

Go Wild

At his restaurant Foliage in Franschhoek, chef Chris Erasmus uses foraged ingredients for his original dishes

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At first sight Chris Erasmus might be pretty intimidating. Rampant beard, tattoos. He looks more like a Hell's Angel than the eco-friendly chef he is.

He laughs and flings a red and white checked dish towel over his shoulder rather

than a bike chain, and confesses to riding a scooter not a motorbike. "It costs about R40 in fuel a week and keeps my carbon footprint small," he says.

In the culinary world Chris is an original thinker, a maverick. In his unique way, with exceptional cooking skills, he brings together all the New Age ideas about



organic food, foraging and sustainability, to create one extraordinary package at his main street restaurant in South Africa's gourmet capital of Franschhoek.

The restaurant could be described as contemporary rustic, for it has all those modern surfaces, glazed concrete, sleek, stainless-steel kitchen and bold lines, but



in keeping with the three forests where Chris forages, wood from poplar, oak and pine bring warmth and patina into the mix. It is arty, too, with delightful miniature bronze sculptures on each table. These are a spillover from IS Art gallery next door, where his wife Alisha works.

If you've had any doubts about how to eat more organically or if you grapple with the contradictions about how to live a sustainable life, they should vanish when you meet a man who lives the life, out of the (packaging) box so to speak. "It is going back to a more personal way of living and eating," he maintains.

He is undoubtedly a modern thinker but prefers some older ways. "I can't bear to see people sitting on their cellphones in the restaurant. I love power cuts because everyone goes offline and there are candles that light only the company and the food in front of you."

Chris owes a lot to his mom who brought him and his three siblings up singlehandedly on a Karoo farm. She taught him how to live sustainably and live off the land. She still couriered down fig preserve and quince jelly to him from Hofmeyr where she owns two guest houses.

At Foliage, the menu is tweaked daily depending on what Chris' two-hour morning and evening foragings bring in. Today in the misty rain he takes us to a pine forest, but the mushroom pickings

are few – a dry winter – only one pine bolete turns up in the first forage. Sorrel and dandelions are, however, in abundance, growing strongly through a thick carpet of pine needles. He picks a tiny, round, black berry from a nightshade bush. Of course, we hesitate, with 'deadly' springing to mind, but then you have to trust a man who serves up wild produce daily. The taste is extraordinary, tomato-ish with a huge kick of liquorice at the end. It is so strong you want to open your mouth to let in the air.

Chris knows his plants and has been

foraging for 12 years. He keeps a logbook of what grows where and when, from the mushrooms, dandelions and sorrel to the bramble berries, the buchu and the nightshade (of the benign kind). He keeps his treasured places secret and won't tell us where his oak forest is. He forages a lot on the wine farms in Franschhoek and frequently organises terroir pairings at the restaurant, pairing wines with dishes made using ingredients he has foraged from a particular wine farm.

"I don't read cook books, only books

OPPOSITE PAGE: On a misty morning, Chef Chris Erasmus forages in a pine forest. INSET: Wild dandelions, fruits of the hunt. ABOVE LEFT: At Foliage, an artful display of wine buckets underneath a portrait from the gallery next door. BELOW: Foliage is a step or two from Franschhoek's main road. BOTTOM: The restaurant interior has a contemporary rustic feel.





ABOVE: Xolani Bradley Dywil welcomes guests to Foliage. TOP: Foraged greens in the kitchen.

on trees and shrubs and ferns,” he says. Ranged on the shelves around his beautiful spacious kitchen are bottles and jars of dried mushrooms and herbs. There is not a commercial label in sight. Here is alchemy, and it’s not surprising, because this most skilled of chefs first trained as a chemical engineer and then a dentist. And he knows how flavours can be enhanced through various processes in the kitchen and how to infuse his food

with a complexity of tastes.

“I also barter a lot with all the lady gardeners in Franschoek. There are wonderful gardens here. And I do a bit of ‘gorilla gardening’ myself. The plot next to the restaurant had been neglected and had a weedy lawn. With permission from the owner who was renting the place out, we pulled up the lawn and planted vegetables,” he says. He foraged all the salad leaves for 600 guests at the recent Nederberg Auction.

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“Local restaurant suppliers are so conventional, so boring, which is why I started foraging in the first place. We need to wake up in this country. I think the next protein will be insects. I just can’t abide the thought of stall-fed animals and what they go through,” he says.

“The old South African way of eating involved a lot of salt and sugar for preserving,” says Chris. “We try to cut the sugar. I don’t really have a sweet tooth and we have low-sugar desserts.”

Chris did a six weeks stint at Denmark’s world-famous restaurant Noma, and his career path has taken him through the kitchens of our top restaurants, from Le Quartier Français across the road to the Cape Grace, and to Pierneef at La Motte.

