

## *Her kitchen rules!*

# Simply **THE BEST!**

South African Chantel Dartnall of Restaurant Mosaic was named the world's best female chef at The Best Chef Awards 2017 in Warsaw last year – she was also placed 32nd in the awards' Top 100: the only South African on the list. We caught up with her between seatings.

  
By **Shireen Fisher**

**I** didn't have a clue that I would win,' says Chantel. 'It was just such a privilege to have been nominated with people I've looked up to and admired from afar. I attended the ceremony just because I'd get to meet some of these giants.' Her win felt slightly surreal for a long time, she says. 'After a frenetic end-of-year service I had to go away, unwind and really let it sink in.'

The Best Chef Awards showcase the culinary artistry and visual presentation of the world's top chefs. The winners are selected in six categories by 300 voters – made up of chefs, food writers and culinary experts from all over the world – as well as over 1 million followers on the competition's digital platform.

The 37-year-old's journey to the top seems to have been inevitable. 'I've always

been passionate about food – apart from the 15 minutes in Grade 9 when I thought I wanted to be a hairdresser!' she jokes. 'I've always wanted to cook, and I've always wanted to run my own restaurant.'

After graduating from Prue Leith Chefs Academy, Chantel was offered a spot in the kitchen of acclaimed UK chef Nico Ladenis at his three-star Michelin restaurant, Chez Nico, in London.

'When I began working in London I was fresh out of college,' she says. 'I'd worked in some wonderful kitchens in South Africa during my practical placement, like Ellerman House with Chef Craig McCormack, then Ile de France with Chef Marc Guebert. I was very excited to begin working with Ladenis and with Chef Michael Caines at Gidleigh Park after that.'

'Our working hours were intense, but it taught me about stamina, dedication and perseverance. The most important lesson I learned, not only in London but also from the local chefs I trained under, was consistency. The saying "you're only as good as the last plate you send out of the kitchen" was drilled into us. Nothing but "perfection" was allowed to leave the kitchen.'





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Chantel at the beautifully styled Restaurant Mosaic.

All the long hours and hard work have paid off, earning Chantel the position she finds herself in today: having established one of this country's finest culinary establishments and collaborating with some of the world's top chefs.

'To be able to open Restaurant Mosaic 11 years ago and build up its reputation on both the local and international stage was a dream come true.'

Restaurant Mosaic at The Orient boutique hotel in Pretoria is situated in the beautiful Francolin Conservancy, which is also where Chantel, an only child, grew up. It's home to abundant wildlife and indigenous plants, and it's where Chantel's culinary

imagination can run wild.

'This was my playground as a little girl, where I could experiment and explore, and it still is. When I came back from London it seemed only natural for me to open the restaurant of my dreams in an environment that is so close to my heart.'

She describes her cuisine as passionate, feminine and botanical, and insists on using organic and seasonal produce. Her mission is to deliver 'nature on a plate'. Michel Bras, the father of botanical cooking, influences her significantly.

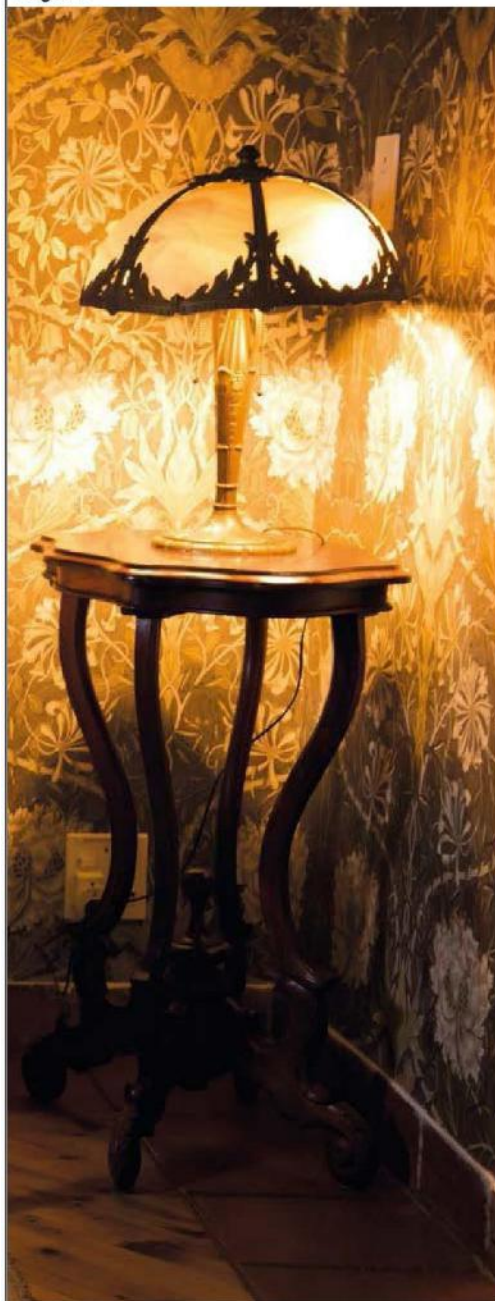
'His restaurant is on top of the Aubrac plateau in Laguiole, France, about four hours from Paris, in the middle of nowhere.

