

BEYOND CULINARY EXCELLENCE

Six Women Leading the Culinary Scene in South Africa

If the names Jamie, Gordon, Nigel, or Yotam mean anything to you, they indicate that the foodie halls of fame are dominated by men. Not so in South Africa, however, as more women rise to the top of the local food chain. We celebrate a selection of South Africa's culinary queens.



Whether you've just added to your growing collection of Jamie Oliver cookbooks or enjoyed another episode of Masterchef Australia with its history of male-centric judges, there's been a substantial gap where women are concerned.

Surprisingly, in South Africa, chef Peter Tempelhoff notes that the scene is visibly more diverse than this. The founder of restaurants such as FYN and *beyond* has surrounded himself with a close-knit team of female leaders, from his pastry division to head chef positions. Shaping the discourse of food in South Africa is by no means a female-only

role, but a handful of women are making waves in the scene.

For **Lorna Maseko**, pushing boundaries as a woman of colour is a tremendous honour. Having grown up in one of Johannesburg's biggest townships, the self-taught celebrity chef, media personality, and author of *Celebrate with Lorna Maseko* is also the first black ballerina to ever perform a principal role in South African theatres. Culinary fame came to Lorna when she made the top six in *Celebrity Masterchef SA*. Maseko also won two Gourmand World Cookbook Awards and has recently launched her cooking show - *Homegrown Tastes South Africa* - on BBC Lifestyle. Her goal is to give rise to other women in the industry.

Julia du Toit, Head Chef at *beyond*, is one of them. Eight years after starting her culinary journey, she was selected to represent the restaurant with a stint in Lyon, France, working in the Michelin-starred restaurant L'Atelier des Augustins. While there, her menu dedicated to author Deon Meyer highlighted the diversity of South African food, which she says "draws on flavours from around the world





that result in signature combinations.” While putting SA on the culinary map, she’s also hoping her visit cemented a reputation for *beyond* in France. When she’s not developing menus for a Michelin-starred restaurant, her everyday superpower is her unerring sense of calm and her organisation skills. “If I’m the one person in the kitchen who remains calm, then everyone else knows to stay calm too,” she notes.

Michelle Elliot, Head Pastry Chef, alongside Julia, manages a team of five like a well-oiled machine. Having worked at La Colombe and the Cape Grace prior, she brings both experience and inspiration to the fore. For her, proving that women can hold their own in professional kitchens and inspiring other young women to follow is what brings her joy. That, and creating a dessert that keeps bringing diners back.

For **Jessica Saurwein**, winemaker, and founder of Saurwein Wines, winemaking is a sensual process, one to which she feels women are naturally attuned. In the seven years since starting with three barrels of Pinot Noir, Jessica has received multiple accolades from critics, with her 2019 Chi Riesling being dubbed “possibly the best Riesling in South Africa”. She approaches her craft with as little intervention as possible,



resulting in wines that channel the natural balance of the grapes and the nuances of their terroir. Her Nom, Chi and Om wines are now available in 13 countries globally, and all carry symbolic meaning – named in honour of ancestry and spirituality.

Having begun her journey as a runner at La Colombe, **Jennifer Hugé** has resolutely climbed the ranks to General Manager and co-owner at FYN

restaurant. While it has taken almost two decades, Jennifer attributes her experience in various front-of-house positions as the backbone of her inherent understanding of what's needed at every level. "I tend to thrive under stress, and I 'love' the challenge of an unhappy customer, having them leave with a smile feels special," she says. Being called upon by two of the industry's top chefs

to collectively open FYN is almost as big an honour as being the recipient of the 2016 & 2019 Eat Out John Psillos Award for Outstanding Contribution to Service.

"The stigma should be broken that alpha males should run all kitchens." At just 29 years old, **Bea Malherbe** was recently appointed as FYN's new Head Chef. Having climbed the ladder from trainee, she is a driven leader who brings a kind-hearted spirit to a harsh environment. When she's not ensuring that guests ultimately have the best experience possible, you'll find her climbing Table Mountain, her other love. Thanks to her farm upbringing, Bea has an innate respect for the journey of food. "It's our responsibility as chefs to treat every ingredient with respect, thinking about the people before us, and thinking about those who will come after us," she notes.

"The culinary industry has developed a hard edge thanks to names such as Gordon Ramsay and Marco Pierre White. But we need a softer touch. We need a generation of kitchen leaders with empathy; the more women in leading roles we have, the more it'll be an attractive industry for the younger generation to enter into," Tempelhoff says. 🍷



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