

Sommelier's winning ways

ON TOP: Winner of the Wine Services Award at the 2017 Eat Out Awards, KZN's Moses Magwaza is the sommelier at Restaurant Mosaic in Pretoria.

TANYA WATERWORTH

'NOBODY warned me so it was actually shocking, but also the most exciting moment in my life."

That was how sommelier, Hammarsdale-born Moses Magwaza, felt when he learnt he was winner of the Wine Services Award at the 2017 Eat Out Awards.

The coveted title for the 36-year-old wine connoisseur has put the cherry on the top of a highly successful year for Restaurant Mosaic in Pretoria. Its award-winning chef Chantel Dartnell walked away with the title of the world's Best Female Chef at the 2017 Best Chefs Awards in Warsaw recently.

Magwaza started his working life as a gar-

Top award goes to local man

dener.

"My father passed away the year after I was born and we moved to Mpumalanga, although my family and I go back to my father's family in KwaZulu-Natal every December. I am a traditional Zulu man.

"I started out working in the garden for the owner of the Orient Hotel and Mosaic Restaurant," he said. "But I was part of the team at the beginning and started working in the hotel as the porter. Then I moved to the restaurant.

"I was the guy from the township, but I remember my first glass of wine, it was a rosé. It captured my imagination and changed the course of my life."

With encouragement from the owners, Magwaza started poring over any material or books he could find about wine.

"I think they could see I was really interested and sent me on a course at the Cape Wine Academy, and that's when it started getting serious – but it

was also fun at the same time," said Magwaza.

He spent time in the Cape cellars and vineyards to get a first-hand understanding of winemaking, as well as being mentored by renowned French sommelier, Germain Lehodey, at Restaurant Mosaic.

Last year Magwaza went to the Loire Valley in France, legendary for its wines.

"It was my first trip to Europe and I felt as though I was in a different world. I was studying wine, but going to wine farms really opens your eyes. The European wines are very different to South African wines and it could have something to do with the sun and soil," he said.

He should know: the restaurant's cellar houses more than 75000 bottles of wines under 500 different local and international labels, as well as boasting a brandy selection said to be unmatched in South Africa.

"It's one of the things I love about my job and it is unique

in that we have a vast number of international wines, whereas most restaurants will only stock five or six.

"This gives me a huge opportunity to get to know them and every time a new wine comes in, I have to know it," he said.

While storing up such formidable knowledge about such a selection of wines, Magwaza said there were simply too many for him to have a favourite.

"Each winemaking region has exceptional wines, so there are a lot of good wines. We also do pairings and the chef will come to us with the ingredients for a new dish. We may take up to three weeks deciding which wine will suit a dish. We taste and taste until we find the right wine for the pairing," he said.

His tips for wine lovers: start with identifying the food's profile – is it sweet, acidic or salty?

"Then look for a wine that balances the food. For example, curries don't go with dry wines, you have to look for

something sweeter. Don't be varietal specific when it comes to wine, you need to explore. People often say they don't like a chardonnay, but perhaps they just haven't tasted the right one," said Magwaza.

Lehodey, who is retiring at the end of the year, was full of praise for his protégé.

"Moses has an excellent palate and thoroughly deserves this recognition. I believe he is the South African sommelier with the widest knowledge of international wines and that makes him stand out. We work closely with the chef when she devises her menus and Moses has a great understanding of ingredients and pairings," he said.

Dartnell said: "Moses is passionate about wine and it's as simple as that. It has been a pleasure watching his journey."

And being a sommelier is not only about wine, but also about people: "I've always enjoyed working with people and to work in the hospitality industry you have to really enjoy your job as it's long hours. You have to have lots of patience and a big heart," said Magwaza.

