



Jenny with her husband Dave at the Raymond Blanc Cookery School (left), and with Terroir's plated chef Michael Broughton

In love with food

Food reviewer Jenny Handley shares her gastronomic journey through SA's towns and cities to reveal the top restaurants, and chefs at their helm

Jenny, 53, is a respected global restaurant reviewer and the blogger behind *The Gourmet Guide: Jen's Journeys of Flavour*, loved by followers in 80 countries. She studied food and nutrition, working part-time under Ina Paarman as a demo assistant early in her career. She then set up her own business, JHP, in 1994, focusing on another area that she's passionate about: brand performance and strategy.

In 2015, she went back to her foodie roots, establishing a 'plating' rating system for SA eateries. When awarding one, two, or three 'plates', cuisine, service, a chef's philosophy and food provenance are considered, amongst other factors. To draw attention to 21 of SA's plated eateries, Jenny compiled recently released book, the *2018 JHP Gourmet Guide*. She lives in Cape Town with her husband Dave, 57. They have two sons, Gareth, 27, and Warren, 25.

Food is my love language. If anyone in my family is sick, I cook for them. If they're sad, I bake for them. As a mother, I've made sure all childhood milestones for my kids were marked at a table overflowing with good food; later, we added wine. Food is the thread that unites our family.

My love affair with food began aged 13 when I met Dave, the son of a gourmet cook and oenophile. He opened up my eyes to the idea of food as more than sustenance; as something to nourish the soul, spurring me on to pursue this new passion in my student years. I qualified as a home economist, and then went on to complete a higher diploma in food and nutrition, setting me up for a career in the industry, which began under the welcomed tutelage of celebrated foodie Ina Paarman. I married that boy at 20 and, in every spare moment spent in our home, relished cooking and baking.

Writing gourmet travel stories fast became a hobby. Once our two sons were old enough, we started to travel, visiting destinations across the globe, eating our way from one fabulous establishment to the next... and, being an insatiable learner, I'd always sneak a cookery course onto the itinerary! I took advantage of these trips, by setting up interviews with chefs from some of the iconic restaurants we'd visited, like Raymond Blanc of Belmond Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons in Oxford, Michel Roux Jr of Le Gavroche in London, and Eric Ripert of Le Bernardin in New York.

I realised local chefs are as good as many of the global gourmets I'd met; sometimes, better. Knowing that we don't award Michelin stars in SA, I started to plot a reviewing and rating system, similarly based on trust and anonymity that rewards excellence – not only of cuisine, but of service, too.



Restaurant Mosaic's Chantel Dartnall is a three-plated chef (left); a delicious curry prepared by Ellerman House's Grant Daniels; and Hartford House's tasty cuisine (below)



pursuing passions

their vegetable gardens, or trawl me off to meet their week-old piglets, as chef Christiaan Campbell of The Werf Restaurant in Franschoek did... and then wonder why I didn't order pork at lunch!

The smell of a Sunday roast wafting out of his mother's kitchen when he was a child inspired chef Grant Daniels of Ellerman House to roll up his sleeves and get in there, too. He tells me

The dream started to take shape and that's how the *JHP Gourmet Guide* was born. Finding impartial inspectors and creating criteria for evaluation and platings took quite a while. One plate is awarded for excellent cuisine, two for exceptional dining that demands a detour, and three plates for world-class destination dining worthy of a flight. Benchmarking against overseas establishments was the aim, so I set about doing more research and chef interrogation. Dave would respond in one of two ways when I announced there was a restaurant I wanted to visit: "San Sebastián? Okay, I'll go to Spain. São Paulo? I'd love to take you to the airport!"

In San Sebastián, I had a culinary experience that transported me to new heights. I spent time with fourth-generation chef Elena Arzak. Her family's eatery, Arzak, has held three Michelin stars for the past 43 years. We met her family lunching together before service in the kitchen – enjoying simple tripe, as they do each day. It was my warmest memory of Spain – seeing how food unites their family, just like it does ours.

Being a restaurant reviewer demands honesty and integrity, in addition to knowledge. After settling into my seat (comfy, I hope), I peruse the restaurant and watch other diners. When a plate is served, I scrutinise presentation, use

of terroir, taste, temperature, texture, technique and many other aspects. I can still hear Ina's voice in my ears. For me, the sweetest bite is meeting the chef. Being taken into the kitchen – with the hot steam, pungent smells, steady drum of voices (over the years, reduced from shouts to whispers), and concentration as the chef adds the final finishing touches – is also part of the magic.

'Local chefs are on par with global gourmets; sometimes, better'

I love discovering what makes a chef tick; uncovering their passions, inspirations and how they got into the industry – often their

mothers and grandmothers influenced them. Many chefs say the combination of their mother's awful cooking and eating bland boarding-school meals is what drove them into the kitchen!