You get there by driving along winding country roads. Just one salad has 29 different vegetables. You can just feel yourself starting to glow with health after eating it!'

Chantel says most of the regulars at her restaurant are as passionate about food as she is and love the complete food and wine experience they get there. Restaurant Mosaic boasts one of the most comprehensive and lauded wine cellars in Africa, comprising more than 75 000 bottles under 5 500 different local and international labels. Each course is paired with what the team believes is the perfect wine to enhance it.

The eatery also pairs meals for patrons who don't drink alcohol:





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Andrew Fairlie, Anne-Sophie Pic, Georges Blanc, Gert de Mangeleer, Peter Goossens and Pascal Barbot. I’m also fortunate to travel and dine in some of the world’s finest establishments. These culinary journeys have been truly inspirational.’

Named South African Chef of the Year by *EatOut* magazine in both 2009 and 2015, Chantel was also voted 2017 Chef of the Year for Africa and the Middle East by the Luxury Travel Guide Awards, which recognise and celebrate excellence across all sectors of the luxury travel and tourism industry. At the 2017 *EatOut* Restaurant Awards, her restaurant won the Service Excellence Award, the Wine Service Award for sommelier Moses Magwaza, and claimed second spot in the top 10 Best Restaurants of South Africa.

With haute cuisine being such a male-dominated field, Chantel is clearly shaking things up.

‘It’s a tough, male-orientated industry and, without losing your femininity, you have to be tough as well. You have to understand that the hours are long. You have to give up a lot. But it’s in my blood.’

Her most recent accolade has placed Restaurant Mosaic on both the local and international maps.

‘We had to open on extra days to accommodate people who wanted

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to visit the restaurant after our win, so we’ve been very blessed. There’s also been a lot of international attention as I was put in the same category as major Michelin-starred chefs,’ Chantel says.

‘Those who have followed Mosaic since we opened 11 years ago know that I’ve never remained static when it comes to creating dishes, so it will continue to be an evolution for us. We always push ourselves to be better and to produce a menu that will please both the eye and the palate. I want to keep on growing in culinary terms and exploring all facets of food.’

With so much going on, does she ever have a moment to relax?

‘Of course! I love spending quiet time at home with my loved ones, relaxing in the garden or watching a movie. I also binge on series – all usually on a Monday – my day off.’

The hotel and restaurant close annually in June and July for a winter break, and Chantel uses this time to travel and taste. One of her favourite destinations is France, especially Paris, which is her gourmet hub.

‘We usually spend a few days there to unwind, dine, shop and stock up on essential spices before we head to other parts of Europe. I also have a special place in my heart for the Far East... I’m fascinated by the culture and traditions – and, of course, the food!’

So are her friends intimidated to cook for her?

Chantel laughs. ‘I’m lucky to have a group of friends who have excelled in their own fields – painting, sculpting, film producing and writing – and I’m humbled by their achievements. They’re not at all intimidated when they cook for me! They know that even the simplest dish seems like a gourmet meal when we’re together.’ ❖

‘We put as much thought into the non-alcoholic pairings as we do for the wine pairings,’ says Chantel.

She has a great relationship with her team, many of whom have worked at the restaurant since it first opened.

‘I couldn’t have achieved what I have without them. I’m proud of how Restaurant Mosaic has matured, mentored and grown its staff in the decade we’ve been operating. It’s all about passing the passion and the knowledge forward,’ she says.

‘I’ve always admired chefs like Spain’s Elena Arzak and France’s Sébastien Bras, and I competed against them,’ she says. ‘So many have inspired me – Alain Roux,