

Nature is Served

Interview with

Chantel Dartnall

**Chef Patron of
Restaurant Mosaic, South Africa**

There is something magical in every plate presented by Chef Chantel Dartnall. Each plate is an interpretation of nature at its best and of her famous innovative Botanical Cuisine. Every plate brings people into contact with nature through the ingredients she chooses and the way she creates her dishes. Her unique approach to cooking has earned her Restaurant Mosaic a reputation as one of South Africa's top tables. Moreover, she has also been recently awarded the title of the best Lady Chef in the World at the international 2017 Best Chef Awards in Warsaw in Poland. We recently had the opportunity to discuss with Chef Dartnall her passion for food and her definition of Botanical Cuisine. She also shared with us her achievements in the culinary industry and what to expect when dining at her Restaurant Mosaic.



Credits: Dylan Swart



Give me a run down on your culinary journey. How did it start? Where did you study? Your career up until now?

After graduating from the Prue Leith Chef's Academy, acclaimed UK chef Nico Ladenis offered me a position in the kitchen of his three-star Michelin restaurant, Chez Nico at 90 Park Lane, in London which was a huge break for me.

When I began working in London I was fresh out of college. I had worked in some wonderful kitchens in South Africa during my practical placement such as Ellerman House with Chef Craig McCormack and then Ile de France with Chef Marc Guebert. I was very excited to begin working with Ladenis and thereafter with Chef Michael Caines at Gidleigh Park.

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 that I trained under, was in regard to consistency. The saying that you are only as good as the last plate you send out of the kitchen was drilled into us at every service in every kitchen I have ever worked in. Nothing except "perfection" was allowed to go out of the kitchen.

They were all incredible learning experiences.

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

Since then I've been lucky enough to work and collaborate with some of the world's top chefs.

Tell me about Restaurant Mosaic. When did it open? What is the cuisine style? Who is your typical customer? Your team?

My home (and Restaurant Mosaic at The Orient) is situated in the beautiful Francolin Conservancy with its abundance of wildlife, birds and indigenous plants. This was my playground where I could experiment and explore. On my return 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 and we opened our doors in 2006.

I was also blessed in that my parents have always supported my passion and helped make my dreams become a reality.

We are open for lunch from Thursday to Sunday and for dinner on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. I am always in charge of the kitchen and in attendance to meet guests when the restaurant is open.

My style of food is passionate, feminine and botanical. I have always been inspired by the father of botanical cooking Michel Bras.

His restaurant is on the top of the Aubrac plateau in Laguiole France, about four hours from Paris in the middle of nowhere. You get there by driving along long, winding roads in the country side. One salad has 29 different vegetables. You can feel you're starting to glow with health after eating it!

I am not sure that we have a "typical" customer except to say that most of our regulars are as passionate about food as I am and love the whole food and wine experience.

Restaurant Mosaic also boasts one of the most comprehensive and lauded wine cellars in Africa, comprising of more than 75,000 bottles of wine under 5,500 different local and international labels and so each course is paired with what the team believes is the perfect wine to enhance the dish.

For the teetotalers, we put as much thought into the non-alcoholic pairing with drinks specially chosen to complement the meal.

My team and I are like a close-knit family many of who have been here since we first opened. I could not have achieved what I have without them.

I am proud of how Restaurant Mosaic has matured, mentored and grown its staff in the decade the restaurant has been in operation. It is all about passing the passion and the knowledge forward.

Where do you find your inspiration for your beautiful dishes?

I am inspired by the setting of Restaurant Mosaic which is situated in the Francolin Conservancy with an abundance of wildlife, birds and indigenous plants. I am passionate about using organic and seasonal produce and endeavour to render "nature on a plate".



Tell me about the Best Chef Awards. What is the selection process like?

I was honoured to be named the world's Best Female Chef at The Best Chef Awards 2017, which took place in Warsaw in October, 2017. I was also placed at number 32 in the Best Chef Awards Top 100 list for 2017. I was also the only South African chef listed in the top 100.

Launched in Poland in 2016, this international competition seeks out the world's top chefs in terms of 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 competition's digital platform.

What did it mean to you being nominated for and then winning the Best Chef Lady at this year's Best Chef Awards?

I didn't have a clue that I would win. It was just a privilege to have been nominated with people that I have looked up to and admired from afar. I attended the ceremony because I would get to meet some of these giants.

How does it feel ranking as the top female chef Best Chef Awards top 100 list for 2017?

After a frenetic end-of-year service I had to go away, unwind and really let it sink in. For a long time, it felt slightly surreal.

Which other awards have you won?

Restaurant Mosaic has been fortunate enough to win a host of culinary and wine awards. In 2017 I was also named 2017 Chef of the Year for Africa and the Middle East by the Luxury Travel Guide Awards which recognize and celebrate excellence across all sectors of the affluent travel and tourism industry in Europe, the Americas, Asia, Australasia, Africa and the Middle East.

At the 2017 Eat Out Awards, we 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.

I was named South African Chef of the Year by Eat Out in 2009 and again in 2015.

This award has obviously put you on the map. What has the response been like? Is it more difficult to get a table at your restaurant?

Of course, there is pressure. There's been a lot of international attention since I have been put in the same category as these major Michelin starred chefs.

But those who have followed Mosaic since we opened 11 years ago know that I have never stood still when it comes to creating dishes so it will continue to be an evolution for us. We have the benchmark where we are now and we always push ourselves to be better and to produce a menu that will please both the eye and the palate.

We had to open on extra days to accommodate people who wanted to visit Restaurant Mosaic after our win so we have been very blessed.

Where to from here?

I am delighted with the recognition my team and I have received. As far as the restaurant goes, I want to keep on growing in culinary terms and exploring all facets of food. It is all about passion. I put my heart and soul into every dish I create, but I am also happy to say that I am having a lot of fun working on my cookbook.

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CHANTEL DARTNALL

Alchemist's Infusion

West Coast Rock Lobster, Hibiscus Consommé, Heirloom Vegetables. Heirloom vegetables are a gardener's inheritance, handed down to him by his family. They have been selected and saved over hundreds of years, and offer some of the best tasting and best yielding varieties. The diversity of colours, flavours and textures in heirloom vegetables certainly add variety to my menu.

The colourful hibiscus flower is cultivated worldwide for both its aesthetic appeal and its medicinal uses, which are primarily in the form of tea. Even though, for many of us, the beautiful hibiscus flower brings to mind visions of the Hawaiian Islands, the hibiscus plant is actually native to Africa. Hibiscus tea is made from the dried, vibrantly coloured calyces of the hibiscus flower and has an exotic and tart flavour.

This dish consist of a beautiful and aromatic vegetable consommé that will reinfuse through hibiscus tea and other aromatics, which include Angelica - our small tribute to Hungarian winemaker Angelika Árvay whose wine we have selected to accompany this dish. Guests will be allowed to participate in the cooking process, as the infusion will be done at your table. The warm vegetable tea mixture will be served over West Coast Rock Lobster cut into medallions that will gently cook when it comes into contact with the heat from the consommé.

For our Vegetarian guests this dish will be served with Saffron.