It's been a delicious adventure, following my taste buds around SA, enjoying Cape Malay cuisine and world-renowned wine in the Cape, moving inland to new taste frontiers from Karoo lamb to Rooibos tea, both trademarked because of their uniqueness. In Durban, the heady smell of curry beckons, and in Jozi, I was taken up to a Rosebank roof garden to see how fresh herbs are propagated with a view of this vibrant city. Flat shoes are essential – often, chefs walk me to

this over a delectable Cape Malay dish he'd prepared, which we enjoyed al fresco, with a sprawling view of Bantry Bay in front of us. Down the road, plated chef Dylan Laity of The Roundhouse in Camps Bay explains that when he's not picking fynbos, he's catching a wave. Working 16 hours a day in a hot kitchen demands a conscious pursuit of excellence, but balance, too. Visiting Hartford House in the Midlands, I look past a tranquil scene of grazing horses, over the rose garden, and wonder how a plated chef like Constantijn Hahndiek stays focused. He welcomes diners before dinner to share the source of his inspiration – it may be from the pineapple beer he brewed under his bed at boarding school, or from the salt-and-vinegar shaker he sneaks into a movie, much to the chagrin of his girlfriend!

When I studied food as a career, it wasn't sexy nor sought-after – it was before nose-to-tail, froths or foams, foraging or fermentation. It's been eye-opening to see the changes in the industry, which drew one international chef to our shores. I met two-plated chef Greg Czarnecki of The Restaurant >>



pursuing passions



Jenny with fourth-generation Spanish chef Elena Arzak (left); local chef Constantijn Hahndiek from Hartford House; dine with a view at Ellerman House; and a dish prepared by chef Christiaan Campbell (below)



at Waterkloof Wine Estate in Somerset West in 2008. At the time, I was doing the PR for the launch of Ernie Els' Big Easy Winebar & Grill in Stellenbosch. Greg came from France just as SA's gourmet revolution was beginning, and says if he'd come earlier, he would've left. Humble and talented, he lays no claim to being part of the revolution, yet those in the know, know better.

SA culinary hero and three-plated chef Luke Dale-Roberts was faced with two career options – follow in his uncle's footsteps to become an electrician, or follow the smell of baking bread in the kitchen to pursue his passion. How lucky for us that it was the latter! Taking SA to the global stage, he is an inspiring teacher – three of his four restaurants have been plated, and chefs who've worked with him have reached their own iconic status. Another great teacher is Terroir's Michael Broughton, who proves that not all of our lauded chefs have had formal training. The self-taught foodie demonstrates

the techniques of French haute cuisine to

perfection. Based on a Stellenbosch estate, he's driven by a daily desire to excel, yet remains refreshingly humble.

The adage of never trusting a skinny chef had Restaurant Mosaic's Chantel Dartnall and I smiling. Her secret? To love food and stay slim, one needs to pretend to love exercise! This diminutive but dynamic, botanically-inspired chef told me how she, too, grew up loving food. She works with her parents, and her proud mom Mari runs their Orient Hotel in Pretoria. In October 2017, she received a three-plate rating, took home the inaugural SWISS Culinary Innovation Award, and was named the 'Best Lady Chef' in the Best Chef Awards 2017. A force to be reckoned with.

I have many friends who are willing 'plus-ones' for my foodie expeditions. One such friend is Sharon, who follows my blog and then messages me to say: "You couldn't possibly have eaten all that food last week – come on, let's walk." Just as you should be 'wary' of a slender chef, you shouldn't trust a rotund reviewer. They're supposed to analyse quality, not quantity!

Last year, I was lucky enough to 'work' in Champagne-Ardenne in France – no struggle to get my husband to join me on this trip! While dining at the Taittinger family's Château de la Marquetterie, I was introduced to the world's oldest and most prestigious chef competition,

known as the 'Everest of Gastronomy' – Le Taittinger Prix Culinaire International. Paging through the recipes in the first *JHP Gourmet Guide*, Taittinger's hospitality manager and competition organiser, Jean-Pierre Redont, was so delighted by our local chefs' high standards that he invited me to attend the 2017 competition and opened it up to the chefs we'd plated. My response was instant, and sincere. I leant forward and whispered, "Can you hear my heart beating? My dream is about to come true." From 2018 onwards, plated, eligible SA chefs can now apply to compete in this illustrious event, and I'll have the privilege of working with them; of guiding them in preparation for the honourable, but arduous challenge.

Chefs are often shy and would rather cook than talk. That's where my brand and performance training comes in. I can draw them out of their shells with a few 'soft' questions. One is to ask them where they eat in their free time, because it allows them to talk about someone else. A popular response is: "At home with my family, preferably a braai with good wine." I know the feeling. After fast and furious fine dining, I love nothing more than coming home for simple food, shared with family. The most important part of a meal is who you share it with. **w&h**

The 2018 JHP Gourmet Guide (*Jenny Handley Performance*) is out on exclusivebooks.co.za

