Sugar and spice and all things nice, the cuisine of Mosaic chef Chantel Dartnall

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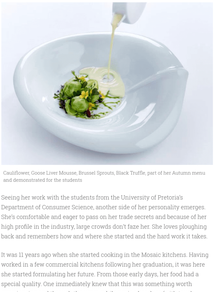
DIANE DE BEER

Chantel Dartnall

One of the few Gauteng chefs not disregarded by national (and international) food award judges, Chantel Dartnall from Restaurant Mosaic at the Orient (just outside Tshwane), is someone who is constantly evolving, never resting on her laurels.

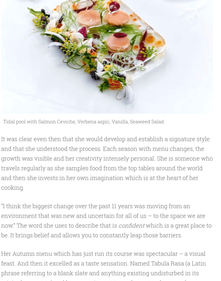
She takes everything she does seriously and yet, she's always visible to her customers and ready to talk food. She loves sharing her inspirational ideas and talking about the origin and where her current interests lie.



Cauliflower, Goose Liver Mousse, Brussel Sprouts, Black Truffle, part of her Autumn menu and demonstrated for the students

Seeing her work with the students from the University of Pretoria's Department of Consumer Science, another side of her personality emerges. She's comfortable and eager to pass on her trade secrets and because of her high profile in the industry, large crowds don't faze her. She loves ploughing back and remembers how and where she started and the hard work it takes.

It was 11 years ago when she started cooking in the Mosaic kitchens. Having worked in a few commercial kitchens following her graduation, it was here she started formulating her future. From those early days, her food had a special quality. One immediately knew that this was something worth experiencing and through the years, while paying her dues (with tough lessons along the way), she signaled that she would realise her full potential – and more.



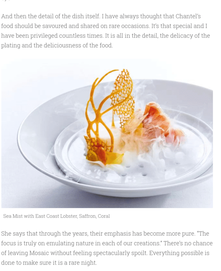
Tidal pool with Salmon Ceviche, Verbena aspic, Vanilla, Seaweed Salad

It was clear even then that she would develop and establish a signature style and that she understood the process. Each season with menu changes, the growth was visible and her creativity intensely personal. She is someone who travels regularly as she samples food from the top tables around the world and then she invests in her own imagination which is at the heart of her cooking.

"I think the biggest change over the past 11 years was moving from an environment that was new and uncertain for all of us – to the space we are now." The word she uses to describe that is *confident* which is a great place to be. It brings belief and allows you to constantly leap those barriers.

Her Autumn menu which has just run its course was spectacular – a visual feast. And then it excelled as a taste sensation. Named Tabula Rasa (a Latin phrase referring to a blank slate and anything existing undisturbed in its original pure state) and her commitment towards a natural approach was clear.

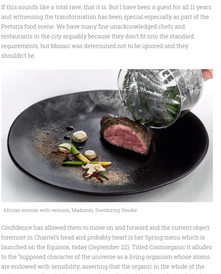
She has always been able to achieve magnificent visual explosions. It's almost like being embraced by a colourful Spring garden. You want to sit back and wallow in the exquisite picture. It's always been a magical part of a Mosaic meal.



A plate of dreams

How many times have I just marvelled at the magnificence of the plate? Not the food, before I even get to that, the physical plate! They're so rare and so perfectly picked for each dish, its hard to resist as they linger in your mind's eye.

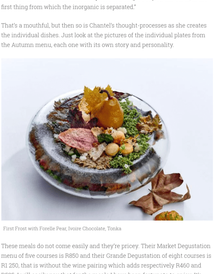
And then the detail of the dish itself. I have always thought that Chantel's food should be savoured and shared on rare occasions. It's that special and I have been privileged countless times. It is all in the detail, the delicacy of the plating and the deliciousness of the food.



Sea Mist with East Coast Lobster, Saffron, Coral

She says that through the years, their emphasis has become more pure. "The focus is truly on emulating nature in each of our creations." There's no chance of leaving Mosaic without feeling spectacularly spoilt. Everything possible is done to make sure it is a rare night.

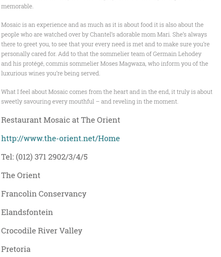
If this sounds like a total rave, that it is. But I have been a guest for all 11 years and witnessing the transformation has been special especially as part of the Pretoria food scene. We have many fine unacknowledged chefs and restaurants in the city arguably because they don't fit into the standard requirements, but Mosaic was determined not to be ignored and they shouldn't be.



African aromas with venison, Madumbi, Soetkoring Smoke

Confidence has allowed them to move on and forward and the current object foremost in Chantel's head and probably heart is her Spring menu which is launched on the Equinox, today (September 22). Titled Cosmorganic it alludes to the "supposed character of the universe as a living organism whose atoms are endowed with sensibility, asserting that the organic in the whole of the universe as well as in the narrow sphere of a single body on the earth, is the first thing from which the inorganic is separated."

That's a mouthful, but then so is Chantel's thought-processes as she creates the individual dishes. Just look at the pictures of the individual plates from the Autumn menu, each one with its own story and personality.



First Frost with Foodie Pear, Ivoire Chocolate, Tonka

These meals do not come easily and they're pricey. Their Market Degustation menu of five courses is R850 and their Grande Degustation of eight courses is R1 250, that is without the wine pairing which adds respectively R460 and R585. I will easily pay that for the meals I have been fortunate to enjoy. It's something unforgettably special and if food is a passion for you especially when this kind of artistry comes into play, save the money and go. It will be memorable.

Mosaic is an experience and as much as it is about food it is also about the people who are watched over by Chantel's adorable mom Mari. She's always there to greet you, to see that your every need is met and to make sure you're personally cared for. Add to that the sommelier team of Germain Lehodey and his protégé, commis sommelier Moses Magwaza, who inform you of the luxurious wines you're being served.

What I feel about Mosaic comes from the heart and in the end, it truly is about sweetly savouring every mouthful – and reveling in the moment.

Restaurant Mosaic at The Orient

http://www.the-orient.net/Home

Tel: (012) 371 2902/3/4/5

The Orient

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