



MAIN: LENTSWE BHENGU, FROM FINANCE TO FOOD AND NOT LOOKING BACK.

LENTSWE BHENGU: MASTER OF HIS PLATE

After five years working at top investment companies, Lentswe Bhengu decided to follow his passion for food. It has taken him across Africa and his journey is just getting started.

Born and raised in KwaZulu-Natal, Bhengu studied for a B.Com and has worked at top finance companies. But, at the age of 25, he decided to hang up his investment tie and become a chef instead.

"I wanted to open a restaurant after I left finance, but I also wanted to be a reputable restaurateur," says 29-year-old Bhengu. "So I told myself to just do the schooling thing." He was already living in Cape Town, so he enrolled at The Culinary Academy, now The Hurst Campus. And although he still wanted to open a restaurant straight after studying, he was sucked into working life instead.

"I started working and working, more and more," he says. "And then the foodie in me came out. I was always a cook before. But after culinary school I was around people who spoke the same language of passion." Another person who speaks his language of passion is his business partner, Jurgens van Wyk. The two connected over a glass of wine and chatted about starting a series called 'Africa on a Plate'. "He had experience behind the camera and I had the passion and skill of cooking," Bhengu says. "We started with a web series. It was recognised by MWEB (a South African internet service provider) and, a year later, we designed a food portal for them. A year after that, we were featured on The Africa Channel (an American television network) to produce a TV version, which is now being aired across the United States, the Caribbean and Canada."

The show follows Bhengu travelling around Africa, learning how to become a better chef. His goal was to look at it through the eyes of someone who didn't go to culinary school, but who still wanted to get all the flavours and skills from the best of the best. "I go to high-end restaurants, I go to street vendors, I go the mama across the road and the auntie who makes the bobotie," he says.

"And I learn from everyday people why their meal is the best. They teach me a skill and I make an inspired version of it at the end. It's not reinventing the wheel, it's just giving the wheel some mags!"

They filmed four episodes in Tanzania: at Dar es Salaam, Pemba Island, Zanzibar and Stone Town. Because everybody thinks of Zanzibar as 'The Spice Island', Bhengu expected to find dishes like pilau rice filled with so many spices. But when he got there, he was shocked to discover something else. "To them, spices are such a sacred thing that it's only used in abundance for celebrations and for showing off,"

he says. "But one restaurant I went to splashed out and went overboard with spices because it was a big thing with the camera crew. And that's when I learnt that what we see in the books and on the flag doesn't necessarily correlate to what we get on the plate."

Another culinary surprise came from Nigeria, where Bhengu found an interesting contrast of different foods. Yes, there are staples across Africa – yams, cassava, and variations of pap – but Nigerian cuisine took it to a whole new level. "They can pretty much grind anything into a flour and make that into a staple," he says. "That's why Nigerians, wherever they go across the world, are so patriotic about their food. They have their own type of food, made from different ingredients that we all get today, but they change it up so that it's specifically Nigerian. It's very creative."

Closer to home, Bhengu grew up with modern influences on his cuisine. It's the reason he can enjoy such a variety of food. But it's also the reason he finds it hard to pinpoint a specific South African meal.

"We don't have that one ingredient or that one meal or that one solidifying dish that we call South African," he says. "It has influences from the French, from the Dutch, from the English. For example, pap is found everywhere across Africa, chakalaka is found everywhere across the world (just in different variations), and bunny chow is more Indian than South African. We don't have that one thing that's ours."



Still, he's happy to keep exploring and sharing his love for food. As someone who comes from a big family, with siblings in Johannesburg and Durban, he loves making elaborate meals when cooking for someone special or bringing guests into the fold. But as a single guy ("no spouse, no kids, no cat, no dog, no nothing") and the only member of his family living in Cape Town, he's happy to keep his cooking quick, easy and not too finicky when he's by himself. As long as it's good, wholesome, and hearty food, he's happy.

"I'm a big risotto fan," he says. "It's such a simple dish that everyone pulls their nose at it, but it's a dish you need to get right for it to taste good. Every chef knows if someone can make a good risotto, you can hire them. It's the same with eggs. Because they're simple dishes to make, they're also easy to mess up. But I love anything with eggs. I'll eat breakfast any time of the day!"

By Eugene Yiga

OPPOSITE FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: LENTSWE'S SALMON STARTER; EAST AFRICAN PRAWN DISH; THE FLAVOURS OF ZANZIBAR; MALVA PUDDING WITH AMARULA CREME ANGLAISE; CHEF LENTSWE BENGHU. **TOP RIGHT:** FISHING THE TRADITIONAL WAY OFF PEMBA ISLAND; LENTSWE BHENGU, CHARMING AND TALENTED.

CHEFS WHO SHARE

Bhengu is the South African ambassador for the Chefs Who Share 'Young Chef Award', an inspiring new initiative that aims to showcase and nurture South Africa's young culinary talent. The third annual 'Chefs Who Share – the ART of giving' gala event, which has raised R6m since it began in 2013, took place at Cape Town City Hall on 10 September 2105, presented by Mercedes-Benz and associate sponsors Deutsche Bank, Swiss International Air Lines, Bulgari, Chocolat Frey, the Century City Conference Centre and Taj Cape Town. Proceeds from ticket sales and an art auction went to MAD Leadership Foundation and the Laureus Sport for Good Foundation. Learn more at www.chefswhoshare.com.

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