ingredients).

Main course was a choice of 36-day matured Angus beef with sumac and red ivory fruit preserve (made with berries grown on the property); or “queen quail” glazed with wild acacia honey, lavender and Italian white balsamic, and spinach velouté.

For dessert, there was the option of either sweet or savoury: a cheese selection (including Old Amsterdam, Belnori Kilimanjaro and others); a “Mamelon de Venus” (a delicate cream of jasmine and apple filling a crunchy choux pastry) or the “Starburst”, with poached white peaches, an airy jasmine mousse and crunchy vanilla meringue, inspired by images taken by the Hubble telescope.

## Awards

Among a string of awards won this year, was the Diners Club Diamond Award and Best in Gauteng, as well as a Best of Award of Excellence from Wine Spectator's Restaurant Award – one of only three South African establishments to be recognised by the influential international programme.

Last Sunday, [Mosaic was announced Eat Out's fifth best restaurant in South Africa](#) – the only Gauteng in the top 10 list.

Restaurant Mosaic has been a top 10 contender in the Mercedes-Benz Eat Out Restaurant Awards for the past eight years. Chantel has twice won Chef of the Year (in 2009 and again in 2014).

It's been a process, Chantel admits, though her commitment to “botanical cuisine” remains. And her approach to cooking has matured. I recall on my first visit being mostly impressed but a tad overwhelmed by the fussiness of it all. Now, Chantel seems more confident, her cooking far more assured.

So while her gastronomy looks too good to eat, much of it is good for you: “The delicate herbs and flowers are more than just garnish” – they're also healthy.

*The Grande Dégustation Connoisseur Wine Pairing costs R685 per person, which includes international wines. The Enthusiast Wine Pairing is R550 per person, which includes South African wines. The 10-course degustation menu per person is R1,250. There's a “mini”, six-course degustation, the Market Menu, which costs R850 per person; Connoisseur Wine Pairing: R550 and Enthusiast Wine Pairing: R425. They also offer a delightful non-alcoholic pairing, of spritzers, mocktails, consommés, teas and more.*

On December 3, Mosaic will host its final of the year – its exclusive Gourmet Champagne tasting. It's a lunchtime tasting, starting promptly at noon. Cost is R2,800. Call to book.

***Watch Chantel describing her Celebrations menu below:***

