

A look at how to spend your downtime — from music, to sport, books, the theatre and the screen

Sea Mist



## RESTAURANTS

# FRESH, FLORAL, FLAVOURFUL

*Love of nature and passion for food combine in this prize-winning chef's work*

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● It turns out that we have the world's best female chef. Last month South African Chantel Dartnall was given that acknowledgment in Warsaw, where she took the prize at the best chef (lady) awards 2017. She was also the highest-positioned woman in the best chef awards top 100 list, and one of only three to make the top 50. And she was the only SA chef listed in the top 100.

Dartnall started Restaurant Mosaic at the Orient Boutique Hotel in Gauteng 11 years ago. Since then the restaurant (and the food creator herself) has garnered top local awards as well as international ones. Dartnall was twice named SA's chef of the year.

For the awards in Warsaw winning chefs in six categories are selected by 300 voters, from chefs and food writers to culinary experts from around the world, as well as by 1.5m followers on the competition's digital platform.

Mosaic is nearly an hour away from Johannesburg, so convenience is out of the equation (though there is a helipad which regularly accommodates out-of-town visitors). There's also nothing trendy about the place. It's not about marble and shine and space and vibe, but more about opulence, Art Nouveau, dark wood and calm.

"We didn't just want a restaurant, we wanted people to be able to escape from [their environment] even if it was only for four hours, to recharge and rejuvenate," Dartnall says.

It seems to work. About 90% of patrons are repeat customers.

Dartnall is from an Afrikaans family, but speaks crisp English. On top of this there is something very French and stylish about her, from her bright red lipstick to her svelte, chic look. She is also rather European about her preferences. Her favourite drink is champagne (there is a champagne bar at the restaurant) and she's quite clear about exercise — she seriously dislikes it.

She had dreamt about running a restaurant since her schooldays and chose her high school because it offered hotel keeping and catering as subjects. Later, when she was studying at the Prue Leith Chefs Academy, she won the Bill Gallagher scholarship to represent SA in America, at the Johnson & Wales University in Providence, Rhode Island.

It exposed her to chefs from around the world, including George

Tajine du Maghreb



Chantel Dartnall: Serving botanical cuisine





Calombaris of the *MasterChef* TV series.

Fast forward to when she returned from England, where she had worked for two years, and Dartnall was clear that she wanted to open her restaurant where it is now, in the Francolin Conservancy near Pelindaba. It was her uncle's home and has been renovated to its present design.

The refurbishing of the restaurant and its rooms is Moorish, because the family loves Art Nouveau, French cuisine, India, Morocco and the Persia of old. Much of the furniture and decor was imported from India and Morocco. Most style elements in the hotel and restaurant are from the spice route between the Western outposts of Africa and the exotic Northern parts of India.

The restaurant serves botanical cuisine, which is light and simple. It doesn't incorporate too many influences at the same time, and, of course, uses many edible plants and flowers to decorate the plates.

Dartnall has a feminine style of cooking. She describes this as embracing harmony, balance, simplicity and minimal ingredients. "I would take a beetroot and make seven different preparations in the dish to bring out the true harmony and flavour of beetroot.

"But you won't find the fashionable burnt charcoal [here]."

### Long hours of hard work

Mosaic is not just a restaurant. It offers accommodation as well. It's very much a family business. Dartnall's mother, Mari, runs the restaurant and the hotel while her stepfather, Cobus, masterminded the design of the Orient; he's behind the scenes and is known as the cellar-master, as he researches and selects the wines, manages the cellar systems as well as the maintenance and operations of the hotel. That's no small feat, as the estate spans 280 ha.

The chef's parents come from a corporate background, and no-one in the family had ever run hotels or restaurants before, so what made her think she could do something like this?

"I always, always, always just wanted to cook. I'm sharing this with my staff, who are as passionate about the business as I [am] —



I would never be able to find other people who are so passionate and willing to put in the number of hours, and are as committed. Working with them, I'm the most fortunate person in the world."

Fortunate maybe, but the family is incredibly hardworking. A normal day for the award-winning chef starts at about 7 am, so she arrives at between 6 am and 7 am. Though the restaurant is supposed to close at 10.30 pm patrons often stay till about midnight or later.

Lunch starts at about 12.30 pm and generally finishes at about 5 pm, or on a Sunday at about 7 pm. And dinner is served every night apart from Sunday.

Many people choose to stay in one of the rooms, which vary in rates from R2,600/day to R4,000/day, breakfast included.

Once a month the entire team is given Monday to Thursday off to rest and visit families. The big break of the year is for six weeks in winter — everything closes from mid-June to the end of July. During this time, renovations and maintenance are done. Chantel goes off and travels the world. The family buys wines for the hotel, dines at some great restaurants and goes to museums, the opera or ballet. They soak up loads of art and culture and then, for a week, switch off in some very quiet place.

Top of Chantel's list of big influences is nature. "I think that is why we've established ourselves as a restaurant that serves botanical cuisine. When we first opened, it was a concept that was not well known locally.

"Everything on the plate is inspired by nature: scenes of nature, the harmony of nature."

The restaurant can seat up to 40 people at a time, and the entire place can be hired. The staff is a small team, with four in the kitchen (along with the chef) and five who are front of house, in addition to the cleaning staff.

Monday is Chantel's crash day. She doesn't answer her phone or her e-mail. "I try to do as little as possible. But it's also a creative cooking day when I work on new recipes." When recipes are tasted by the staff, it's not the entire dish but every aspect and ingredient of it.

### Everything on the plate is inspired by nature: scenes of nature, the harmony of nature

What is she most proud of? "I think [it's that] we were able to achieve what we did with a team from the local community, without having trained personnel." Moses, who used to be the gardener became the security guard and was then trained to be the sommelier. Johanna, who used to work in the scullery, now bakes the bread (which is beyond delicious). And people from Atteridgeville were trained.

Once the restaurant is open, Chantel never sits down to eat a meal but tastes and nibbles throughout the day. "My great challenge is that I can't cook if my tummy is full. I need to be a bit hungry because I find once you're salivating and you want to eat, you're more prone to cook something really yummy, whereas when you're already full, your body asks you: 'Why are you cooking?'"

When it comes to food, Chantel loves the influences of different countries. She enjoys Oriental food, the Far East and the exoticness of it all.

She is also particularly beguiled by Belgium. "It is phenomenal. The Belgians have such a feminine approach to cooking. I can really relate to their style."

The family is building a museum on the estate. It is set to open in October next year to house its private art collection of SA old masters, collected over many years. These include works by Alexander Rose-Innes, Gregoire Boonzaier, Adriaan Boshoff, Adolph Jentsch and the more contemporary Aleta Michaletos.

Internationally some of Chantel's favourite chefs include Pascal Barbot in Paris, who has a small, 20-seater, three Michelin-star restaurant called L'Astrance. There's also chef Peter Goossens of Hof van Cleve and Gert De Mangeleer of Hertog Jan in Belgium, as well as chef Michel Bras of Bras in France, who was the founding father of botanical cuisine.

The current spring/summer menu at Restaurant Mosaic is called "Cosmorganic" and features Chantel's signature botanical cuisine, using only the best seasonal produce.

The menu includes dishes such as Song of the Sea (salmon, kombucha, yuzu); Some Birds Don't Fly (ostrich, beetroot, plum); Tajine du Maghreb (capretto, prunes, argan oil) and The Clash of Constellations (passion fruit, mango, fresh berries).

Let's not forget the wine cellar. Restaurant Mosaic boasts one of the most comprehensive wine cellars in Africa, consisting of more than 75,000 bottles of wine under 5,500 different local and international labels. ✘