

Female family heritage Cooked into contemporary cuisine



By [Lauren Hartzenberg](#)

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Nestled among the display of artisanal goods at the V&A's Watershed you'll find [Cooked](#), a quaint eatery serving up traditional Middle Eastern and Mediterranean fare infused with a modern twist, courtesy of owner and chef Lindy Levy.



The food at Cooked symbolises a strong sense of tradition and family. Using recipes passed down through four generations of women, Levy adopts a 'gourmet street food' approach to cooking, focusing on creating homely, unpretentious meals that's made from scratch every day. Expect homemade pies, freshly baked bagels and khoubiz flat bread with toppings, and borscht soup that Levy learned to make from her grandmother Tsilla.

In the spirit of [Women's Month](#), Levy discusses her business journey, and her passion for food, family and a busy kitchen.

Tell us a little bit about yourself and your background.

I started a paper and textile screen printing business when I was 24 and living in Harare, Zimbabwe. The business grew from a single garage at home, to a factory employing over 200 people. We exported product all over the globe, and were the first privately-owned enterprise to achieve Fair Trade status for our commitment to employee empowerment, amongst other things.

I have always been creative, hands on and passionate in my endeavours, and Cooked is the culmination of many years of business experience, combined with my creativity and passion for cooking.



■ ***How did your love for cooking develop?***

I come from a background where family and tradition are cherished and celebrated, and what better way to do this than through the sharing of a meal at the family table! Some of my most cherished childhood memories are of the time spent helping my Bobba (granny) and mother in the kitchen, as they went about the magic of preparing a special family meal.

The creative process and the 'honesty' of working with my hands to create delicious but 'uncomplicated' food, and then sharing it with the people I care about, has always been at the heart of my love for cooking.

■ ***Tell us about the food you serve at Cooked and the family heritage involved in your creations.***

My recipes, which have been passed down matrilineally through the ages, from my great grandmother, grandmother and mother, tell the stories of their lives through the tastes and smells, and, whilst I love and respect the strong sense of tradition that these recipes symbolise, I have 'infused' them with my contemporary twist that makes them unique to Cooked.

My grandparents are descendants from Eastern Europe and I married into a family with Middle Eastern roots. Culminating in a truly special mix of recipes and flavours. The food that I serve whether at home or at Cooked is a reflection of this. Borscht didn't just make its way onto the 'pot special' menu at Cooked because it's tasty. It's there because my grandmother Tsilla who grew up in Lithuania taught me how to make it when I was little, along with the baked cheesecake, latkes and other favourites.

I thrive on the energy and buzz of a busy kitchen, of the adrenaline crash after a hectic service, and the camaraderie and special bonds that are forged in a commercial kitchen environment. I also believe that my hands-on approach makes all the difference.

Being there everyday and creating a menu that I love, including the creative flexibility of seasonal, weekly and even daily specials, affords me the opportunity to make everything from scratch just the way I like it. From the pickles to the bagels - it's all freshly made in our little space... daily.

■ ***How did Cooked end up at the V&A Watershed, and would you say it was a good move?***

My journey to The Watershed started a few years ago after having a Cooked stall at a few of Cape Town's food markets. I was aware of The Watershed development from early on, and believed that my concept of producing freshly made, 'real' food, in-house, for a café/restaurant was in keeping with the ethos of the design and handmade products of the Watershed... gourmet street food.

We started off as a 'pop-up' stall in The Watershed in December 2014, having to quickly find our feet, in the adjustment from weekly food market environment, into a more structured, daily environment right in the middle of 'season'! From there on, there was no turning back, and we have consistently grown, month to month, year to year. Despite our success and concomitant growth, I have always tried to stay true to who I am and what I believe in, and most importantly to ensure that the passion remains.

At Cooked, we operate a little differently and have our own 'quirks' which our customers seem to enjoy and appreciate...we hope. I would like Cooked to feel like my own kitchen at home – when you're finished, please bring your plate to the kitchen! Our customers often come up to the hatch, with an empty plate and, the best part – a satisfied smile.

I am very proud to be a part of a local initiative that supports the incredible arts, crafts and design that South Africa, and the Western Cape in particular, has to offer. The Watershed is the perfect place to showcase this local talent and the management of the Waterfront have been very supportive in working with me as the business has grown and grown and grown. I am also very proud of the fact that, despite our very 'tourism focused' location, we have managed to develop a large local customer base.

In order to meet the increasing demand, we have plans to expand at our existing location, which will also give us the opportunity to further enhance the space as a local 'hang out'.



▣ ***What are your thoughts on Cape Town's culinary scene at the moment?***

Cape Town is truly a culinary delight on all levels and it is always a treat for me to get out and explore and experience the hidden, and not so hidden gems. Not surprisingly, I am particularly interested in the smaller, owner-run establishments where passion for good, honest, delicious food is the primary driver. The growth of organic markets and the strong focus on seasonal and local produce is really exciting and I am happy to be able to both support and be a part of it.

▣ ***What has been the biggest challenge on your business journey so far?***

Finding the balance between work and family remains a constant juggling act. As you can gather, family is very important to me, and on the other hand, running a food business, seven days a week is not for the faint hearted. Apologies for the cliché, but it is the challenges that push me to the next level and force me to think creatively and laterally about how to overcome them.



▣ ***What is your recipe for success?***

1 x cup passion

2 x tablespoons husband's support

3 x teaspoons children's support

Mix all of the ingredients together, and knead until the mixture feels just right.

Leave to rise until it's roughly doubled in size.

Bake.

Serve with love and a pinch of salt!

🍷 **What is your message for Women's Month?**

My message is to embrace the present, trust your intuition, seek joy daily, and treat all with respect.

Follow the Cooked journey and keep up to date with daily specials on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).

ABOUT LAUREN HARTZENBERG

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