

ABOVE: Magnificent Makweti Safari Lodge is tucked in the trees and perches over Makweti Gorge. BELOW: Paula Dorrington and Gary Parker, managers of Makweti Safari Lodge, in front of a huge makweti tree. RIGHT: Chef Johannes Maredi. BOTTOM: Makweti has no fences so the Big Five and other game wander about freely, and particularly enjoy the lodge's waterhole.







# The Bush at its Best

Chef Johannes Maredi invites us into the boma of Makweti Safari Lodge in the Waterberg, to taste his cooking on the coals

WORDS JULIA LLOYD PICTURES ELMARIE KNAPTON AND SUPPLIED

So here we are in Limpopo, in the only savannah biosphere in the world. The sun heaves over the krantz and turns the plains to the colour of port, and we stop to lap it up. It's the most stunning image of bushveld, and I need to remember it. Take it home in my mind and sip on it every once in a while.

If this and the morning's hectic bush telegraph isn't enough to have us excited, the edgy lioness that belts around a bend toward us certainly does. Turns out she's spurned the advances of a male and is on the run. We eventually track him down and the poor bloke's looking awfully sorry for himself. His mane's in a froth and he's gulping some water at the roadside, having been led quite the merry dance.

We're actually in Welgevonden Game Reserve in the Waterberg, a Big Five spread of almost 40 000 hectares of unimaginably beautiful bushveld. Our destination is the fabulous Makweti Safari Lodge, one of several lodges in this well-managed reserve that are tucked out of sight in the special mountain folds you find here. We are also to meet the man behind Makweti's very, very fine bush dining.

"To work in the bush has always been

my dream. Now I'm living it," says chef Johannes Maredi, as we enjoy iced tea on Makweti's Indaba deck. Metres away at the waterhole is a herd of kudu ambling about with some darling warthogs. We don't bother them at all.

Joe smiles brilliantly as he describes his life at the lodge. "What more could I want than this? No noise. Just the roars. And, yes, maybe I don't get out much to view the bush but here at Indaba is the best game drive in the world."

And then there's the freedom Joe enjoys as chef at the lodge. "The policy here is that the kitchen is my domain. I'm encouraged to try new tastes, change or add to the menu, explore the season's produce. Go for it, do what you like, is how everyone feels, but there're always suggestions, and great tasting and wine-pairing sessions when it comes to setting the menu every season."

We have a mountain of food photographs to get through but Joe seems unfazed, unflappable, as we stroll to the kitchen at the main lodge. "There's no other way to



TOP LEFT: After being led a merry dance by his lady lioness, an exhausted lion has a breather. ABOVE: Early morning at Welgevonden Game Reserve in the Waterberg.

describe the meals at Makweti other than bush fine-dining at its best. We really spoil with food."

He explains that Makweti also wants to emphasise that this is not just a South African bushveld experience but an African experience, and so he has developed a pan-African menu, with dishes like Senagalese soup and Moroccan tagine. "But there I have my freedom again. I love the tastes

## COUNTRY CHEF ▸ JOHANNES MAREDI

and the simplicity of French cooking, and I'll use that as a base, and then combine flavours and spices, change something here, use a South African twist there, and then make it distinctly Makweti."

At the kitchen a monkey eyes us from the rooftop, paying particular interest to the tray of tea and muffins being brought to the deck. He looks miffed as we tuck in but Joe pays him no attention.

"What started my love for cooking was working nights at a local bistro while I studied accountancy in Pretoria," he says. "I dropped the accounting after three months and ended up training under legendary chef Daniel Chapat in the kitchen of his Krugersdorp restaurant. Then came a stint

with Michael Broughton in Sandton, where a regular patron recommended me to the Oppenheims, who were looking for a chef at Brenthurst."

He explains how that really was the start of the 'Big Time'. "It was a chance to become involved in fine dining and silver service. There was plenty of high-powered entertaining and I found myself cooking for royalty both from afar and from home. Like Mr Mandela. After Mr Oppenheimer died, his wife said I had too much potential and helped me look elsewhere."

He spent time in the kitchens of top city hotels but it was when he worked at lodges in Mkhuze, Bela Bela, Dinokeng and the Okavango that he fell in love with the bush. "Then my heart got to Makweti," he says with that smile. "I discovered they were looking for a chef, and that was it."

