

# CHEFS IN THE SPOTLIGHT



The Luxe-Jonsson Workwear Restaurant Awards celebrate SA's top culinary offerings.

Muse's Thuveshnie Govender chats to the chefs in the winners' seats; Culinary Rising Star Jess van Dyk, Chef of the Year Johannes Richter, and Culinary Innovation Chef Wandile Mabaso.



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At Kuka, we are passionate about the good things of life – food, drink, laughing, friends and family.

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Our extensive wine list includes some hidden Cape gems not usually found on the tourist route while our cocktails and heady mixes are designed to enhance your meal experience.



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## JESS

From uncertain career beginnings to owning her restaurant Post & Pepper, Jess van Dyk is proving why she is a rising star. Born and raised in the Northern Cape, Jess is now part

of a new world. From sous chef to head chef of the award-winning La Colombe, to a year in a creative food agency, to now being Post & Pepper's sole owner and head chef. Jess is solidifying her merits ambitiously, including her wins at the 2023 Luxe

Restaurant Awards for Rising Culinary Star and New Restaurant of the Year, and she is not stopping there.

### Building up a chef

I worked hard and partied hard. I was living and breathing the chef life – and loved every second of it. The pressure,



the chaos, the discipline, the chase to perfection... Everything! I also worked with incredible hardcore chefs, some of today's industry giants. I am so grateful to have started my journey when cheffing was still as robust and gross as it was – it trained me to be the best version of a chef I could be.

### Lesson well learned

In a kitchen/restaurant, your work is never done. There is, and always will be, something else that needs prepping, cleaning or packing. As an overthinker who is quick to analyse day-to-day things in the kitchen, I always find things that need doing. My personal life, however, is another

story. I slack off but then tire myself out thinking up a massive production schedule at home.

### Advice for young, upcoming chefs

You shouldn't aim to stand out. You should be the one people rely on and trust with prep or in service. The more reliable you are as a chef or with prep, the more you will be tasked with work to do, the more you will learn, and the better you will get. **Do all the jobs people don't want to do.** Work fast, be clean, organised, focused and interested.

I think your job as a young chef is not to be creative but to be the hands and backbone of the chef who is the creative in that kitchen. Play the long game; if you help them achieve the picture they create in their mind, you will become the standout.

### Motivation, interest and creativity

You have to really love it – the industry, cooking and food. If you focus too much on what others are doing, you will lose a sense of self. Stick to what you believe in; cook the food you want to eat and the food you love to see. It's a hard life to live, so it only makes sense to do it if you challenge yourself and do what makes you happy.

### Dreams and aspirations

I am extremely fortunate in how well Post & Pepper has done up until now. I am happy to have a restaurant the staff and regulars love coming to. If there is one more thing I dream of, it would be to be recognised internationally – no matter how small

the acknowledgement might be.

### IN THE HOT SEAT

**I would love to cook for** my grandmother. She was a phenomenal cook but had Alzheimer's since I was young. Unfortunately, this meant she couldn't appreciate my cooking when I eventually started my culinary journey. It would be amazing to sit around a table exchanging stories about dishes and recipes and techniques and to cook her a meal of my own.

**My last meal on earth would be** crispy and sticky chicken wings, pizza (it doesn't have to be the world's best, just something crispy and cheesy), and lastly, pasta (preferably my mom's lasagna, but beggars can't be choosers, and I've rarely met a pasta I didn't like).

**My chef idols are** Marco Pierre White and Clare Smyth.

**My fave South African foods are** vetkoek & curry mince, droëwors, *ystervarkies* (aka lamingtons – although some might argue that's the Australian name).

**My top 3 ingredients are** butter, garlic, crispy shallots.

**If I could offer any cooking tip,** always brown or caramelise your meat, vegetables etc., it gives them the sweetest and best flavour.

**I cannot live without** my knife, *lappie* (kitchen cloth) and a nice cast iron or nonstick pan.

Jessica is Head Chef at Post & Pepper in Stellenbosch's Old Post Office. 021 203 5165.

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# JOHANNES

Diversity, sustainability and hospitality, that’s what you can expect from Chef Johannes Richter. With his roots in KwaZulu-Natal and using his international experience, Johannes has been making waves in the culinary industry. His restaurant, The LivingRoom at Summerhill Guest Estate, is no stranger to awards, and while Johannes won Chef of The Year, his restaurant nailed the Sustainability Award.

