

Chef's Corner: Makaron Restaurant's Tanja Kruger



Chef Tanja Kruger & her team at the stylish Makaron Restaurant.

A member of the South African Culinary Olympic Team, and winner of the 2008 Chaine de Rotisseurs Young Chef of the Year competition, Chef Tanja Kruger's enthusiasm for all-things-food has fueled her success in the competitive world of cheffing. Now leading the team at Stellenbosch restaurant Makaron, winner of the Eat Out Boschendal Style Award and part of the five-star Majeka Guesthouse, she tells us a little more about what makes her tick:

My mother did a lot of baking and catering, and I never wanted to become a chef because I saw the long hours

she worked and how much time it took away for everything else. Despite this, I have always loved cooking and spending time in the kitchen, and in my matric year I realised that cooking was in my blood. After that I decided to apply to the Institute of Culinary Arts and the rest is history!

You were the winner of the 2008 Chaine de Rotisseurs Young Chef of the Year competition, and are a member of the South African Culinary Olympic Team. Tell us about how you managed to accomplish this, and what experiences you've gained as a result.

Hard work always pays off! I am a very driven person and I like to perform to the best of my ability, no matter what I do. I worked very hard for everything that I have accomplished. For the competitions I practiced, and for Team SA I invested a lot of my personal time.

It was also great having a chef like Carmen Trutter that believed more in me than I did in myself, and she inspired me to do all of these things. The knowledge and experience I have gained, not only as a chef, but as a person, is worth more to me than anything else. I have made new friends, travelled the world, met amazing chefs, seen amazing food and wore the green and gold colours to represent my country by doing what I love to do. I couldn't ask for anything more. I'm living the dream.



The stylish entrance to Makaron, complete with a glass-encased wine cellar and a 750kg steel Gregor Jenkin table.

How would you describe your style of cooking and approach in the kitchen?

My style of cooking is playful and modern with classic roots. I love cooking fresh, seasonal, local ingredients as close to "home" as possible, and not messing too much with flavours, but rather enhancing flavours and playing with textures.

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I want to be the chef that inspires others. I want my team to enjoy coming to work every day. I let them know when they have done something wrong and how to fix it, but more importantly I let them know when they have done something right. This way we all learn and grow together and I believe the guests can taste it in the food.

You have access to a herb and vegetable garden, as well as fruit grown on the property. Tell us how using these fresh ingredients has affected the seasonal menu at Makaron.

One of my biggest inspirations for my menus has always been the garden, and I have always had organic vegetable gardens at all the restaurants where I have worked. This is something that I am very passionate about.

The garden at Makaron is being re-planted for the new season as we speak and I am so excited about this. Nothing gives me more pleasure than to walk into a garden and pick fresh ingredients for my menu. I enjoy cooking seasonally anyway, so planning what we are going to grow, and then how it will be used at Makaron is very exciting.

Is there a dish on the menu now that you feel represents this season's best? And can you tell us what wine would you pair it with?

At the moment, I am loving the Rose & Strawberry Panna Cotta. We have just had our local strawberry season, and we have a few wild strawberries in the garden too, but the real star of the show is the rose. We make our own Rose Water from the roses all over the Majeka House garden. It smells and tastes amazing, and reminds me of summer!

What could guests say about the dining experience that would make you feel most proud?

I always enjoy good comments from guests, but I feel most proud when a guest tell us that this is one of their favourite dining experiences, or when they compare us to some of the amazing restaurants in South Africa. As a Chef, you are only as good as the last plate of food you cooked, so here at Makaron we try to make every plate the best that we can!

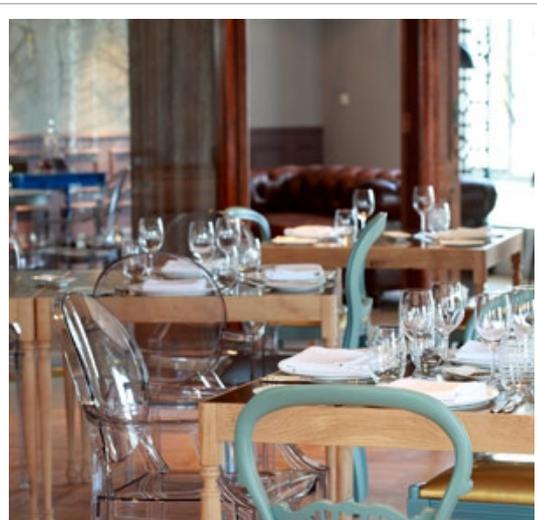
Want to try it at home? Click here for Tanja's recipe for Rose & Strawberry Panna Cotta. <http://www.fineplaces.co.za/flp=2175>

For reservations phone: 021 880 1549,
email: reservations@majekahouse.co.za
or visit www.majekahouse.co.za.

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The elegant and glamorous dining room at Makaron features herringbone flooring and French oak tables with copper inlays custom made by James Mudge.



Seating at Makaron is a playful mix of refreshed vintage and ultra-modern Victoria Ghost chairs by Philippe Starcke.