

By Eugene Yiga

Master of his plate

As the first South African to ever receive the prestigious Michelin accolade, **Jan Hendrik van der Westhuizen** is spreading his love for South African cuisine throughout France and beyond.

Born in Nelspruit in 1982, Jan Hendrik van der Westhuizen moved to Middelburg in Mpumalanga at the age of two.

"My earliest food memory is pigeon on the open veld fire on our farm," he recalls. "Ever since I was a young boy on the farm, I used to be in the kitchen. My parents say that I was very selective as to what I was eating."

After completing his schooling, he moved to Stellenbosch to study culinary arts and applied design. His unique skillset led to a stint as a contributing food editor at *ELLE* South Africa, after which he packed his bags to join the ranks at the test kitchens of the head office of *ELLE* International in Paris.

"I always wanted to be in food development and trend forecasting," he says. "Luckily this tied in with the concept of my restaurant as it's kind of what we do here."

Chasing opportunities, challenges, and dreams

Van der Westhuizen moved to France for the "opportunities, challenges, and dreams". But adjusting to living abroad wasn't easy at first, especially because of the language barrier. And even though things are better now, he still misses South Africa a lot.

Together with Pascal Szafranski, Van der Westhuizen started working on the concept of a restaurant in early 2013. Restaurant JAN, a fine-dining eatery in the up-and-coming bohemian district Nice Port in the south of France, then opened its doors on 28 September that year.



"All the red tape was a challenge," he recalls. "Administration in France is a nightmare; this and the occasional misunderstandings between me and the suppliers. For example, I would order 3kg duck breast and instead receive three whole ducks! This has all been a challenge, but such a learning curve."

Van der Westhuizen jokes that overcoming this challenge required a combination of "mampoer and patience" but he learnt some important lessons in the process.

"Cook what makes you happy and strive to do the impossible," he says. "And never take shortcuts. Instead, put people in place that support your ideals, understand your vision, and surround you with positive energy."

Resisting the malva pudding

"Never take shortcuts. Instead, put people in place that support your ideals, understand your vision, and surround you with positive energy."

It took two years for the restaurant to become profitable but it now ploughs all its profits back into the business. Doing so has allowed the team to expand from six when they first opened to eight now.

"The staff members are from South Africa, France, England, and the Philippines," says Van der Westhuizen, who was recently joined by South African chefs Kevin Grobler and Rutger Eysvogel. "To manage such a diverse team you have to connect with each member of staff, care for their needs, and respect where they come from."

Still, there are challenges; not just in resisting the malva pudding every time he walks past it but in also managing his love for cooking with the need to run a business at the same time.

"I am lucky to be able to focus on both," he says. "However, my attention is more on the creative and guest relations side. I love the satisfaction of being able to spoil people and make them happy."

Soul food with a difference

Restaurant JAN is described as a celebration of South African hospitality, serving honest food inspired by produce from the markets of Nice. Van der Westhuizen describes his culinary philosophy as being about "soul food with something to surprise people".

"I am a proud South African and relate to things I am familiar with," says Van der Westhuizen, who adds that he is also inspired by Asian and Mediterranean cuisines. "My taste memory is important and things like my grandmother's burnt custard evoke happiness in me. I like to share these moments."

Guests love to share them too, given that the restaurant is full when it serves dinner five days a week and lunch twice a week. The guests are French, Swedish, American, German, Dutch, English, Japanese, Chinese and, of course, South African too. And while he can't say which famous names he's hosted, they include high-profile actors, singers and politicians.

From back left: Yun Silva (Kitchen porter), Philippe Foucalt (Maître d'Hôtel), Sonia Dunstan - seated (Chef de Partie/ Pâtisserie), Charlie Martinet (Head waiter), Jan Hendrik van der Westhuizen (Executive chef), Kevin Grobler (Head chef), Michael Schmitt - seated (Sommelier), Rutger Eysvogel (Sous chef)



COOKBOOKS

Following on the success of his first recipe book, *The French Affair* (2013), which received the Gourmand World Cookbook Award for the Best French Cuisine Cookbook in the South African category, Van der Westhuizen is set to release his second title *JAN - A Breath of French Air*.

The new book picks up where the previous one left off and serves as Van der Westhuizen's personal call to adventure for every person who makes their way through its pages. Each of the almost 100 recipes was lovingly created and it is with great pride that the JAN team sets their little piece of France afloat in the world for adventurous foodies to experience for themselves.

"We have to adjust some dishes like cut down the sweetness in the bobotie or use less cinnamon in the milk tart," says Van der Westhuizen, who believes people would be surprised to discover how much butter he uses in his dishes.

"But they love it!"

Offering something other than the norm

Restaurant JAN received its first mention in the *Michelin Guide* a mere eight months after it first opened. Subsequent accolades included a spot on a list of the World's 15 Best Restaurants (as curated by Condé Nast Traveler), as well as glowing recommendations by *The New York Times* and the *Gault et Millau* restaurant guide.

Then, at the beginning of February, Michelin released the results for 2016 at the Place Vendôme in Paris. Restaurant JAN was awarded its first Michelin star. This makes Van der Westhuizen the first South African ever to receive this prestigious accolade, which is accurately described as the restaurant industry's Academy Award.

"It still feels unreal," says Van der Westhuizen. "I think what sets us apart is personal service, attention to what people want, and offering something other than the norm. We have proved ourselves and I think the reason is that we always up our game."

Since the prestigious announcement, bookings have increased nearly fourfold and the waiting list has grown. And although Van der Westhuizen wishes he knew what the future holds for him, the possibility of employing a few more staff will mean a lot for the restaurant. He is also open to franchising or any other opportunity as long it makes sense.

"The world moves forward," he says. "I think it's important to know when and where to do this. I will consider anything that I am capable of giving my personal attention." ■
editorial@finweek.co.za



Jan Hendrik van der Westhuizen
Owner and executive chef at Restaurant JAN

GETTING TO KNOW THE CHEF:

FAVOURITE DISH: *Pot-au-feu* (a French beef stew) or a simple lamb stew.

FAVOURITE RESTAURANT: Poilâne bakery, a little sandwich shop in Paris.

FAVOURITE HOLIDAY DESTINATION: In no specific order: Paternoster (on the West Coast), Arniston (Western Cape), Apricale (Italy), Barolo (Italy), Cape Town and Paris.

MOST IMPRESSIVE CHEF EVER WORKED WITH: My grandmother.