

# The Earthy Gourmet

At The Werf restaurant on Boschendal, chef Christiaan Campbell loves to cook farm-to-table food with a surprise element

WORDS MYRNA ROBINS PICTURES DANIELA ZONDAGH AND SUPPLIED

“The Werf restaurant,” says chef Christiaan Campbell, “is a window to our farming practices.”

Expansively waving an arm at the three-hectare, organic veggie and herb garden at Boschendal farm in Franschhoek. Here we showcase the best of farm produce in exciting ways.”

His cuisine is both rustic and contemporary, reflecting the rhythm of the seasons. For instance, his creative treatment of poultry and meat sees chicken encased in focaccia, while beef rib is partly boned to resemble a giant lollipop.

We’re in the glass conservatory, a new addition to the back of the original 18th century Boschendal cellar, now restored and revamped to house the huge wine farms’s flagship restaurant, The Werf. The weather is perfect for the photographic shoot that has already begun, as Daniela Zondagh hauls her equipment to the terrace, seeking out perfect spots for shooting the main courses.

The rural tranquillity and historic ambience of the 300-year-old Boschendal estate have been enjoyed by visitors for decades but in recent years the estate had lost its gloss. So when word spread that new owners were investing heavily in ecological restoration, renovation and development, the surge of interest was intense.

Christiaan was appointed executive

chef late in 2014, so had little time to source ingredients, compile menus and train staff before new and existing venues opened earlier this year. But, as I know from experience, this quietly-spoken chef remains calm even when chaos rages around him.

I manage to drag him back to 1987 when he spent his two-year National Service in the navy’s catering section. Is this where his interest in cooking started? “Oh, long before that,” is his reply. “As a teenager I enjoyed helping my stepmother cook Sunday lunch in the kitchen. Getting my request granted to learn catering in the navy was wonderful luck as I used the two years to qualify.”

A short stint in a big hotel “did not make his heart sing” but Campbell’s career took off when the late Liz McGrath appointed him chef at The Cellars-Hohenhort hotel, then a small guest house. “I was left alone to cook and present three-course dinners to 30 diners every night – it was my biggest and best learning curve.”

Christiaan is a cheese maker of note and his cheeses became household names across South Africa and attracted many awards. I ask Christiaan what inspired his interest in cheese and his subsequent successful cheese making. “It was several things,” he says. “First, I felt like a change and wanted to try running my own business. My wife Moya and I were planning to start a family. Then came the magic of cheese making – how a few ingredients can be manipulated to produce



RIGHT: Boschendal’s culinary magician Christiaan Campbell with his favourite purple spinach. ABOVE: The farm’s original wine cellar houses Boschendal’s flagship The Werf restaurant. LEFT: Food garden manager Megan McCarthy transplants seedlings into the organic garden behind The Werf. BELOW: Taking a break from snail patrol, the ducks cool off under sprinklers in the garden.



such a variety of products.”

But he decided to return to the heat of the kitchen after the birth of his second son and, early in the new century, was appointed group executive chef of The Collection, the late Liz McGrath’s portfolio of four top Cape hotels. Some six years later he accepted the post of executive chef of the glamorous Delaire Graff Estate outside Stellenbosch. It was there, while chatting to a visiting chef from New York, that Christiaan’s latent interest in sustainable and humane production was sparked.

“He pointed out the benefits of producing beef naturally and I started questioning how all animals are reared and produce is grown. The subject impacted on our lives and Moya and I spent months researching the subject – and we still do.”

Ethical production of meat and poultry

and organically grown produce became principles that Christiaan embraces and practises. As they coincide with those of the new owners of Boschendal farm, a symbiotic partnership has resulted, using the mantra ‘naturally raised and grown’. While the goal of local, farm-to-table cuisine has largely been achieved, he admits it is still a work in progress.

“Beef is sourced from Boschendal’s free-ranging herd of Angus cattle which never spends time in stalls, while carcasses are kept in the farm’s own cold rooms and butchery. Food garden manager Megan McCarthy is dedicated to providing the kitchens with what she terms “honest food, high in nutrition... Call them sexy veggies if you want, or food with soul... They are grown bio-dynamically within a permaculture framework, with little



with exciting results. “We recently featured fermented cream in a starter of smoked chicken and tree tomato jelly, and presented a main course of fermented millet paired with butter-poached hake.”

On my way out, I admire some old-fashioned indigenous herbs, culinary and medicinal, that thrive in their containers. Christiaan smiles and says, “In the past, these huge farms had to be self-sufficient to survive. Now, we in the 21st century are heading that way, but this time, because we want to.” ■

Map reference F2 see inside back cover

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or no impact on the environment.”

Christiaan agrees wholeheartedly and says, “We chefs can have huge influence on how food is produced and it’s our responsibility to use this power for ethical treatment of animals and to protect our environment.”

