

CHEF TO WATCH

The perfectionist

Kayla-Ann Osborn - the hottest young chef in Durban right now - inherited her meticulous approach to cooking from her gran, a legacy brought to life on the ever-changing seasonal menu at The Chefs' Table

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This decadent dessert sees an orb of pear mousse in a liquorice glacé, in-season pears, almond crumble and a garnish of basil paper.

CONSIDER THIS. A sublime tomato, lemongrass and ginger risotto with a plump, perfectly poached langoustine and textured tomato: a gel, a broth and a dust. Followed by melt-in-the-mouth, slow-cooked pork belly with wild mushrooms, apple jelly and a delicately intense ginger-and-carrot reduction. And for dessert, as “a play on blue cheese and preserves”, a Roquefort brûlée with red wine, pear and caramelised nuts.

“When the plate from the first course came back to the kitchen and I saw they’d run their fingers through what was left on it...” Kayla-Ann Osborn describes the moment in January 2016 when she knew that, despite her age (she was 23) and relative lack of experience, she had likely secured the dream job she was “auditioning” for: that of executive chef at The Chefs’ Table in Umhlanga Rocks – then still just a concept and a vision.

up with her two younger sisters in a house of “strong women – my mom and gran” – and her grandfather) she watches me and still gives me uphill!”

I AM CHATTING to Kayla at one of the custom-built tables near the exotic Tretchi-style mural that is a fun and ornately decadent design feature at The Chefs’ Table. The restaurant is large but lighting and clever use of space, texture and colour confer intimacy. She has a complement of 12 chefs, including “two amazing sous chefs I trust absolutely to run the kitchen as I would run it,” she says.

She also has 11 interns working shifts in the kitchen. “Your internship is your grounding. It is often what dictates your career direction.” Working with interns can be hard, she admits. “You can see within a week who will last and who will fizzle out.” She loves the people who have stuck

AS WE TALK, SHE IS RELAXED.

Engaged. Seemingly living the balance she believes is essential for the hectic life of a chef. There is nothing in her demeanour to suggest that a five-course wine-and-food pairing dinner for 100 people is lined up for the evening. “Five hundred plates will go out of the kitchen in two hours,” she says.

The next morning, she shares, starting at 7 am, she will compete in the regional finals of the Unilever Junior Chef of the Year contest. She was runner-up in 2015 while head chef at the erstwhile Traffords restaurant in Pietermaritzburg. As she turns 25 on 14 November 2017, this is her last chance to compete as a junior.

“Hopefully I will win,” she says. There is nothing brash or egotistical in this simple statement. “The prize is a trip to Nice to work in (South African Michelin-star chef) Jan-Hendrik van der Westhuizen’s kitchen

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“So few chefs actually get to see the making of a restaurant,” this graduate of the 1 000 Hills Chefs School says. “I’ve been involved at every step. The design of the kitchen. Choice of the glasses and hand-thrown plates. Hiring the kitchen staff. Choosing the food (which includes working collaboratively with the farmers who grow and rear the organic veggies, the free-range chickens, the ducks and other creatures she and her team evolve into culinary works of art). Devising the ever-changing seasonal and tasting menus. The building, the flow, the layout: everything.”

Kayla – down to earth, grounded, friendly, enthusiastic, genuinely nice – is the hottest young chef in greater Durban right now and her restaurant offers what many rate as the best-tasting and most beautiful food currently available.

She says she knew from the age of six that she wanted to be a chef and has vivid memories of her gran teaching her how to make apricot jam squares. The pastry mix of sugar, butter and flour. A portion of said pastry frozen, then grated on top. The squares delicate and meltingly crispy when they emerge from the oven. Then there was the spaghetti Bolognese. Another seemingly simple dish... “But my gran is so meticulous when she cooks. It must be good mince and properly browned, the onions perfectly caramelised. To this day when I’m cooking in the kitchen in Scottburgh (where Kayla grew

“They are very passionate and eager. I really enjoy them.”

She also loves that, unlike some interns who come from schools that do not prepare them well for kitchen work, she had Chef Dixi, another “strong woman, hard-core, who fought for her place in the kitchen”, as her inspiration at 1 000 Hills. “There, we cooked all day so that, at the end, we could walk into any kitchen and hold our own.”

While we talk, the kitchen team is busy prepping. The no-place-to-hide, open-plan space offers diners, especially those who choose front-row seats overlooking the action, kitchen theatre at its best. Kayla does a lot of the plate artistry. “Although, if my senior chefs come up with a better idea, I let them take over.” And while delegation is key, she says she must cook. “I love it. I am not a particularly happy person when I’m not cooking.”

Although, as an aside, this does not transfer to the home front. She laughs and shakes her head when I ask her. She lives in Umhlanga with her partner, Jeane Morkel, executive chef across the road at Fourteen on Chartwell and Kayla is grateful for the mix of luck and coincidence responsible for the proximity. The couple shares their home with three dogs. “My SPCA specials. My babies.” She runs on the promenade. For balance. To let off steam. She wants to do the Comrades one day. “I think anyone who can finish that has a mind stronger than their body.”

for a week. I like competition. At the end of the day you’re trying to beat yourself and you learn so much in those situations.” She won. The national finals are on 6 September.

Kayla turns our conversation back to her interview for The Chefs’ Table, for which she was recommended, then headhunted by owners Sean Gray and Soti Sonitis. As soon as she heard they wanted to open a restaurant with an open kitchen and a menu that would change every day, she knew she wanted the job.

“I don’t think they had realised how young I was. When I arrived for the interview they bombarded me. It was a three-hour interrogation. When I left I thought of all the things I hadn’t said and put them in an email. I got an: ‘OK. Thanks.’”

They had also said she could cook for them, if she’d like to. “I spent the next two days breaking my back cooking at my mom’s house.” The house in Scottburgh where she got her cooking mojo; where she grew up with sit-down meals and beautifully cooked “from scratch” meat and veggies.

“I spent hours prepping. Getting things perfect.” Then she packed all the prepped food and drove it to Durban where she could finish it, plate it and await their verdict.

They loved the meal. She got the job. The rest is history.

And it’s still in the making. **W**
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Clockwise from above: Breads are baked in-house using stoneground flour from the Champagne Valley and served with house-made butter, chive ricotta, olive oil foam and olive-and-pork speck; staff prepare for guests; local oysters with chilli oil, blanc de blanc foam, Granny Smith apple brunoise and vygie; sommelier Zwai Gumedede.



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Above: Roasted Kokstad porcini with truffle emulsion and textures of mushrooms. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Informality and fine dining blend with comfy chairs and clever use of space; textures of chocolate and tomato: chocolate ice cream rolled in chocolate crumble, roasted white chocolate, a chocolate-and-caramel shard and a slow-cooked tomato-and-honey glaze; hand-made pasta hangs to dry; Moores-Pitt rolled baby chicken with potato purée, grilled grape, celery, ricotta gnocchi, chicken jus and beetroot dust.