

Five minutes with George Jardine

George Jardine, chef-proprietor of the popular Eat Out Top 10 restaurant, Jardine, is a man of few words - with a bone-dry sense of humour to match. Annette Klinger managed to knead a few answers out of him, whilst he waited for bread rolls to prove in his restaurant kitchen.



Eat Out: Driving home down Bree Street one afternoon I passed Jardine only to spot you and Jason Lilley the baker from the adjoining Jardine Bakery, helping yourselves to figs from the tree across the road. Is that an established ritual between the two of you?

George: We don't do that very often, no. We did a photo shoot one day for a specific dish that required figs and since they weren't in season, we raided the tree next door. They're not really very good figs, though. They're probably full of carbon monoxide and lead.

Eat Out: Judging by the long lines of people queuing at Jardine Bakery every day, it seems to be a hit amongst Capetonians. Do you think the bakery's success has further contributed to the popularity of the restaurant?

George: The people who come to the bakery aren't necessarily the same people who come to Jardine, but we have found that some of them are filtering through to the restaurant. I think the important thing is that both operations share the same philosophy and drive for quality.

Eat Out: You were awarded the esteemed title of Eat Out Chef of the Year for two years running in 2006 and 2007 and the restaurant has been on the Eat Out Top 10 list since its opening. To what do you attribute the success of the restaurant?

George: We've got fantastic staff that work here. We're all quite passionate about what we do and I think that translates to the guests.

Eat Out: Who would you say are your heroes in the local restaurant industry?

George: All the usual faces: Reuben Riffel, Margot Janse, Neil Pendock, Richard Carstens and Pete Goff Wood. As a group, we communicate on a regular basis - when one of us finds nice products, for example, we tell each other about it. We're a nice little collective and continually inspire each other and I think that speeds up the development of local restaurants to a certain extent.

Eat Out: 'Innovation' and 'excellence' are two adjectives that have become synonymous with the fare featured on your menu. How do you keep inspired?

George: The dishes that we make in the restaurant are product based. When there are lots of fantastic products to choose from we have a wider variety of dishes. In spring there's an abundance of ingredients to experiment with and incorporate into our daily menus, whilst in winter there's less to choose from, so we end up drawing upon dishes that we've done previously.

Eat Out: You are a native Scotsman, but have been residing in Cape Town for quite some time now. Do you miss the food back home? Have you ever considered incorporating haggis into your menu?

George: No, I haven't. I love haggis, but I'm quite orthodox, so I don't believe in fancifying or beautifying it. It's quite a basic dish, and I think the best way to serve it is with mashed potatoes and turnips. I do miss certain aspects of Scotland's food - the seafood back home is particularly good, for example. But generally there's enough here to keep me from getting homesick.

Eat Out: What was the best meal you had in 2008? Bar anything from your own restaurant, that is.

George: I was at a lunch at Overture where Chef Bertus Basson prepared a rather large tasting menu featuring quite simple but really flavoursome food, like mushroom gnocchi, pickles and a tasty beetroot dish. I would say the overall experience, ranging from the setting, the service and the passion of Bertus and his staff, made it the best meal of the year.

Eat Out: In what way have you experienced the financial crunch of the current economic crisis at Jardine?

George: During this time of year the restaurant is normally over-full, so it's definitely a bit quieter than usual but we're still managing to fill the tables.

Eat Out: What food trends do you predict for South Africa in 2009?

George: I don't follow trends, so I'm the wrong person to ask that question.

Eat Out: Any interesting developments on Jardine's menu during 2009?

George: Previously we would change our menu every two months, but now the menu changes every day. That's probably the newest and most exciting development. Yesterday, for example, we got an organic suckling pig from Kimilili [George opens an industrial walk-in fridge to reveal a hapless piglet dangling from its hindquarters]. So today, for example we'll use the rack and the shoulder of the pig and the next day we'll use the head and the legs, and so forth. Changing the menu each day keeps us on our toes.

Eat Out: Lastly, name the first things that come to mind when you hear the following words:

- a. Crayfish
- b. Summer
- c. Whisky
- d. Bree Street
- e. Marrow
- f. Nostalgia.

George:

- a. Tietiesbaai
- b. Vleesbaai.
- c. Bredasdorp.
- d. Jardine.
- e. My back garden.
- f. Nothing. It's empty.

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