

What I know now: Chantal Dartnall

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Though the chef-owner of Restaurant Mosaic be but small, she is certainly fierce competition in the international arena. Her latest coup? Being named best female chef in the world...

I grew up in Elandsfontein on the farm Restaurant Mosaic is situated on. During school holidays, we stayed with my gran. I think one of my warmest, fuzziest memories was of her teaching me how to make vetkoek. I remember the first time I made my own and broke it open; so yeasty and comforting and rewarding. And then, making a batch for my parents for dinner and being able to share that with them. Every time I smell vetkoek, those memories just come rushing back.

After qualifying as a chef, I worked as a commis chef under Nico Ladenis at Chez Nico in London. He's a very, very hard task master; chefs like Marco Pierre White and Gordon Ramsay came from his kitchen. I think that's where I realised how important consistency is, because it was drilled into us every single service. The food had to be perfect and if it wasn't perfect, it didn't go out. You literally worked 18 hours a day, went home, got four and-a-half hours' sleep, and got back in the kitchen. Most of the time we were dead on our feet, but then you'd get back into the rush of service and you'd just push through – all of us fighting to keep those three Michelin stars.

When I went to work for chef Michael Caines at Gidleigh Park in Devon, he was still fighting to get his second Michelin star, so it was an even tougher kitchen to be in. Where Nico was extremely minimalist, chef Michael's food was really labour intensive, with lots of little details to perfect. Pushing to get even one plate out took forever, so that experience really taught me focus and speed.

By the time I came back to SA, I'd found a good middle ground between cooking with extreme detail and extreme simplicity, but neither was my style. It's only when I travelled to Aubrac in France and ate at Michel Bras that I had my "aha" moment. I walked in there and it was what I'd always envisioned food to be. The most beautiful, feminine, elegant, almost fairytale like food that tasted just magical. That was it. I said, this is my style: botanical cooking.

We celebrated Restaurant Mosaic's eleventh birthday in October. Right now, the menu is very much a reflection of my personality and my interpretation of nature. My style has become more condensed; purer and focussed. I was very young when I opened the restaurant and I think because of the chefs I'd previously worked with, there was a lot of their style and influences that manifested in the earlier dishes. My dishes are now definitely more me.

One of the more unexpected plants I'm currently using on my menu is agapanthus. I'm using it in a dish called Song of the Sea, where we combine salmon with oyster leaf, a succulent that tastes just like fresh oysters, and ice leaf, which has an incredible amount of moisture; like biting into cucumber. And then there are these ethereal, long agapanthus petals, with their beautiful sweet taste. The purity of their whiteness blends beautifully with the pink of the salmon and green of the salad.

I'm lucky enough to travel every year for inspiration. This year we started in Paris and from there went to the Netherlands. I managed to secure a stage at the kitchen of chef Peter Goossens of the three-Michelin-starred restaurant Hof Van Cleve in Belgium. What surprised me most is how we do so many things similarly in the kitchen. The way we make sauces, the kitchen prep ... I realised we always think Europe has all these advanced techniques and it's a lot more refined. But actually they do exactly the same things we do.

Being named Best Female Chef at the World's Best Chef Awards was surreal. On the day of the event, we arrived in Warsaw in Poland at 11 am. They were announcing the Top 100 positions and they'd already reached the seventies. My name hadn't featured yet and I started getting slightly worried that we had flown all that way for nothing. By 5 pm, still nothing. Then, just as we were about to leave for the function, they announced the top 40 and I saw my name on the list. It was magical, seeing my name with major chefs such as Elena Arzak and Anne-Sophie Pic. At the event, they'd started with proceedings, and when they came to Best Lady Chef, I was busy taking Instagram videos, as one does. Suddenly I heard "Best Lady Chef, Chantel Dartnall". I threw my phone onto the seat next to me, went on stage, got the award, had my picture taken, and got off. Once I sat down and the rest of the event went on, I thought, did that really just happen?

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