

SEARCHING FOR SOUTH AFRICA'S

Culinary stars

Twenty-five hotels from around the country entered their candidate chefs and wine stewards in the third annual Inter Hotel Challenge. CemAir Skynews Correspondent Eugene Yiga was at the finale to find out which young stars came out on top.

"This has been a wonderful opportunity; a joy to see and experience the heart-warming enthusiasm and achievement over years," said Annette Kesler, editor of Showcook.com and organiser of the competition. "We should be proud of our hotels in South Africa. They're doing a great job."

The challenge began with five Crème de la Crème Executive Chef dinners in February and March. During these gala events, each hotel's executive chef introduced the candidates. Each event also had a random draw to pair the hotels with a wine brand from Cape Legends: Allesverloren, Alto, Durbanville Hills, Fleur Du Cap, Le Bonheur, Lomond, Neethlingshof, Plaisir de Merle, Pongrácz, Stellenzicht, Uitkyk and Zonnebloem. These all form part of the fine wine arm of Distell, a conglomerate with a strong portfolio of internationally renowned and award-winning wine estates.

"For us at Cape Legends, it's one of our best initiatives; not just to help build and further the hospitality industry, but also people's careers," said Carina Gous, Business Director of Distell. "We represent a group of wine estates and well-loved and well-established wine brands throughout the industry. They're all unique and have their own character, but they do share a common thread of quality, excellence, and endurance

that makes us successful as a group."

After the matching, the candidate chefs and wine stewards took part in a series of exercises and initiatives. First, a "Grape to Glass" experience in May allowed the candidate wine stewards to spend a day with their chosen winemaker to learn more about wine production and the key to pairing wine with food.

Regional "cook-offs" and Showcook.com also held an "Indian Ocean Island Cuisine Day" in June. This Skills Exchange Development Programme took place at the state-of-the-art Unilever Kitchens in La Lucia Ridge in Durban and featured chefs from the Seychelles (Davinder Rawat from Paradise Sun and Cursley Lebrass from Maia Luxury Resort and Spa), Mauritius (Vikash Coonjan from One&Only Le Saint Géran), and Abu Dhabi (Don Chandana Ratnasiri Munasingha). Port Elizabeth and Kwa-Zulu Natal candidates attended, together with students from the International Hotel School.

"We are privileged to have them in a most valuable exchange of creativity – an inspiration to all our candidates who have benefitted from an introduction to the island tables and to Abu Dhabi, which has its own very special flavour," Kesler said.

In the first two weeks of July, each hotel showcased their menu. But for the finals, only the top five candidates in each category competed at the South African Chefs Academy in Cape Town. They were then judged by a panel of respected food and wine professionals, led by Paul Hartmann of South African Chefs Academy and Chris de Klerk of Cape Legends. In mid-August, the winners were announced at a gala dinner at the Southern Sun Cape Sun.

From Johannesburg, 54 on Bath was part of the three-way tie for Best Bread and Protea Hotel Balalaika was part of the two-way tie for Best Team. Radisson Blu Gautrain was part of the three-way tie for the Lancewood "Best Dessert" Award (Tshepo Dikgole) and received an honorary mention for Best Team.

From Durban, Southern Sun Elangeni & Maharani was part of the two-way tie for Best Team and secured second place in the wine steward category (Mduduzi Shabangu). The Beverly Hills came third in the chef category (Mukhtar Alli), received an honorary mention for Best Team, and won the award for Most Glamorous Table of the night.

As was the case last year, Western Cape hotels won the majority of the awards. Grootbos Private Nature Reserve's Bennet Msweli won the South African Sommeliers Association Award for the most "Up & Coming Wine Steward" while One&Only Cape Town's Mercy Mwai, won this award last year, moved up to third place. The Belmond Mount Nelson was part of the three-way tie for Best Bread and The Twelve Apostles Hotel & Spa received an honorary mention for Best Team.

The Westin was part of the three-way tie for the Lancewood "Best Dessert" Award and won the award for Most Creative Chef (Jody Africa). Taj Cape Town was also part of the three-way tie for the Lancewood "Best Dessert" Award and won the award for the table setting that best reflects the ethos of the hotel. Radisson Blu Waterfront's Robyn Marney won the "RIO LARGO Top Woman Cook for Meticulous Presentation" award and secured second place in the chef category. But Cape Grace was the

biggest winner, taking first prize in the wine steward category for Mpho Masiu as well as first prize in the candidate chef category for Charmaine Deacon, who also received the "ScanPan Excellent Kitchen Practice" and "The SAPPO Purple Ribbon Best Pork Dish" awards.

Jacques Moolman, GM of Southern Sun Cape Sun, included an inspirational message to the candidates by quoting Mark Twain: "Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So

throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover."

"When you entered this competition, you threw off your bowlines," he went on to say. "Now is the time to sail away from that safe harbour. Use the experience you have gained throughout this challenge as the trade winds to fill your sails. Go and explore. Dream big, discover greatness, and you will go far."

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Photos: Top: Natal's winner from the Southern Sun Elangeni & Maharani - Mduduzi Shabangu with Pongracz award-winning wine maker, Elunda Basson. Bottom left: 'Most Up and Coming Wine Steward', Bennet Msweli of Grootbos with Estelle Lourens from historic Uitkyk. Bottom right: Robyn Marney of the Radisson Blu Waterfront with her first award for 'The Top Woman Cook for Meticulous Presentation' with Brenda Wilkinson of Rio Largo.

IMPACTING THE ECONOMY

"We are fortunate to have a hotel industry that is known worldwide for professionalism," Kesler said. "Often we take this excellence for granted. What our hotels have brought to this initiative is what they do every day. They educate. They train. And we should use this collective energy to uplift and to create visible job enhancement."

"South Africa is fast becoming a culinary hotspot," said Tokozile Xasa, Deputy Minister of Tourism. "It goes without saying that people are our greatest asset and are positioned right at the heart of this vibrant industry."

Ultimately, the Inter Hotel Challenge goes beyond the competitive and has become a unifying spirit and a collaborative force in the hotel industry: reaching out and encompassing the broad and important role of development and advancement.

"This initiative embodies the mutually beneficial relationship between industry and government in capacity building for the sector," Xasa said. "Indeed, it is a sure way to move South Africa forward. Surely, if people can cook together and eat together, they can live and work together."