

Smack your lips! Here's Chantel

Now savour this: local chef honoured as best female foodie on the planet

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WHAT does it feel like to be the best female chef on the planet? For South African chef Chantel Dartnall, news of the accomplishment still hasn't sunk in.

"It feels pretty insane," says Dartnall, the owner and head chef of Restaurant Mosaic in Elandsfontein near Pretoria.

The 37-year-old says she is still trying to process the news, having just arrived back in the country from Poland, where she attended The Best Chef Lady Awards. "To win exceeded all my wildest dreams. It's a great honour."

Last week, she was crowned the world's best female chef at the prestigious international awards, which took place in Warsaw.

Dartnall, who has twice been named South Africa's Chef of the Year, beat strong competition from globally acclaimed chefs including Spain's Elena Arzak (Best Chef Lady 2016 winner) of the three Michelin-starred restaurant Arzak; Emma Bengtsson, who is at the helm of the two Michelin-starred Scandinavian restaurant Aquavit in New York; France's Anne-Sophie Pic, who gained three Michelin stars for her restaurant, Maison Pic in France; as well as Clare Smyth, the first and so far the only female chef to run a restaurant with three Michelin stars in the UK with her establishment, Core.

The Elandsfontein-born Dartnall was also placed number 32 in the Best Chef Awards Top 100 list for 2017, the highest positioned woman and one of only three to make the top 50.

She was also the only South African chef listed in the top 100. "It's a major award when you look at the other chefs who were nominated, such as Elena Arzak and Sophie Pic, who both have three Michelin stars. I've always admired them," says Dartnall.

She admits she didn't expect to walk away with the title – she trav-



Pretoria-born chef Chantel Dartnall beat strong competition to be crowned The Best Chef Lady in the world.

PICTURE: KEVIN MARK PASS

elled to Poland for the awards simply to meet her idols.

"I made the decision to fly across the world for one night to attend the awards ceremony in Warsaw because it was such a great honour to be included with these giants who I admire so much.

"I've spent time with them before and was just excited to meet with them again – they are my food heroes

and to be in the same room as them was a reward in itself."

The Best Chef Awards, which was launched in Poland last year, seeks out the world's top chefs for culinary artistry and visual presentation. The winning chefs are selected in six categories by 300 voters comprising chefs, food writers and culinary experts across the globe as well as 1.5 million followers on the compe-

dition's digital platform.

Dartnall is delighted with the recognition and hopes her award will help put South Africa on the culinary map. "I certainly think people who would not generally have taken South Africa too seriously at an awards function of this calibre, will sit up and notice and become aware of the talent that we have in South Africa.

"Ever since winning the award, I have received a number of calls from international chefs whose restaurants I've eaten in, as well as foreign guests planning a visit to South Africa."

Dartnall admits her culinary journey hasn't been an easy one. "It is a tough, male-orientated industry and without losing your femininity, you have to be tough as well. Upfront, you must understand that the hours are long and you have to give up a lot. For me, though, it is in my blood. I can't imagine doing anything else. The kitchen is my happy place."

After she graduated from the Prue Leith Chefs Academy, acclaimed UK chef Nico Ladenis offered Dartnall a position in the kitchen of his three-star Michelin restaurant, Chez Nico, in London, a huge break for the young chef.

She also worked with Michael Caines at Gidleigh Park in Devon, a two Michelin star establishment, while chefs such as Ladenis, Alain Ducasse and Marco Pierre White set the standards by which Dartnall measured herself on her return to South Africa, where she opened up Restaurant Mosaic and has been there for the last 11 years.

"When I arrived in London as a young, inexperienced commis chef in the busy Chez Nico kitchen, I was chucked in the deep end.

"It didn't take long to learn that the quicker and the more perfectly you performed the tasks you were given, the greater the rest of the team's respect became for you and eventually I was one of the team.

"This taught me that no matter how hard any task may seem, if you practice and persevere it all becomes easier in the end."

Dartnall credits her mom as her inspiration. "My mother was one of my biggest influences growing up. "My family has always supported me and encouraged me to do what I enjoy and they have exposed me and provided me with the opportunities to explore the culinary world."