Proud and passionate, Johannes advocates sustainable eating, organic farming, and sourcing local produce. All the while, creating delicious, unique dishes that inspire warmth and happiness.

**The start**  
It wasn’t a dish but a love for ingredients and food growing up. It all came together after being exposed to self-sustaining practices on a farm through my grandparents and visiting food markets. That’s how I entered the culinary world and fell in love with food.

**A journey towards sustainable eating**  
For us, there has never been a way around sustainability. Our core

idea and thoughts were always about setting up a sustainable restaurant. It’s governed every decision we have made, and it continues to oversee every future decision. We are always focused on how we can reduce our environmental impact, use more local suppliers and use crops that have less impact on their surroundings by being more drought-resistant and using less water etc. It has always been tied into what we do.

**Tips to minimise food waste**  
If you really want to be more sustainable, what makes more sense is to use suppliers and farmers closer to home, and eat more vegetables. A healthy diet doesn’t mean you have to limit or abstain from eating meat, just reduce it and be more conscious of where it’s from and how it’s reared. The more locally grown vegetables you have, the better and more sustainable it is. Dignifying produce and working with it respectfully is a prerequisite. If you look at crops in that manner and want to make the most of what you have, then food waste gets minimised automatically. Nose to tail. Root to shoot.

**Plant-based ingredients to stock up**  
I’m stocking up with endemic grains

– sorghum, teff and millet. Our first shoyu to be made with indigenous grains and pulses is turning six years old. That’s one of the things I am really enjoying right now – using our homemade miso and shoyu to add a bit of umami to our vegetable dishes. Otherwise, it’s always difficult to pinpoint a single ingredient because we are so spoilt with what is grown here. Also, what we get from our local farmers depends on seasonality; this year, we’ve had amazing purple sweet potatoes that we are featuring in our barbeque bush pig dish, which is really hitting home. On the protein side, we’ve just gotten in our first batch of pigeon peas, which we are pairing up in one of our more spring-inspired dishes with some cauliflower and curry aromatics. Keeping it local and close to home has always been the driving force, and that’s the inspiration for all of our plant-protein and meat-protein-based dishes.

**Heritage and food**  
On paper, I’m German, but I grew up in Durban. I did my training and professional career development in Germany, and it has given me a lot on the way. But my upbringing in Durban, the diversity here and the nature of the city made me who I am. Johanna, my



wife, and I enjoy passing that on to our kids. Giving Durban’s cultural identity a platform to shine from a food point of view has always been dear to me. Finding a way of showcasing all of my heritage – traditional but a modern interpretation, is a privilege and gives us a lot of joy and our identity.

**Homebase**  
When we started, we were sure of one thing, we didn’t want to be stiff or daunting. We always wanted to give the warmth of being in someone’s home and treated as private guests. We are now able to replicate that through our team. Our front-of-house and kitchen teams really have that down. The warmth of being in the house I grew up in is showcased through our team and my mother, Christine, and



wife, Johanna, who are the main hosts of our guests.

**Beyond the chef**  
When I am not cooking for a living, we generally light a fire, open a couple of nice bottles of wine and enjoy the downtime with good food. A favourite snack is difficult because there’s so much. On the regular, it’s freshly cooked pasta... we eat a lot of that, or just a good steak on the braai, thinly sliced with lemon juice and salt – snacking away with a nice glass of wine in my hand. Fairly simple, down to earth, no big stories.

**IN THE HOT SEAT**  
**If I could cook for anyone** and serve anything, it would be for Johanna, my wife. We have little time together despite running a business together. I’d



serve steak frites with bearnaise and a nice salad.

**My last meal on earth** would be truffle risotto or porcini risotto.  
**My top 3 favourite ingredients are** Max’s truffle from Willowdale, chicken from Blue Orange farm, the vegetables that Deon and Chisomo grow for us are unbelievable.  
**My chef idols are** Renè Redzepi and Ferran Adrià.  
**My favourite South African foods are** top-quality biltong, boerewors, and bean bunny chow. I also love a good biryani, dombolo cooked in a stew and offal – a tripe stew.

Johannes is Executive Chef at The LivingRoom at Summerhill Guest Estate, Pinetown. 063 529 1966.