The Werf restaurant incorporates current global gourmet trends of preserving veggies, meat and fish by curing, drying, smoking and pickling. It’s a return to roots, he explains, as chefs adapt techniques developed centuries before refrigeration became commonplace, applying them to unexpected ingredients. “Whereas we take for granted fermented items like yoghurt, buttermilk, soy sauce, the yeast-fermented malt that produces beer and the fermentation of grapes to produce wine, many of us are experimenting by giving uncommon dairy products and grains the fermentation treatment, sometimes

ABOVE: Characteristically calm and collected, Christiaan selects produce from the organic kitchen garden. TOP RIGHT: The stylish conservatory of The Werf restaurant looks onto the three-hectare produce garden. BELOW: The buffet table reflects The Werf’s Cape heritage.



## Smoked Salmon Gnocchi with Asparagus and Slow-cooked Egg

Serves 6

- 1 salmon trout (about 1.5kg)
- 500g coarse salt
- 100g fine sugar
- grated zest of a lemon, grapefruit, orange
- 100g smoked salmon paste
- 500g potato, preferably the Nicola variety
- 200g flour
- 3 eggs
- 20g salted butter
- grated nutmeg
- salt
- olive oil for dressing
- 300g green asparagus
- 6 free-range eggs
- vinegar
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**Chef’s Tip:** If you don’t want to smoke your own fish, use ready-smoked salmon trout.

**METHOD** Fillet and pinbone the salmon trout and cure in a citric curing salt for about 20 minutes. For the curing salt, place the coarse salt, fine sugar and citrus zest in a blender and mix well until semi-fine. Curing salt can be washed well and reused after air drying. Cold smoke the fish with oak chips to add fragrance and flavour. Remember that curing and smoking allows for a longer shelf life.

For the gnocchi, take 100g of the smoked salmon and mix it into a fine paste. Cook the potatoes, with the skin on, in seasoned water until soft. Peel when cooked and allow extra water to evaporate. Keep the potatoes warm until ready to use. Leave salted butter on a semi-low heat until it turns brown. Separate the eggs. Thoroughly mash potato (or use a potato press), make a well in the potato and add the egg yolks, half the flour, nutmeg and a pinch of salt.

Add the smoked salmon paste and mix into a dough using the rest of the flour where needed. Cut dough onto 100g portions, roll each one into a tube, slice into 2cm portions and create ovals, using the extra flour to prevent them from sticking together. Place the gnocchi into boiling water and remove as soon as they float to the surface. (If you want to use them later place the gnocchi in ice water to stop the cooking process). Gently pat dry the gnocchi and dress with good olive oil. Pan-fry the gnocchi to add colour and flavour.

To make an egg and asparagus garnish, blanch or pan-fry the asparagus until cooked but crunchy. Place some vinegar into salted boiling water and stir well clockwise to create a vortex, before poaching the eggs.

**Wine suggestion** Boschendal Reserve Collection Sauvignon Blanc



## Short Rib Beef

Serves 2

- 1.2kg short rib with the bone on
- salt and pepper
- bay leaves
- black and yellow mustard
- bacon 'jam' (optional)
- pickled eugenia berries (optional)
- roasted seasonal vegetables

### Basting Sauce

- 250ml (1 cup) home-made tomato sauce
- 25ml Worcestershire sauce
- 125ml (half cup) chutney
- 10ml lemon juice
- 25g white sugar or honey
- 1 clove and 1 bay leaf
- dash of red wine
- salt and pepper to taste

**METHOD** Preheat oven to 100°C. Debone the short rib along the bone. Flatten the meat into a rectangle. Season the inside and place the end of the cleaned bone on the inside of the meat. Roll the meat around the bone and tie it with cotton string. Wrap the meat very well in plastic wrap and the bone with foil. Use a straw to suck out any air to create a vacuum pack. Transfer to oven and leave to steam for 8 hours. While the beef bakes, make the basting sauce by combining all ingredients and mixing well.

Once the rib is cooked, unwrap, baste with the sauce, increase oven heat to 180°C. Leave meat baking for about 30 minutes, basting regularly with sauce, until it caramelises to a rich, sticky consistency. Served with black and yellow mustard, bacon jam and pickled eugenia berries and oven roasted seasonal vegetables.

**Wine suggestion** Boschendal 1685 Shiraz Cabernet Sauvignon



## Baked Cob and Spinach in Paper

Serves 2

- 1 whole cob (about 1,2kg)
- 100g English spinach
- 1 whole fennel with tops, thinly sliced
- salt and pepper
- 150ml white wine
- 1 whole lime, juiced and grated zest
- wax or silicon paper
- other vegetables, optional

**METHOD** Preheat oven to 165°C. Wash the cob, scale and clean very well. Wash the spinach and place in the middle of a 60cm<sup>2</sup> sheet of wax paper big enough to make a parcel for the fish. Place fennel slices on top of the spinach (or optional veg). Place the fish on top and season with salt and pepper. Fold up sides of the paper, then carefully pour over the white wine, sprinkle over the lime zest and add the juice.