As we head for the boma Joe tells me he is working with the lodge on a seasonal cook book. "Actually I should call it a lifestyle book. Here the food is an experience that is as important as the wildlife, and the book will incorporate all this, to

become the Makweti bushveld story."

In a huge cast-iron container in the middle of the boma, a fire has been lit. Joe gives the venison another turn on the coals of his "outside kitchen", and prepares the trout for the smoker. "There's nothing that gives a taste of the bush to food than the coals," he says, as he starts on his vegetable skewers. "You can create the most elegant dish on a fire, and with it will always come that extra-special seasoning unique to cooking outdoors in Africa."

The fire is blazing as the sun sinks like a burning orange. Aromas of wood-smoked trout and slow-cooked venison promise a feast. Joe opens a bottle of his favourite Pinotage and, as we raise our glasses to a splendid evening, I am reminded of our day's start, of Makweti's savannah in the morning.

Yes, Joe, this is the bush at its best. ■

Map reference B6 see inside back cover

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TOP LEFT: Dinner is usually served – with a dollop of colonial charm – in the candlelit dining room. LEFT: On warm, clear nights the candles are lit and the fire roars in the boma. Overhead is a roof of stars. ABOVE: Chef Joe Maredi gathers the Makweti team on the suspension bridge across Makweti Gorge.





## Wood-smoked Stuffed Trout with Cannellini Bean Salad

### Serves 6

- 1 trout per person, filleted, keep the skin, tail and head
- 200ml horseradish sauce

### Stuffing

- 1 punnet button mushrooms
- 1 whole onion, sliced
- 2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- salt and pepper to taste
- oil to deglaze the pan
- 2-3 sprigs each of tarragon and parsley, chopped
- olive oil

### Peppadew Aioli

- $\frac{3}{4}$  cup drained Peppadew peppers
- 2 garlic cloves
- 4 egg yolks
- juice of 1 lemon
- 1 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 2 tbs honey
- $\frac{1}{2}$  tsp salt

### Fennel and Cannellini Bean Salad

- 1 bulb fennel, sliced
- 1 can cannellini beans
- segments of 3 oranges or naartjie
- $\frac{1}{2}$  tsp Dijon mustard
- 1 tsp chopped mint and dill
- salt and black pepper to taste

**METHOD** For the aioli, purée Peppadews and garlic in a food processor. Add yolks and lemon juice and purée for 20 seconds. Slowly drizzle in the olive oil until fully incorporated (should have a mayonnaise-like consistency). Season with honey and salt and keep refrigerated until ready to serve. To make the salad, combine all ingredients and allow to rest in fridge for an hour. To make the stuffing for the trout, fry onion with garlic until soft and add sliced mushrooms. Cook until water is evaporated and add chopped herbs. When cool, stuff the trout. Brush both sides of the fish with a little olive oil, sprinkle with a pinch of salt. Add the desired wood shavings (about a cup) to the smoker and smoke the trout for about 15 minutes on a medium-heat fire.

**Wine suggestion** Haut Espoir Chardonnay

## Coal-roasted Venison with Vegetable Skewers and Sweet Potato Crush

Serves 6

- 1 leg of impala (or springbok), deboned
- 250g streaky bacon (thick rashers work best)
- olive oil
- 15ml coarse salt
- 15ml crushed pepper
- small bundle of fresh rosemary

### Marinade

- dry red wine to cover the leg
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 1 head of garlic, finely chopped
- 250ml olive oil
- 200g apricot jam
- 200g dried apricots

### North African Vegetable Skewers

Makes 9-10

- 2 medium zucchini (green or yellow), sliced into 2cm rings
- 2 medium bell peppers, cut into 2cm pieces
- 1 large yellow onion or sweet onion, sliced and separated into quarter slices
- punnet of button mushrooms, cleaned
- 10 large wood skewers (soaked for at least 30 minutes in water)

**METHOD** Place the meat in a large ziplock bag. Mix the marinade ingredients and pour over the meat to cover it. Marinate for at least 3 days. Remove meat from marinade and pat dry. Reserve the marinade. Make incisions across the width of the leg and insert a cut of the bacon (cube or thick slice) and secure with a toothpick if required. Brush meat with olive oil and sprinkle with salt, pepper and rosemary. Place on a braai grid over hot coals, not too close to the coals. Seal the meat for 5 minutes on all sides, and then cook for an hour, turning every 15 minutes.

