



Food & Drink

# **‘Fine dining doesn’t have to be overly serious’, says South African chef Chantel Dartnall**

The owner of Mosaic restaurant in Elandsfontein, near Pretoria, was named best female chef at the 2017 Best Chef Awards. She talks about giving up her vegetarianism and being tricked into shaving her head.

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**How did Mosaic come about?** “I always wanted to be a chef and have my own restaurant, so my mom and stepdad worked with me to achieve this vision. My stepdad is the cellar master, and with 75,000 bottles, Mosaic has the most extensive and most awarded wine list in Africa and the Middle East. We might be slightly compulsive wine collectors, but we visit the winemakers and taste [everything].”

**How did you get into cooking?** “We grew up on the farm [where Mosaic is located, in Elandsfontein] and it was wonderful to be in nature and learn from my grandmother [her stepdad’s mother]. During school holidays, I was in the kitchen with her making cookies or baking cakes. We made braised tongue, shin and short ribs, and meatballs. We also made a traditional deep-fried bread called *vetkoek*, which is eaten with curry mince and sweet chutney, but the ultimate is with salted butter and Lyle’s Golden Syrup.”

**Where did your interest in vegetables come from?** “When I went to high school, I decided to become vegetarian. I wish I could say it was for religious reasons, but it was just because it was trendy. My mom said I would have to cook for myself and that encouraged me to discover the vast possibilities with vegetables. I planted my own herbs and made infusions and teas. A typical South African diet mainly consists of meat, rice and potatoes, and vegetables are almost forgotten. For me, it was wonderful getting back into the cycles of nature.”

**Did you go to culinary school?** “When I was 13, I attended a high school that had hotel-keeping and catering as a full-time subject. We cooked for two hours a day. They taught us the French basics of making bread, sauces like mayonnaise and béarnaise, and basic wine knowledge. After graduating, I wrote to all the three-Michelin-starred restaurants in England and France by fax. Literally half an hour later, I got a call from Chez Nico, in London, with a chef position.”



Mosaic's interior is reminiscent of Paris' belle époque eateries. Photo: Mosaic

**What was that experience like?** “It was a pretty intense 18 months. The work ethic of chefs in England – you don't find it in France – everybody is so focused, they take things seriously, it's a harsh environment. I don't think I would have achieved what I have if it wasn't for my time in England because it teaches you stamina, perseverance, but also respect and camaraderie.”

**Why did you stop being vegetarian?** “On my first day [at Chez Nico, in 2000], they put me in the larder section and cut a thick slice of foie gras terrine on brioche. Chef Nico [Ladenis] told me to eat it and when I told him I was vegetarian he said I had to either go back on the plane or finish the terrine.”

**A year later you moved to chef Michael Caines' Gidleigh Park, in Devon. What did you learn from him?** “Nico’s style was clean and minimal, while Michael’s was over the top, with seven million elements. We had a red mullet dish and it had five different-coloured purées, which we had to do like a Vincent van Gogh painting on the plate. I had nightmares thinking about plating 40 of these the next day. As harsh as Nico was, Michael was even harder, but it was a brilliant learning experience at age 20.”



Francolin forest fungi, a dish served at Mosaic. Photo: Mosaic

**What was it like being a female chef then?** “I was the only girl in the kitchen so they treated me like one of the boys. My hair was long and one day I was told the health inspector was coming and that in England nobody is allowed to have long hair so I had to shave my head. I did it the next day, in the middle of winter. It was partially a joke. But because I actually went and did it, they decided she is one of us and weren’t as harsh on me.”

**How did you prepare for the opening of Mosaic?** “When I came back [to South Africa in 2002] at 21, we started building Mosaic. In the meantime, I met the love of my life, we got married and I worked at a deli for two years. From 2003, I focused full time on Mosaic [it opened in 2006].”

**Where do you get inspiration for your dishes?** “Walking on the beach, experiencing the smells, the texture of the sand in between your toes, seeing broken shells and whatever debris has washed up, taking those connections and putting them on the plate. Mousse de mer is a good example, because although it has a tomato, there is a seaside scene with langoustine, lemongrass foam and rooibos tea. The francolin forest fungi [a risotto dish] came about when we had all these wild mushrooms popping up where we are. I tried to eat them but it was an unpleasant experience. But that turned into a fantasy mushroom dish that retains a bit of the child at heart. Fine dining doesn’t have to be overly serious.”



The exterior of Dartnall's restaurant Mosaic, near Pretoria, South Africa. Photo: Mosaic

**Do you keep wine pairings in mind when you create new dishes?** “Sometimes we have wine in the cellar that is at its optimal drinking and I design a dish to go with it. That’s a more complicated way to approach it because I need to conceptualise a dish thinking about aromas in the wine. But after 15 years, we’ve learned what works with my food and what doesn’t.

“We seldom use raw natural citrus forms in my food because it brings out the metallic taste in white wines. The citrus we use is either blanched, pickled, confit or sugared to have the taste but not the acidity. If you want to create a unique experience of food and wine, it has to be in the forefront of your mind every single moment of the day.”

*Chantel Dartnall was recently a guest chef at Skye, at The Park Lane Hong Kong, in Causeway Bay.*

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