

# OF THE SOIL

Ten of the country's top chefs and farmers of ingredients indigenous to South Africa participated in the recent Harvesting Heritage Culinary Competition, writes Sanet Oberholzer

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**H**umble ingredients. Forgotten ingredients. Indigenous ingredients. What do marula nuts, *morogo*, *ditloo*, *mabele*, *delele*, *lerotse*, *legapu*, *dithodi* and *dinawa* have in common? For many people, they are the foods of their childhood. They're also the foods that inspired a recent cooking competition in the name of collaboration, upliftment and preserving South Africa's food legacy: the inaugural Harvesting Heritage Culinary Competition. Established by NGOs Harvesting Heritage and SocioTech Broad-Based Livelihoods, in collaboration with the South African Chefs' Association and supported by Nederburg, the competition was held at the end of May with the goal of bringing together and fostering connections between Gauteng-based chefs and farmers of ingredients indigenous to South Africa.

Many of these mostly female farmers were at the event, selling the produce that the chefs had decided to cook with on the day. As I browsed the ingredients – some familiar, others not – they took care to explain the different ways of cooking with the colourful beans and magnificent greens.

But before any of the fires being lit, this entrepreneurial spirit coming alive or ingredients being conceptualised into innovative dishes, the 10 participating chefs visited the Limpopo community of Strydkraal. Here, they met the farmers, explored the produce in the fields and learnt how to cook with the ingredients.

As Anna Trapido of Harvesting Heritage explains: "If you don't know how these things are used traditionally and you start being creative, you mess up. You need to know how people who've been using them for hundreds of years use them, and then go and play in any cheffy way you like."

The chefs – some known for working with these ingredients – were given free rein to do what they wanted on the day of the competition as long as they used the Nguni beef prime cuts and offal allocated to them through a blind draw and the ingredients they sourced from Strydkraal.

And what they came up with was inspired – a combination of authenticity and modernity. Some dishes featured insects and mopane worms; others braised and shredded cow head or pickled tongue.

From the makeshift kitchens of the participating culinary minds I enjoyed the likes of braised chuck with *isinkwa sombila*, *izindluba* purée and *imfino* from chef Lindo Mbalati. And not to forget the



Farmer Elizabeth Moroaswi in her crop fields in Strydkraal, Limpopo. Picture: RYAN VAN DER SPUY



SocioTech farmers from the Strydkraal community selling their foods at the event. From left: Hilda Nchabeleng, Mabatho Sebei, Maggie Manganeng and Elizabeth Moroaswi. Picture: KATLEGO MORUTHANE



BBQ brisket, jugo bean cassoulet and morogo spinach on cilantro flat bread, by Mzwandile Hector Mnyayisa. Pictures: SANET OBERHOLZER



Flat ribs and amadumbe on roasted lefodi mash, with steamed cabbage, mochaina, carrots and moringa powder, by Themba Chauke.



Chef Wandile Mabaso was declared the Harvesting Heritage Culinary Competition winner and earned the award for best prime cut. Picture: KATLEGO MORUTHANE

fillet – which chef Lebo Phala was lucky enough to cook with – served with red wine jus, a *lerotse* swirl and *mokhusa* gel. My offal ticket also went to a dish created by Phala of braised oxtail with sorghum and tapioca crispy pap quenelle tarte tatin.

With a stroke of luck, three of my six tickets – randomly selected across the 10 chefs' tables – ensured I tasted three of the dishes that won prizes on the day.

Chef Wandile Mabaso was overall Harvesting Heritage Culinary Competition winner voted by the panel of South African Chefs Association-accredited judges.

He also won the award for the best prime cut dish: a delicious plate of beef shin biltong mousse with mopane textures, pumpkin and rosemary purée, eggplant and bone marrow caviar, beef jus smoked in *impepho*, cabbage chutney and caramelised onion.

It's the kind of cooking that judge and chef Forti Mazzone had in mind when he said a new milieu of South African cuisine was being created that day.

The people's favourite dish was created by chef Mzwandile Hector Mnyayisa: a tasty plate of slow-braised BBQ brisket, jugo

bean cassoulet and sautéed *morogo* served on a coriander flatbread.

The award for best plating, judged by Continental China, went to chef Themba Chauke for his slow-cooked flat ribs and *amadumbe* on a bed of roasted *lefodi* mash, served with steamed cabbage and *mochaina* and topped with crispy carrots and sprinkles of *moringa* powder, as well as chef Napo Ramaili for his smoked silverside beef flat bread with mopane hummus.

Chef Andile Somdaka won best offal dish for his beef tallow pastry filled with sweet *lerotse* pudding.

And the fun didn't stop there, with sommelier Moses Magwaza heading up a tasting of Nederburg's Heritage Heroes wines with ingredients such as *morogo* and *lerotse*. The message from Nederburg was simple: our South African food is delicious – here are wines that pair with it.

The competition was conceptualised last year but the fruits of the farmers' labour have been cultivated for 30 years.

"We started working with this specific community in 1993," says Marna de Lange, the founder and CEO of SocioTech. "We are in 400 communities in eight provinces and we want to be in 4,000."

She says SocioTech receives requests daily for assistance from communities.

Using its broad-based livelihoods approach, SocioTech provides training in communities – from hands-on concepts such as cultivating fertile soil to building healthy familial relationships – which helps them shift their focus to doing things for themselves and building livelihoods.

Paired with Harvesting Heritage's mission to protect and preserve local heritage ingredients, this initiative aims to support sustainable and profitable livelihoods for the farmers while elevating indigenous and heritage ingredients on the tables of top restaurants.

It's an initiative, De Lange says, that's making history.

"We have all seen this big new drive for a true South African cuisine so that we can enjoy what's really, truly from our soil, and people who come to our country can learn to eat real South African food – not other countries' food that we try to plate as well or better than they do.

"[With this initiative] produce is flowing out of the villages and, importantly, the money is flowing into every household that is making the effort of growing this deliciousness. Let's make that magic work for our entire country, and let's be joyful about it."