

CHANTEL DARTNALL – THE CHEF WHO COOKS FROM THE HEART

AWARD-WINNING BOTANICAL CHEF CHANTEL DARTNALL TALKS US THROUGH HER JOURNEY WITH FOOD AND RESTAURANTS TO GRAB A BITE IN HER DOWN TIME

Words: Sylvia McKeown



Image: Supplied

Chantel Dartnall

When we first called the two-time EatOut S.Pellegrino Chef of the Year winner Chantel Dartnall, she was frantically trying to find leeks for her Friday night service at Restaurant Mosaic at The Orient.

"Four shops later I managed to buy two here and two there," explains Dartnall. "It's so bizarre, last week it was a Brussels sprouts mission. Every week there seems to be one thing that needs to be found, but it's printed on the menu, so the mad hunt begins."

With some of her dishes having 27 different elements at a time, it's not surprising that one of them may fall through the supply chain cracks. But when it comes to a Mosaic dish you know that none of those elements landed up on your plate lightly and each one of them is absolutely necessary to complete Dartnall's vision of a scene.

"My dad always says I do a everything in excess. So even if I make a sandwich it's made with lots of little things. I can't just make a peanut butter and jam sandwich, it always has to be a process."

But her father may have been the one to introduce her to her love of processes in the first place. As a child, the only restaurant Dartnall's father enjoyed frequenting was that of Pretoria's legendary bistro, La Madeleine, which is as famous for its gloriously indulgent food as it is for Chef Daniel Leusch's practice of personally coming out to your table in his white chef's coat to explain what is on the menu that day. Dartnall still recalls the light dusting of paprika in a creamy bisque sauce

that coated tagliatelle noodles and pan-seared prawns all these years later, as well as an incident of accidentally ordering an entire plate of oysters at the age of 8 - needless to say she was very surprised when the dish came out but she diligently ate each one.

"I think being confronted with [Leusch] coming out and explaining the menu made me realise what a great impact the interaction made. Getting involved with the passion of the chef greatly influenced the experience I wanted to give my guests, so they didn't feel isolated from the kitchen."

Dartnall's childhood dream of being in the kitchen started to take shape in her high school hotel and catering class at Pro Arte Alphen Park and again at Prue Leith Chef's Academy. But it only really came to fruition when she faxed through her CV to Chez Nico at Ninety Park Lane in London after following the advice of a younger George Calombaris, of later Master Chef Australia fame, whom she met while represented South Africa at the World Association of Young Cooks. Dartnall spent two years in London learning the art of fine dining from three Michelin starred chef Nico Ladenis and one armed, two starred chef, Michael Caines, only to return to be a waitress at a tiny newly opened deli in Pretoria called Carlton Café Delicious, sandwiched between a hairdresser and a hardware store.

A month later however, she found her way into their kitchen and would spend every free moment working on her own food vision and having tastings with friends while Mosaic and the Orient were being built on her family farm where she grew up. In the end, all the hard work and planning paid off, as four months after the Belle Epoch themed restaurant and Moroccan inspired boutique hotel opened in October 2006, they won their first American Express Platinum Fine Dining Award (and they've carried on winning every year since then) and found a steady home in EatOut's Top 10 list.

"I was very young when I opened Mosaic and had no experience running my own restaurant. To a certain extent you're quite unsure, you never know how people are going to react and you're constantly wondering if you're doing the right thing. But Franck [Dangereux] told me just before I opened that if you cook from the heart you will always have people that enjoy your dinner with you."

Dartnall says she still follows his advice after all these years by cooking with love and ingredients she finds in tidal pools while she's on holiday or when using leeks in a dish called African Aromas from her latest menu, Tabula Rasa. The dish has an accent on the plate designed to look like the branches of an acacia tree and is a balanced act of Red Hartebeest venison, soetdoring smoke, baby turnips and a dusting of aubergine and madumbi skin.

"The entire plate is smoky and quite African. Interestingly enough I've never done anything with that many African ingredients in one dish before. The leeks are there because nothing else has quite the same accent on the plate; between their bright green bite after just being blanched to it's earthy naturalness of flavour. So, yes, that's where missing leeks go."

Some beautiful dishes from Chantel's menu:



- River meets Sea (Photo by: Supplied)

When not hunting for leeks or eating stir-fry at home, these are Dartnall's top three favourite places to go to for a bite:

l'Astrance, Paris

"To even get into this restaurant is a mission because they don't have a website. You can only call at 10 o'clock in the morning, exactly a month in advance and then they only have 20 seats in the restaurant so they fill up incredibly quickly. There's no menu when you get there, the chef literally sends out whatever he wants to and you get the wine that the sommelier wants to give you. So you have no choices but it is the most phenomenal experience."

The Foodbarn, Noordhoek

"Franck [Dangereux] is one of my great local food heroes. Franck and Margo [Jansel]. We go often to Noordhoek as we are very good friends with Lynne-Marie Eatwell, a young artist who has her gallery right there. So a visit to Franck is always on the top of the list."

Restaurant at Waterkloof Wines, Somerset West

I always found Gregory's [Czarnecki] style of cooking fascinating and his plating is truly some of the most beautiful in South Africa. I just really love going there. Funny enough, Chef Gregory is actually going to be cooking in my restaurant in a few weeks, so that should be loads of fun.

Book your place at the Four Hands Dinner as Chantel Dartnall and Gregory Czarnecki of Restaurant at Waterkloof (and next week's profiled chef) work together to create a fantastical culinary experience inspired by their natural environments on the 24 and 25 May 2017 at Mosaic at The Orient. Reservations can be made by email: reservations@restaurantmosaic.com, or calling: +27(0)12 371 2902/3/4/5.