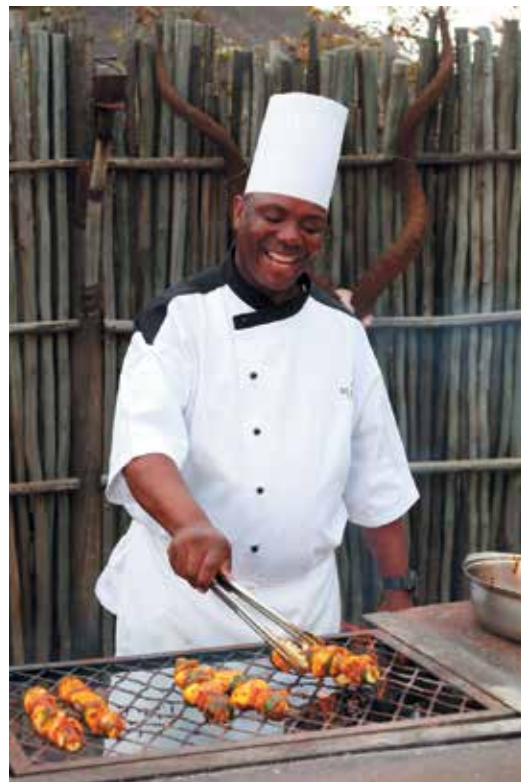
To make the vegetable skewer marinade, place all ingredients in the food processor except for the coriander and parsley. Pulse the marinade 5-7 times to mince the garlic. Add coriander and parsley and pulse a few more times until your coriander and parsley look chopped (your veggies will look nicer if you don't purée your marinade). To assemble the skewers, rinse, dry and slice the veggies and transfer them to a large bowl. Pour marinade over them and toss to combine and coat veggies evenly. Refrigerate for 4 hours, remove from marinade and place on wet skewers so the veggies just touch each other (no need to pack

### Marinade

- 4 tbs olive oil
- 4 tbs fresh lemon juice
- 3 garlic cloves
- 1 tsp ground coriander
- ¼ tsp ground cumin
- 1 tsp sweet paprika
- good pinch chilli powder
- ½ tbs salt
- ½ tsp ground black pepper
- ½ bunch fresh parsley
- ½ bunch fresh coriander

### Sweet Potato Crush

- 3 sweet potatoes
- 3 limes
- 40g fresh mint
- 40g fresh coriander
- 2 fresh red chillies



them together). Braai over a medium-heat fire for about 15 minutes, basting regularly with marinade.

For the sweet potato crush, cut the sweet potatoes in half and place in an ovenproof dish, flesh side up. Slice the limes in half and place on top of sweet potatoes, flesh side down. Cover with a lid. Place over medium coals for about

