

Michelin star is target for trainee chef

Having just completed a 16-hour shift at Luke Dale-Roberts's *Test Kitchen* in Woodstock, chef-in-training Bonani Lester arrives at the Hout Bay Manor somewhat blurry-eyed. He's not complaining, however. It is all part of the plan.

This time next year, he will be sharpening his knives, packing his chef's coat and apron and heading for Britain to work in one or more revered and world-renowned restaurants such as *Le Gavroche*, *The Fat Duck*, *Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons* and *Dinner*. It will be the cherry on the top of the training he began in the kitchens of Hout Bay Manor five years ago.

Lester, who was recently named joint winner (with Kirby Auret) of *Showcook's Reaching For Young Stars Competition* for up-and-coming chefs, was raised in Queenstown in the Eastern Cape. He was a teenager when he was introduced to cooking by a home economics teacher, who took the time to explain what the subject was all about and what kind of careers it could open up to students.

"I liked the idea of working in a restaurant and, with the teacher's encouragement, was interested in the subject," he says. "But taking the course required additional school fees. Fortunately, my mother thought it was a good idea too and paid the extra money so I was able to study home economics."

But, after matric, it was years before Lester got the break he was hoping for in the restaurant business. When several years in Pretoria proved fruitless, he moved to the Cape in 2007, where his mother was living and working in Hout Bay.

At the time, the Hout Bay Manor, which was built in 1871, had recently been purchased and renovated by its new owners, Andreas and Susan Struengmann. German-trained chef and hotel manager Alex Mueller fulfilled the dual roles of general manager and executive chef of the premises and its restaurant, *Pure*. Mueller offered Lester a job in the scullery, which heralded the beginning of his training. It was also something of a stove-side baptism of fire.

"Chef Mueller was very strict. We had to be 100% prepared well before service each day. He was meticulous about how the kitchen should run, and about systems, safety, hygiene and avoiding waste. He also taught us how to communicate with others in the kitchen to ensure there were no accidents, errors or misunderstandings. Because we were a small team, there was no time for mistakes. We worked long, hard hours but, because there were only a few of us, I learned to do many different things in a short space of time. Soon, I was preparing meals for the staff and, more and more, I worked alongside chef Mueller."

As he watched and learned from Mueller, Lester's ambition grew. He recalls how he stared in amazement as his mentor skilfully sculptured a watermelon into a delicate rose in minutes.

"I couldn't believe that anyone could be so skilled with a knife, and I realised how much I could learn from him. Another

lesson I learned from chef Mueller during that time was how important it is not to get upset by the seemingly harsh words and many instructions that often fly about in the kitchen when the pressure is on. It's really not personal and there's no time to get upset. After work, you can sit down, have a drink and a chat."

Lester first met Susan Struengmann when he accompanied Mueller to help cater for a private function at her home in Llandudno. Her husband is a former owner of German pharmaceutical companies Hexal and Eon Labs, which were sold to Novartis in 2005. The couple, who divide their time between Germany and the Cape (she was born in South Africa), established a foundation called *Students For A Better Future*, which provides scholarships to "academically gifted, financially needy" students in the Western Cape, in 2007. They also built and funded the Disa Primary School in Imizamo Yethu in Hout Bay.

After the function, Susan complimented Lester on his work and asked him about his ambitions. He replied he wanted to train to be a top chef.

"I didn't think much about it but, about a week later, I saw a notice on the message board in the hotel saying that anyone who wanted to apply for a bursary should do so straight away. I followed the process and was awarded a bursary by the Struengmanns to attend the Silwood School of Cookery."

Lester enrolled at Silwood last year. He'll complete his diploma at the end of the year and will work towards a Silwood Grande Diploma next year under the apprenticeship of Grand Chef Peter Tempelhoff at last year's *Eat Out Restaurant Of The Year, The Greenhouse* at the Cellars-Hohenort.

As part of his training at Silwood, Lester has interned with Michael Broughton at award-winning *Terroir* in Stellenbosch, and at *The Green House* and *The Test Kitchen*. It is telling that Tempelhoff and Dale-Roberts vied to get Lester to return to their kitchens to complete his third year of training. In addition to their theoretical studies, apprenticeships and projects that require them to do things such as run virtual restaurants, Silwood students are encouraged to participate in chef competitions because, says the school, competing helps hone skills and provides them with networking opportunities.

"Actually, I really enjoy competitions," says Lester. "I enjoy the pressure - it's even more intense than being in a busy restaurant kitchen - and I enjoy being challenged to come up with new things. It's all part of learning to be a chef. I also like watching TV programmes like *MasterChef*. They're inspiring and they give people who don't know what the job involves some idea of what it takes to be a chef."

When he has completed his Grande Diploma at the end of next year, he wants to get overseas experience: "Silwood offers a programme whereby its owners, Alicia (Wilkinson) and Carianne (Wilson), use their connections to organise work for graduates in many of the top restaurants in Europe for a year. I'm not sure yet exactly where I will be placed but other Silwood students have worked at *The Fat Duck*, *Le Gavroche*, *Le Manoir* and *Dinner*. I'd be pleased to get experience at any one of those places and, if I'm really lucky, more than one."

Once he has experienced work in one or two top international restaurants, Lester plans to come back to South Africa and work, at least for a while, back at the Hout Bay Manor.

Although the terms of his scholarship do not require it - "When she gave me the scholarship, Mrs Struengmann said she wasn't doing it for herself or the hotel, she was doing it to help me succeed" - he wants to show his appreciation for the opportunity.

"I believe I owe it to the family. They showed they have faith in me and I want to repay them. But, maybe in about 10 years, when I'm grown up, I'll have my own fine-dining restaurant."

Source: *Business Day* via I-Net Bridge

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