

FROM AVO MOULD **TO OFAL**

FASHION ON A PLATE

Just as hemlines shrink or lengthen each season, so too does food follow fashion. This year, it seems as though farm-style eating is the flavour of the moment.



Millionaire's Nest Egg, Restaurant Mosaic

✕ “How did you enjoy your sea-flavoured air, sir?” Yes, it’s a ridiculous question – but just a few years ago, when molecular gastronomy ruled the fine dining scene, it was also a completely valid one.

So what’s changed? Rather a lot. If molecular gastronomy was all about turning the kitchen into the kind of lab where a mad scientist would feel perfectly at home, and producing seemingly magical and impossible concoctions – transparent ravioli, anyone? – or even dishes that sounded downright unappetising (bacon and egg ice cream), then today’s trends seem to be a lot less pretentious.

Take smoked flavours, for example. Chantel Dartnall, award-winning chef at Restaurant Mosaic in Pretoria, says that chefs are increasingly including smoking, scorching and barbecuing techniques in their repertoires, often over an open flame. And in some cases, your food may even be smoked at your table. While this might bring to mind the robust flavours of your Saturday braai, the trend was, in fact, inspired by Danish and Nordic cuisine. And don’t for a moment imagine that fine dining loses any of its elegance just because an open flame is replacing the hob. Dartnall uses the example of little quail eggs sent out on a bed of smouldering straw, served as an amuse-bouche, which she presented to great delight at her restaurant.

She adds that you should probably also become accustomed to seeing ingredients such as dashi, mirin, ponzu and yuzu on menus, as chefs embrace Asian flavours and incorporate them into European-style dishes. This is probably because chefs are using the cuisines of other countries like a large, global larder, travelling more and trying exotic ingredients as they continue their quest to create new and exciting experiences.



Beetroot & radish pannacotta, Restaurant Mosaic



Harissa pumpkin with buttermilk dressing, Marble



In 2017, they're not just paying attention to how the food looks. Now there's more emphasis on plating than ever before. Again, this is probably due to the influence of international practices, and the result is an ongoing effort to create beauty, harmony and balance on the plate.

Driving these trends is an overarching theme: a return to nature. It's why we've seen so many chefs including more veggies on the plate, Dartnall says. (Although, admittedly, these are nothing like your mom's watery patty pans – think purple kale, candy-striped beetroot and golden courgettes.) "There's a greater focus on conservation, so more chefs are thinking about nature – it's about the sourcing, origin, sustainability and consistency of each ingredient."

Jason Whitehead, author of *Tasty WasteNotes* – a book which strives to bring the principles of nose-to-tail eating to the home – applauds this mindset, and says it's definitely leaving its mark on restaurant tables the world over. "There will always be a place for fine dining," he comments, "but it's great to see how many Michelin-starred restaurants have become more 'real' in their approach to food." He's not surprised by this new direction. In fact, he sees it as inevitable, now that we are feeling the effects of global warming. It's not exclusive to restaurants, either. Home chefs have warmed to the idea of going outside to their veggie patch to pick a carrot, or to pick up some in-season greens from their local food market, rather than forking out for an imported ingredient at a supermarket. Professionals may work on a larger scale, but they're also concerned about the provenance of their ingredients. They want to know that the chicken hasn't been injected with saline solution, and that the cows were allowed to roam free and weren't fed routine antibiotics. Paying homage to farm-to-table eating is also about respect for the livestock.

And, says Marthinus Ferreira of DW eleven-13 in Johannesburg, it's also about costs – because, let's face it, don't you feel just a little ripped off when you fork out R200 for a plate that consists of smoke-flavoured air? Ferreira also notes that molecular gastronomy can be hard to pull off, and while there's certainly no dearth of talented chefs in South Africa, it still takes time to learn about the basics of food and flavour. "A lot of people have, unfortunately, bastardised molecular gastronomy," he says. "The reality is that before you can present a beef jus in a fancy way, you have to be able to make it taste really special." And that's something that chefs cooking with foams and other airy-fairy ingredients often battle with. These are components that rely heavily on the use of gels to give them shape, and the plain truth is that this usually detracts from the overall taste of the dish.

South Africans have certainly embraced the current down-to-earth mode of eating. Whitehead points to the success of La Tete which opened in Cape Town's Bree Street last year and has swiftly made its way onto "must visit" lists around the world. The brainchild of Giles Edwards, this bistro-style restaurant (which serves up dishes like beef and kidney pudding and ox heart with chips and horseradish) has been named one of CNN's hottest restaurants for 2017.

Whitehead believes that this isn't simply a passing fad. "It's all about education. People are coming to accept that cuts that used to make them squeamish, like organ meats, aren't just cheaper; they're often more nutritious."

If you think about it, nose-to-tail eating isn't anything new-fangled. It's something our forebears were doing long before our double-door refrigerators allowed us to buy what we wanted, when we wanted it. As the French – those bastions of fine dining – would say, "La plus ça change..." ✕