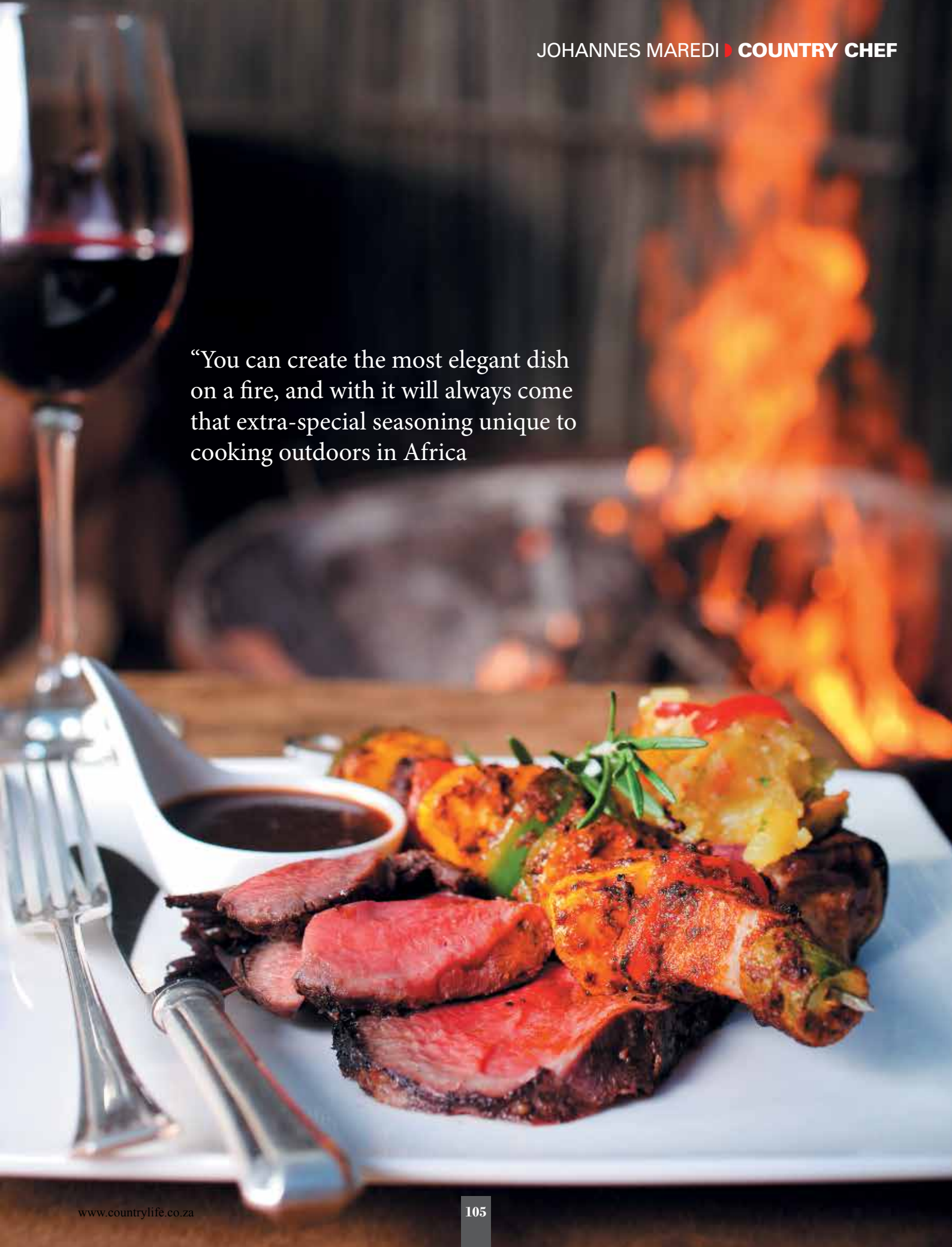
40 minutes. Remove from the heat and uncover. Remove the limes and discard, finely chop the chilli, mint and coriander and using a potato masher lightly crush the potatoes and herbs together. Place back on the braai for a further 5 minutes, with the lid on.

Venison should be cooked medium to rare. Test meat by cutting into the thickest part of the meat, juices should run clear. When done, remove the meat from the fire, rest for 15 minutes before slicing. Reduce the marinade and pour over the meat.

**Wine suggestion Akkerdal Wild Boar Red Blend**



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## Roast Tomato Soup Sipper with Medium Cream Sherry

Makes 1 litre

- 1 kg tomatoes, cut in half
- 1 onion, chopped in chunks
- 1 celery stalk
- 1 tsp rosemary, chopped
- 1 tsp thyme, chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, chopped
- 3 tbs sugar
- 1 tbs salt and black pepper
- 1 tsp each of cumin and nutmeg
- 200ml olive oil
- truffle oil and milk (optional)

**METHOD** Add all ingredients to a roasting pan. Cover with tinfoil. Roast for an hour at 180°C. Allow to cool. Blend all ingredients and thin with milk as required. Season to taste and garnish with a drizzle of truffle oil if you wish.



