



Master of his PLATE

Lentswe Bhengu took a leap to follow his dreams of being a chef. It paid off and he now presents a cooking series on US network, The African Channel, among other things. EOA caught up with him.

HOW DID YOUR CAREER AS A CHEF START?

It's funny because I'd been cooking on the sly since I was about 9 or 10. And even while I was doing my B.Comm and working at investment finance companies, like Old Mutual and Allan Gray, for five years, I'd been attending open days at culinary schools.

WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE TO APPLY FOR CULINARY SCHOOL?

My father told me that if you ever need to sort out your life, just sit down and have a meeting with yourself. And if ever you find yourself doing something you're not happy with, stop it right there and then. Otherwise it will carry on being that way until you're 40 or 50 or 60, saying, "I should have been an artist." Meanwhile you're stuck behind a desk. So I decided to stop the job I was doing and enrol at The Culinary Academy.

WHAT WAS IT LIKE WHEN YOU SWITCHED FROM CORPORATE TO CULINARY SCHOOL?

Of course there were challenges. I was 25 and my mindset was very much: 'I'm an adult, I'm an adult, I'm an adult.' But I was sitting in class with 18-year-olds who'd just finished school, so there was that attitudinal adjustment I had to make.

EXPLAIN HOW IT FELT WHEN YOU BEGAN WORKING IN YOUR CHOSEN INDUSTRY?

You arrive long before everyone else and you work until the last guest leaves. I was clocking in 16 hours as a chef, standing up and working with my hands. You also don't get paid a lot and are a server behind the servers in the restaurant, because no one ever gets to see you. But I love the freedom to express myself on the plate and I got excited when I started to develop my art. It's a passion, not just a job that gives you immediate results.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE LESSONS THAT YOU LEARNED ALONG THE WAY?

You have to love cooking to pursue it as a professional career. It's not always glamorous, but if you pursue it hard enough and you put enough passion into it, you can find the glamour. You also don't get paid a lot, but there are ways to be awesome and make money, while keeping true to your heart.

AS THE SOUTH AFRICAN AMBASSADOR FOR THE CHEFS WHO SHARE THE YOUNG CHEF AWARD, WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO THE FINALISTS?

Because chefs are creatives, we think we know what we want because it comes from inside. But it's a learning process. In finance, they suggest you stick to one job to build credibility and experience. But as a chef you are only as good as how many people have taught you. If you stick with one chef, you'll only learn what that chef has taught you. By changing chefs, you will increase your skill levels as well.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO ASPIRING CHEFS?

Don't do it so that people will say, "OMG! You're a chef! That's so cool!" because it's not that cool. You leave work dirty, you

smell weird, and you always get to the party after everyone else has already left. So you're not the coolest person around. But you know you're cool because everyone else is happy, because you served them great food. You have to have more passion than skill, because skill you learn along the way, but you can't teach passion. And it's your passion that will get you through the long hours. You can be the most skilled chef out there, but if you don't have the passion for long hours, you'll never survive. You'll become disgruntled and you'll leave it for the wrong reasons.

WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS FOR THE FUTURE?

I enjoy writing and one day I will write a book. I keep on saying that. Before I became I chef I used to say, "One day I'm going to become a chef." It took me 25 years to get to that 'one day'.

IS THERE ANY CHANCE OF YOU OPENING UP YOUR OWN RESTAURANT?

At the moment I'm sitting on six years of professional experience in the kitchen, but I feel like I need to explore and learn more before I can say, "Here's my plate. And the reason I'm charging X is because of A, B, and C." At the moment I only have A. I'm going out to look for B and C.

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The third annual 'Chefs Who Share', which has raised R4m since it began in 2013, takes place at Cape Town City Hall on 10 September 2015, presented by Mercedes-Benz and associate sponsors Deutsche Bank, Swiss International Air Lines, and Bulgari. Proceeds from ticket sales, as well as an art auction, go to MAD Leadership Foundation and the Laureus Sport for Good Foundation. Learn more at www.chefswhoshare.com. **E**