And now he’s out in the wild finding his own path to culinary fame. ■

Map reference F2 see inside back cover

Foliage
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Honey and Apple-cured Cape Mullet with Tomato Ragout, and Dandelion and Pumpkin Seed Butter

Serves 8

Cured Mullet

- 6 Cape mullet, filleted
- ¼ cup honey
- ¼ cup lime juice
- ¼ cup apple juice
- wild flowers for garnish

Tomato Ragout

- 500g vine cherry tomatoes
- 1 tbs olive oil
- ¼ tsp flaky sea salt
- ¼ cup good green olives
- 4 fennel bulbs, stems and leaves removed
- 2 tbs butter
- pinch salt
- 2 cups fennel stock
- 1 tsp chopped fennel leaves
- 1 tsp lemon juice

Dandelion, Vanilla and Pumpkin Seed Butter

- 1 fennel bulb, stalks intact
- ½ vanilla pod, split and seeds scraped off
- 200g salted butter
- 3 tbs pumpkin seeds, toasted and chopped
- ¼ tsp salt

METHOD Mix the honey, lime juice and apple juice and pour over the mullet fillets in a plastic container. Leave to cure overnight, remove from the brine and fry for 30 seconds in a hot non-stick pan, skin-side down.

For the ragout, preheat oven to 90°C. Blanch the tomatoes until the skin comes loose and refresh in ice water. Peel tomatoes and toss in a bowl with the olive oil and flaky salt. Place on a tray lined with wax paper and put in the oven for 3-4 hours until shrivelled and semi-dehydrated. Remove from the oven, stir in the olives and refrigerate until needed. Heat a large saucepan and add the butter. Slice the fennel in half lengthways, season and add to the butter. Fry until dark golden brown, then simmer over low heat until the fennel is just tender. Strain off the excess liquid and add with all the ragout ingredients to a saucepan. Cook over high heat until the vegetables are warm and glazed.

For the butter, juice the fennel and place in a saucepan. Add the vanilla seeds and pod and cook over medium heat until ¾ reduced. Add the pumpkin seeds and remove from

the heat. Place the butter in another saucepan and cook until light brown and nutty flavoured. Add to the fennel juice and blend with a hand blender until smooth. (Don’t worry if the sauce splits out, it’s even better that way). Add salt to taste and a squeeze of lemon if needed.

Garnish with dandelion petals, young sprouts from the fennel tops, toasted pumpkin seeds and flowers.

Wine suggestion La Motte Pierneef **Sauvignon Blanc**

Chef’s Tips

■ You can adapt this recipe into a cold salad by substituting the mullet for bokkems and the butter for olive oil in the sauce. Add some leaves and voila!

■ For the garnish, pick the petals of dandelion flowers, and use the young sprouts from fennel, as well as toasted pumpkin seeds and the flowers.

■ Deep fry pumpkin flowers stuffed with some of the olives and seeds, and coated with your choice of either breadcrumbs or batter.





Pumpkin and Ginger Soup with Nettle Pesto

Serves 8-10

Soup

- 1,8kg pumpkin, diced into 3cm chunks (or butternut)
- 140g brown sugar
- 40g fresh ginger, chopped
- 20g salt
- 150g butter
- 1 litre vegetable/chicken stock
- 200g cream

Nettle Pesto

- 250g stinging nettle leaves (use gloves when you pick them)
- ½ cup pumpkin seeds, toasted
- 2 tbs olive oil
- ¼ tsp salt

METHOD Place all the soup ingredients except the stock and cream in a pot and secure the lid. Cook over low heat until the pumpkin is soft. Add stock and cream, bring to the boil and blend until smooth. Pass the soup through a sieve.

For the pesto, bring a large pot of water to the boil and cook the nettle for 1 minute. Strain and refresh the nettle in ice water. Strain off the water and squeeze dry the nettle. Place in a blender with the remaining ingredients and pulse until smooth.

Serve the soup hot or cold, with a tablespoon of pesto in each bowl.

Wine suggestion **Stony Brook The 'J'**

Chef's Tips

- Substitute nettle with basil or kale
- Dandelion pesto done this way is divine

Wild Mushroom Turkish Ciabatta

Makes 12 loaves

- 100g dried wild mushrooms, ground into a powder
- 1kg cake flour
- 1 litre cold water
- 10g dried yeast
- 1 tbs olive oil
- 30g sugar
- 30g salt

METHOD Preheat oven to 230°C. Place all the ingredients except the salt in a dough mixer with a paddle attachment. Mix on high speed for 8 minutes, add the salt and mix for 1 more minute (adding the salt too soon will result in a weak structure). Cover with a cloth and leave to prove until the dough has doubled in size. Place onto a floured surface, dust well with flour and cut into 15cm x 5cm rectangles using a dough cutter. Place onto floured baking trays and bake for 12 minutes. Cool on an oven rack.