## Chicken Tagine with Couscous

Serves 4

- 4 chicken breasts
- 2.5cm piece of fresh ginger, peeled and chopped
- 2-3 garlic cloves, chopped
- sea salt and freshly ground Madagascar green peppercorns
- olive oil
- 2 tbs butter
- 2 cinnamon sticks
- pinch of saffron threads
- ¼ tsp smoked paprika
- 1 red onion, sliced
- 2-3 tbs clear runny honey
- 1 cup ready-to-eat pitted dates
- 1-2 tbs orange-flower water
- 1 tbs extra butter
- 2-3 tbs blanched then roasted almonds (the toasting gives them a very different flavour)
- chicken stock

### Couscous

- 250g couscous
- 500ml chicken or vegetable stock
- 1 red onion, finely chopped
- large handful chopped herbs including mint, coriander and parsley
- ½ cup pine nuts, toasted
- peel of ½ preserved lemon or the zest of 1 lemon
- juice of 1 large lemon
- butter

**METHOD** For the chicken, use a mortar and pestle to pound the ginger and garlic into a paste (and, if needed, the green peppercorns). Heat olive oil and about 2 tbs butter in a tagine or heavy-base casserole dish. Stir in the ginger-garlic paste, sliced onion and cinnamon sticks and spices. Once the mixture begins to colour, add the chicken breasts and brown the skin. Stir in the honey and tuck the dates around the meat. Add enough chicken stock (the amount will vary according to the size of your tagine (casserole dish) to cover the base of the tagine and to come about one-third of the way up the meat. Bring to a boil, reduce the heat and cover. Cook gently for about 25 minutes. Add the orange-flower water to the chicken and season to taste with salt and pepper. Cover and cook for a further 5 minutes, or until the meat is tender and the juice runs clear. In a skillet, melt the extra butter and stir in the almonds. Sauté until golden brown and then scatter them over the dish. Add 250g couscous to 500ml boiling chicken or vegetable stock. Stir occasionally for 10 minutes or until cooked. Meanwhile, fry the onion in a tablespoon of olive oil until soft and remove from the heat. Drain any remaining liquid from the couscous and place in a large bowl. Toss through the onion, herbs, toasted pine nuts and lemon. Season with salt and pepper and stir through 2-3 tablespoons of butter.

**Wine suggestion** *Le Cap Maritime Pinot Noir*



## Red-wine Poached Pears with Parmesan Custard and Candied Pecans

Serves 6

- 6 pears, peeled and cored (from the base)
- 120ml water
- 250ml red wine
- 1¾ cups castor sugar
- 2 tsp pure vanilla extract or 1 vanilla bean, split
- mint to garnish

### Parmesan Custard

- 160ml milk
- 160ml cream
- 2 cups finely grated Parmesan cheese, plus 6 tbs for the biscuits
- 2 whole eggs
- 3 egg yolks
- pinch white pepper
- salt to taste

### Candied Pecans

- 1 cup castor sugar
- 1½ cups pecan nuts

**METHOD** Peel the pears, keep stalk intact, place in a pot and cover with red wine. Add about 2 cups of sugar and a vanilla pod. Poach the pears until soft. Remove from pot and leave to cool. For the custard, heat the milk, cream and cheese over medium heat in a saucepan. Allow cheese to melt while stirring continuously. Whisk the eggs and egg yolks together in a large bowl. Once the milk mixture has heated through, strain into the egg mixture and whisk together. Add salt and pepper to taste. Pour into dariole moulds, to reach halfway. Place in a deep ovenproof dish. Pour enough water into the dish to reach about halfway up the moulds. Bake in the oven at 140°C for about 25 minutes, until firm to the touch. Allow to cool before demoulding – should be served at room temperature. To candy the pecans, slowly melt castor sugar over medium heat until it starts to turn brown. Remove from heat and add pecan nuts. Pour onto a baking sheet, lined with wax paper. Allow to set and break into shards. Once the pears have cooled, make the 6 Parmesan biscuits by melting a tablespoon of Parmesan cheese for each on a baking sheet. Allow to cool. To serve, place a Parmesan biscuit on the custard, and place the pear on top, garnishing with a sprig of mint. Drizzle with reduced poaching sauce and scatter candied pecans, or crush and sprinkle over the pear.

*Wine suggestion* Quinta do Sol Vintage Port ■



More of  
 Chef Johannes'  
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