Wrap the parcel by folding the two long sides over tightly and then the short ends, and place in a baking dish. Bake for about 15-20 minutes, depending on the size of the fish.

To serve, present the parcel sealed, and open and portion fish at the table. Delicious aromas will emerge. This dish can be accompanied by a choice of pestos.

**Wine suggestion** Boschendal Elgin Chardonnay



## Bread-crust Chicken with Gravy and Seasonal Vegetables

### Serves 2

- 1 whole chicken (about 1.2kg)
- good olive oil
- roasted seasonal vegetables
- ready-made brown onion gravy or gravy of your choice (optional)

### Focaccia bread dough

- 1 tbs sugar
- 1 cup warm water (think warm bath water)
- 1 tbs active dry yeast
- 1 tsp salt
- 2½ cups white stoneground flour
- 2 tbs olive oil

### Seasoning spice mix

- coriander seeds
- fennel seeds
- sesame seeds
- bay leaves
- good, rough salt flakes
- fresh herbs of your choice, chopped if necessary

**METHOD** Preheat oven to 100°C. Debone the chicken from the back, removing all bones while keeping the chicken in one piece (or ask your friendly butcher to do it for you). Carefully shape it into a roll by keeping the chicken meat inside the skin. Wrap very well in plastic, use a straw to suck out any air to create a vacuum pack. Transfer the pack to a hot water bath in the oven and bake for 1 hour, 15 minutes. Remove and lower it into iced water to stop the cooking process.

While chicken is cooking, make the focaccia dough. Combine sugar and water, then sprinkle over the yeast and leave it to prove. Add salt to the flour and mix. Make a well in the centre, pour in the frothy yeast mixture, add the oil and knead to form a dough. Continue kneading for about 5 minutes until dough becomes elastic. Cover and leave to rise for about 10 minutes. Roll out to cover the chicken. Make the spice mix by mixing all the ingredients and toasting lightly in a dry frying pan.

Increase heat of the oven to 165°C. Take the chicken out of the vacuum pack. Carefully wrap the rolled-out bread dough around the chicken. Brush dough with olive oil, sprinkle spice mix gently over the dough, transfer to oven and bake for 35 minutes, or until a rich golden brown.

To serve, present chicken in bread crust, surrounded by vegetables, and slice as required. Serve gravy separately.

**Wine suggestion** Boschendal Elgin Pinot Noir



## Poached Guava with Roasted White Chocolate Cream and Coconut Cookies

### Serves 6

- 500ml water
- 200g white sugar
- 1 vanilla pod, slit lengthwise and the inside scraped out
- 12 guavas, peeled and whole

### Roasted White Chocolate Cream

- 300g white chocolate, roughly chopped
- 250g (250ml) cream

### Coconut Tuiles

- 125g desiccated coconut, toasted
- 125g icing sugar
- 2 egg whites
- 35g butter, melted
- 2 baking sheets

### Coconut Cookies

- 560ml (2¼ cups) desiccated coconut, toasted
- 180ml (¾ cup) cake flour
- ½ can (385g) condensed milk
- baking sheet

**METHOD** Make a syrup by combining water, sugar and vanilla and bringing to a boil, stirring to dissolve sugar. Add the guavas and poach gently until tender. Cool in syrup, and leave whole or, if big, slice in half.

To make the white chocolate cream, roast the chopped chocolate in an oven dish at 130°C for 20 minutes. The chocolate will change colour and start to caramelize. Remove from oven and

immediately agitate it by scraping back and forth with a spoon. Leave half to cool to form solid pieces or crumbs, keep the other half warm while you heat 100g of the cream. Add the 150g warm chocolate pieces to the 100g cream and blend mixture to form a smooth ganache. Leave to cool. Then whip remaining 150g cream to soft peaks, and fold gently through the ganache to form a mousse.

To make the tuiles, combine the coconut, icing sugar and egg whites. Stir in melted butter to form a paste. Place mixture between 2 baking sheets and roll out as thinly as possible. Freeze for 30 minutes to let it set. Remove top sheet and bake in 120°C oven until golden brown. Cool and break into pieces as wanted.

Make the coconut cookies by combining the ingredients, mix well and form into small balls, about 40g-50g each. Transfer to a baking sheet, press to shape and bake at 120°C for 20 minutes. Remove from oven and cool. Use the white chocolate mousse to sandwich two cookies together.

This dessert is best served on a large platter, decoratively arranged. The guavas, drained, can be surrounded by white chocolate crumbs, oddly shaped coconut tuile pieces and coconut cookie sandwiches.

**Wine suggestion** Boschendal Vin d'Or Noble Late Harvest