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# WANDILE

Born and raised in Soweto, Wandile Mabaso's love and appreciation for cooking grew into a ladder of milestones, achievements, and experience. From his first job at Nando's to gaining international experience in Michelin-star restaurants in New York and Paris, to owning and heading his own establishment, Les Créatifs, in South Africa. He's been recognised on a global scale, honoured with the highest award for a chef in France, The Culinary Excellence of the College de France. And locally, won Chef of the Year at the South African 2022 Luxe Restaurant Awards. This year he has won the Culinary Innovation Award.

## Culinary innovation

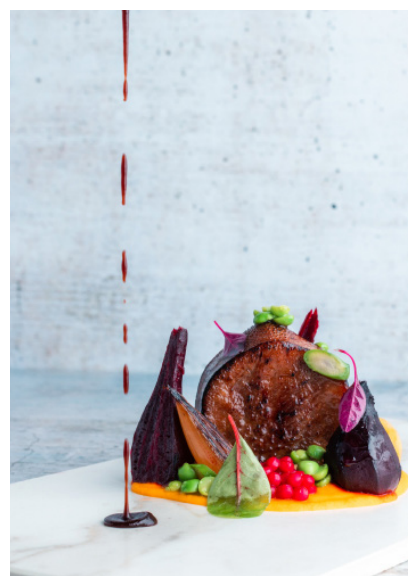
For me, innovation means taking what I have learned and experienced, looking into my cultural background and the current state of our industry; and then using resources to create something that speaks to the future of dining. I transform these ideas into storytelling by using food and changing their form, shape, textures and flavours that translate the story I want to tell.

## Mentors who paved the way

Chef Olivier Reginensi still is my true mentor. He made me think about cooking differently. He is very technical in translating flavours, developing new cooking techniques and understanding the balance of flavours. Alain Ducasse opened up all his international connections for me to learn and experience more French cuisine. He also taught me how to be an entrepreneur in the business of food. Most importantly, he taught me to be consistent and champion my cultural ingredients. Most of all, I learned the confidence to cook at the highest level.

## Les Créatifs and the stellar menu process

The reason for a frequently changing menu was initially to keep myself and the team growing, experimenting and trying to find that unique universal flavour. I'm inspired by current affairs, seasonal ingredients and people around me daily. The process starts with identifying new ingredients, which trigger a new concept. Then, I introduce the dish to the menu and keep evolving it for two weeks until I feel like it's reached its full potential. The following week I remove it from the menu and start the process again with a new dish.



## Moving through tough times

I have faced many challenges. For every win, there are nine losses that the public doesn't know about. What keeps me going is the belief in that 10% win and how it can elevate me. I have accepted the hardships to be part of the process of success and eventually winning. When I feel like it's the end of the world, my passion for the craft keeps me motivated.

## Encouragement and advice for the culinary youth

Choose where you want to train and think carefully about the direction you want to take in the industry. Commit to it and strive to build that 10 000 hours of training. Stay humble. Forget about the popularity and money during this process. The main focus is acquiring the right skills.

**Make cooking your way of life, not just a job or a career.**

## The future

My goal for the near future is to build Les Créatifs into a superpower restaurant that can compete globally. I also want to develop the best team in the country, mentor and train upcoming chefs to be future leaders in the industry and grow my brand on the global stage.

## Favoured cuisine

French cuisine is the base of all my cooking. I am one of the few new-

generation chefs trained in classical French cuisine with an old-school classic chef. This has added an element of rigour, savoir-faire and technical precision to my cooking.

## Biggest impact on your style and taste for cooking

The use of spices. I started cooking with spices as early as 10 years old. The influence is from my family's cooking, which used spice because of our Indian influence in South Africa. I incorporate spice into all my dishes.

## Comfort food

Lamb soup or fish soup. I have always been a fan of soups. Besides the health benefits, broths always bring comfort to my soul.

## IN THE HOT SEAT

**If I could cook for one person it would be** Shaun Carter; I would research his favourite childhood foods and reinvent the dish he grew up eating.

**If I could cook with only 3 ingredients, they would be** garlic, thyme, and onion.

**Favourite fast-food** is Nando's.

**My last meal on earth would be** lamb curry and rice.

**If I wasn't a chef, I would be** a film director or writer.

**My chef idol** is Alain Ducasse. 🍴

Wandile owns Les Créatifs at Hobart in Bryanston, Johannesburg. 067 254 6976.



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