

Q&A w/ Annette Kesler and Chania Morritt-Smith

By  Juanita Pienaar

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The Distell Inter Hotel Challenge has been labelled by many as the 'Oscars of the hotel world' and has become a red-letter annual event on the hotel industry calendar.

The high-energy organisers and founders of the Distell Inter Hotel Challenge programme, Annette Kesler and Chania Morritt-Smith, believe the most important achievement of this annual event is that hotels are persuaded to great lengths to encourage and mentor young talent in an industry that plays a crucial role in South Africa's tourist industry.

We chat with this creative duo and business partners of Showcook to find out more about the event, how it was started and what it means to the tourism and hospitality industry.

■ ***How did the Distell Inter Hotel Challenge get started and why do you think events like these are important for the industry?***

The Distell Inter Hotel Challenge is in every true sense of the phrase, a programme of far-reaching social responsibility objectives. The primary objective of the competition is to create and sustain a strong national base of top-quality chefs, bakers and wine stewards, and more recently concierges.

This, in turn, plays a huge role in South Africa's tourism industry. In many ways, it is in their hands that the future of our hospitality industry lies, not only as a valuable source of national income but also as one of the key contributors to the international brand that is South Africa.

■ ***How do you go about organising such a huge event like this?***

Ahead of the regional start to the Inter Hotel Challenge, each competing hotel staged a rigorous and highly competitive in-house search for their own best young chefs, bakers and wine stewards before putting forward one from each category to compete against the other hotels.



Annette Kesler. © Showcook



The Distell Inter Hotel challenge commenced at the beginning of the year and continues with events over a six-month period. The young apprentice professionals – all of them employed in various capacities within the hotels – are put through comprehensive and thorough orientation workshops.

Within their regions, they experience talks, demonstrations and lectures from senior lecturers from various culinary academies, top executive chefs, sommeliers, bakers, food authors and hospitality industry experts who have already found success in South Africa and around the world.

They meet the partners and judges behind the challenge and interface with the farmers and producers who supply the food ingredients rigorously selected for their adherence to the best local quality can offer – along with wine and spirits from Distell before being given a specific brief for the June cook-offs, that are staged around the country.

List a few things that you think the industry can improve on.

Kesler: The hotel industry is the heartbeat of tourism. It is essential that we maintain the high standards of our hospitality industry but we also have to make sure those same high standards are maintained going into the future. In order to ensure that, we need to have strong and sustained skills and upliftment programme where our young talent are mentored and given the opportunity to grow.

Morritt-Smith: The Distell Inter Hotel Challenge contributes tangibly to the hotel industry itself. It is a unique event where hotels become a unified force. Although the industry is highly competitive from within, at the end of the day they all want the same thing – to ensure a strong and viable hospitality industry to encourage a strong brand South Africa. Our best chance of achieving that is by doing it together.

■ ***Are there any winners from previous years' competitions who stand out to you and why?***

Tinashe Nyamudoka and Siya Molefe of the One&Only, Cape Town. Tinashe won Wine Steward of the Year in 2013 and today is the head sommelier for The Test Kitchen. While Siya has just returned from Amsterdam with NH Hotels and already is bringing new energy to his peers with some innovative ideas!

■ ***Looking forward, what is next on your agenda?***

The finale of the five regional launches at the Twelve Apostles Hotel & Spa Grape to Glass where all the Wine Stewards descend on the Cape attend workshops and lectures with the Cape Wine Academy and top sommeliers, plus meet their respective winemakers, lunch with them in the wine lands and forge new relationships.

Ultimately the national winners of the 7th annual Distell Inter Hotel Challenge will be announced at a glittering gala awards event at the Southern Sun Cape Sun on Saturday 3 August in Cape Town.

ABOUT JUANITA PIENAAR

Juanita is the editor of the marketing & media portal on the Bizcommunity website. She is also a contributing writer.

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