

Big Easy Durban chef shares her culinary adventures

Big Easy Durban Winebar & Grill by Ernie Els is on the eve of its first anniversary. Head chef Janine Fourie shares her passion for cooking, a new menu, and more.



Janine Fourie

International perspective

Head Chef, Janine Fourie has travelled the world and cooked and tasted a multitude of meals in the nearly 20 years of her culinary career.

“London made the biggest impression on me,” Chef Janine says. “It is such a cosmopolitan city. I moved there just after I graduated and thought I knew a lot about food and cooking – but realised I didn’t.

“Meeting and interacting with other nationalities completely changed my perspective on what international food is all about.”

Chef Fourie has worked in Nigeria (where she tasted cane-rat stew) and the Maldives and Cambodia (where she ate crickets). She has also visited countries in Asia, South America, Europe and even Antarctica during three years working aboard a luxury cruise liner.

“Another very odd delicacy I tasted was Balut (a developing chicken embryo which is boiled and eaten from the shell) in the Philippines.”

Reflecting on the first 12 months

As Big Easy Durban approaches its first anniversary in October, the bubbly chef reflects on the past 12 months. “While compiling the new seasonal menu I was looking back at our first menu and remembering how the restaurant started off as just an empty shell – it is fascinating how it has evolved.

“I believe our approach to food – keeping it simple and pure, in a homely and inviting ambiance – is what makes The Big Easy so unique. Also, the input we receive from Ernie Els himself - he is modest and down-to-earth and I think that comes across in the restaurant’s vibe.”

Elements of Spring

Although the firm favourites remain on the menu, Chef Fourie has introduced eleven new dishes, all of which embody elements of Spring.

“I’ve kept things light and fresh and created dishes with a combination of flavours to add a different approach to the way one thinks about food. A ‘light’ meal doesn’t always have to be fish with salad.”

Being innovative was another inspiration for the new menu. “I like taking the basics – something simple – and adding my own style and tweaking dishes,” says chef Fourie. She quotes the Gnu Carpaccio as an example. “I have taken the popular starter invented by Giuseppe Cipriani from Harry’s Bar in Venice, and localised it using thinly-sliced wildebeest venison, served with beetroot and apple chutney, horseradish crème, celery and toasted pumpkin seeds.”

In other dishes, a traditional tomato soup is transformed into a mouth-watering roasted jam tomato and peppadew soup served with nutty Indezi goats cheese truffles and olive tapenade. And then there is the six-hour slow-roasted beef short ribs in an anise-spiced glaze with charred leeks and a creamy horseradish mash just crying out to be tasted.

A new addition to the dessert menu is a deliciously decadent pudding of milk-tart profiterole – very indulgent – served with cream or ice-cream.

“I don’t like to copy dishes that others have produced. I prefer to explore my own creativity highlighting local ingredients,” Chef Fourie explains. “Working in the hospitality industry is not just about providing good food,” she says. “It’s challenging and allows one to stretch oneself, share knowledge, build personal relationships with fellow staff and be able to guide and mentor them.

Culinary sounding boards

“Being mentored and having a sounding-board is so important in one’s career,” Chef Janine adds. “I am fortunate enough to be able to call internationally-acclaimed Michelin-star Belgian chef, Steve van Remoortel (who I worked with in London and is now based in Switzerland), at any time for advice. Also my good friend Nadia Louw Smith, executive chef and manager of Clos Malverne restaurant in Devon Valley, Stellenbosch – we graduated at the same time from the Granger Bay Hotel School in Cape Town. She is an excellent sounding board on issues and challenges. We studied together, worked together and have always been best friends – I value her counsel.”

Any restaurateur’s primary aim is to ensure their diners have enjoyed their meal. “Having guests who don’t want to leave a function, or who linger at the table way after the meal is over is the best compliment ever.”

Chef Fourie admires “anyone in the food industry who is willing to take risks. To accomplish something and not to fail – that is my aim. I always need the little voice on my shoulder to push me on, to take the risk and not to fail.”

Restaurant trends

Regarding restaurant trends, Chef Fourie believes that smaller portions should only be served if they are part of a

Dégustation menu (where the diner samples tiny portions of all of a chef's signature dishes in one sitting – or at one of Big Easy Durban's wine-pairings).

“But if it is a main meal, portions should be bigger and more substantial. The last thing we want is for our guests to stop off at the nearest burger outlet because they are still hungry.”

Chef Fourie's culinary journey has certainly been eventful since her first food memories of helping out in the family kitchen as a tiny tot peeling and chopping veggies and pressing down the biscuit dough with a fork. Her adventure is far from over with future foodie destinations on her bucket list being Greece (“for the flavours”), Nepal (“for their different approach to food”) and Italy (“well... because it is Italy – renowned for its cuisine”).

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