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Fenugreek Roasted Pork Belly

Serves 4-5

- 1kg pork belly, skin on and rib bones removed
- 2 large carrots, chopped
- 2 onions, chopped
- 2 celery sticks, chopped
- 5 garlic cloves, chopped
- 4 bay leaves
- 3 sprigs rosemary
- 2 tbs salt
- 1 tsp ground fenugreek

METHOD Score the skin of the pork belly. Mix the salt and fenugreek and rub into the skin. Place the pork belly on the vegetables in a roasting dish and refrigerate overnight. Preheat oven to 200°C. Place the dish in the oven and roast for 35-45 minutes until the pork skin is crackled and the belly feels firm. Leave to rest for 15 minutes and carve (a serrated breadknife works best to get through the crackling).

To make a sauce, remove the pork and keep warm. Add 500ml chicken stock to the vegetables and cook until reduced by half. Pour through a sieve into a saucepan, pushing all the excess moisture through the sieve with the back of a large spoon. Add 2 tablespoons cream, season to taste and cook to desired thickness. Serve with whole roasted baby potatoes and thinly shaved fennel.

Wine suggestion *De Wetshof Nature in Concert Pinot Noir*



Bitter-sweet Chocolate and Mushroom Pot Plant

Makes 8 pot plants

Pastry

- 250g cake flour
- 1 tsp dried porcini powder
- 125g chopped walnuts
- pinch ground nutmeg
- 1 egg (65g)
- 150g soft butter

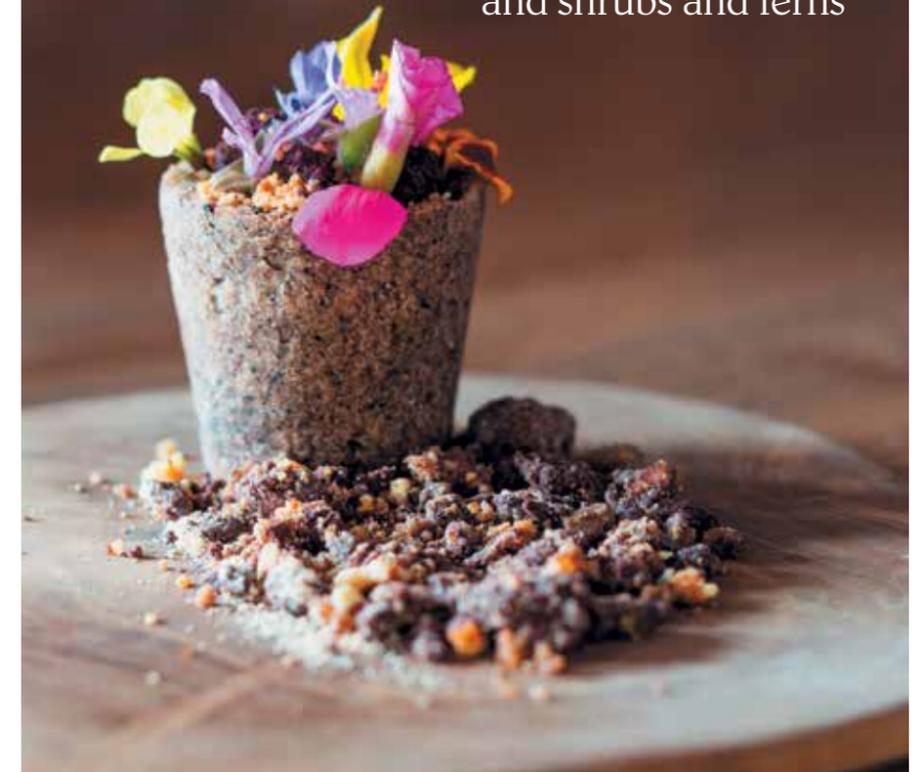
Filling

- 200g 70% couverture chocolate chopped
- 150g cream
- 50g milk
- 1 large egg (65g)

METHOD Preheat oven to 170°C. Knead all the pastry ingredients until smooth. Push the pastry into 100ml danielle moulds using your thumb, about 3mm thick. Line the pastry with thin foil, fill with dried beans or rice and bake for 12 minutes. Remove the beans, rice and foil and bake for a further 5 minutes.

To make the filling, place the chocolate in

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a mixing bowl. Bring the milk and cream to the boil and pour over the chocolate, stir to melt. Beat in the egg and pour the filling into the pastry. Bake at 105°C for 20 minutes until just set. Keep warm until ready to serve, remove from the moulds and serve with edible flowers.

Wine suggestion *Boekenhoutskloof Noble Late Harvest*

Chef’s Tips

■ We serve the chocolate pot with buchu ice cream and carrot-culture cream, but you can add your favourite ice cream.

■ The filling can also be used for a tart with a shortcrust pastry. Serve in wedges.

For Chris’ Tuna Tartare and Buchu Honeycomb recipes visit www.countrylife.co.za