

How chefs say cheers to one of their own

The restaurant world is a cut-throat business but, as DONALD PAUL discovered at a farewell feast for one of SA's finest, there is honour among chefs

WHEN chef Graeme Shapiro opened The Restaurant in Somerset Road, on the borderline between Cape Town's mundane Green Point and trendy De Waterkant, there were mutterings about the presumptuous title. There were further mumbblings about what he assumed his clients would pay for his sometimes audacious offerings. The place was small and the kitchen, in full view at the back, minute; upstairs was a cramped, awkwardly structured galley. Yet within a year, The Restaurant was a must on every gourmet's dance card. You sensed in Graeme's cooking that he not only wanted to coax every filament of flavour from his ingredients, but that he also wanted to distil every bit of fun he could while doing so. He once walked in carrying a bunch of jasmine flowers he'd picked on his way out of the house. Later, he served a sorbet palate cleanser redolent with jasmine.

When Graeme decided to leave SA recently, nobody asked who'd fill his shoes, but it was an unspoken question that flickered among his friends. Many of those friends happen to be chefs and rather than jockeying for succession they decided to throw him a farewell party of note.

To get six of the country's top chefs cooking in one kitchen on the same night requires the persuasive skills of a Winchester 30-06 aimed at your head and the commanding attention of a live rattlesnake under your silver cloche.

The man to do it was Kitchen Cowboy and Alchemist Pete Goffe-Wood. He asked five others to choose an item from Graeme's memorable menu and do their version of it on the night (he had already chosen the Grilled Squid with Pumpkin Seed Pesto as his contribution). The dinner was to take place at his Alchemy Workshop.

Also invited were various food writers and winemaker Bruce Jack of Flagstone, whose vinous skills and bottles of enthusiasm were more than equal to the task the chefs threw at him.

"You won't believe the ease we had in putting this together," said Pete, during one of the many speeches given that night. "Everyone I asked simply said: where, when, what?"

If you put six chefs into a kitchen, however, add a spoonful of sous chefs and then stir in about 30 guests and a photographer, the odds are pretty low on getting any semblance of a meal together within any time frame,

African or otherwise. Chefs become kitchen dervishes, careering about in a roisterous, self-induced mania of practical jokes, insults and a chorus of: "You're not going to try that are you?" every time someone picked up an ingredient, utensil or simply turned up the gas.

The two chefs who didn't give the profession a bad name were David Grier of De Oude Welgemoed, and Matthew Gordon of Haute Cabrière and French Connection. There was around their preparations a triumphant stillness, unmindful of the



FOOD TO GO: Grilled squid with pumpkin seed pesto, above, and Graeme and Robyn Shapiro at the head of a table of friends and fellow foodies saying farewell, below.



A FEAST OF CHEFS: Above from left, Franck Dangereux, Bruce Robertson, David Grier, Matthew Gordon and Peter Goffe-Wood. Right, Margot Janse. Pictures: BRANDON

prevailing frenzy. It didn't help.

Graeme knew nothing of the party, though his fabulous wife Robyn was a necessary conspirator: someone needed to make sure he turned up. (True to form, he was late for his own party — but given the state of the kitchen it didn't matter).

Chef Franck Dangereux, who'd look equally comfortable in a Tricolour rugby jersey as a chef's jacket, started the evening with Seared Foie Gras with Oysters on Brioche and a Cape Brandy Cream. Franck said he took "a little licence" with Graeme's signature dish but then you'd expect that from the man who took La Colombe into the international top 50 restaurants of the year last year. (He's no longer with La Colombe and we're desperate to know where he'll surface next. There's rumour of a place in Noordhoek...)

Bruce Jack opened a few bottles (and then some more) of his 2005 Cape Winemakers Guild Month of Sundays, a blend of Sauvignon Blanc from Elim, Chardonnay from the Helderberg and some Riesling and Morio Muscat from the Swartberg and Oudtshoorn. It was, despite the fruit (pears, perhaps?), a crisp, ideal wine with a lovingly lingering taste.

David followed with Tuna Carpaccio with Black Bean Vinaigrette. He is currently running across the Great Wall of China, a distance of more than 5 000km — although, in all fairness, I don't think the trials of the dinner drove him to do it.

Bruce Jack pulled out the 2003 Flagstone Fiona Pinot Noir for the tuna — and if what's been written about the flavours bottled in it is vaguely true, we were in trouble. I could find little of the



Egyptian dukkah but spice there was, and berries and a bit of vanilla. It's a delicious wine, but then I am mad about Pinot noir.

It was left to the inimitable Margot Janse of Le Quartier Français to do Graeme's famous Marinated Wok Fried Quails. When Graeme put this dish on his menu one restaurant reviewer, who shall remain nameless, described it as "wok dried quails".

Margot confesses that she knew Graeme was up to some magical things in The Restaurant, but when she read this she didn't know whether to weep or throw out all her woks. In the end she paid him a visit and was relieved to discover the simple truth.

Bruce Jack offered a 2002 Schiefferterrassen Riesling, an entry-level wine from Heymann-Loewenstein estate on the slopes of Graeme's Moselle Valley; surprising, because Bruce Jack, in partnership with Graham Knox (as Jack & Knox Winecraft) produces Prosthline, a Riesling from grapes grown some 1 000m above sea level in the Swartberg. That said, the Schiefferterrassen's clean elegance went well with the spices of the quail.

Being a helicopter pilot in his non-cooking moments probably contributed to Matthew Gordon's calm-under-fire while serving the Grilled Ostrich with Deep-Fried Sweet Potatoes. It was the fifth course and Bruce Jack should probably not have brought out the 2003 Dark Horse Shiraz — there was enough wildness at the table already. But it's a beautiful wine, and perfect for the course.

Bruce Robertson of the showroom was finally dragged away from the table and told to serve the Tarte Tatin with Praline Ice-cream. For a while the kitchen sounded like a parliament on a full day with the backbenchers on Red Bull rather than their usual tipple.

Someone asked Bruce if he'd lost his crib notes. A sous chef didn't know whether to laugh or run away screaming. At some point Graeme made a speech while Robyn wept and, all of us being tired and emotional, we wept along with her.

GRILLED SQUID WITH PUMPKIN SEED PESTO

Pete Goffe-Wood's variation on Graeme Shapiro's recipe

Three tomatoes

900g squid

100g rocket

1 cup pumpkin seed pesto

Blanche, skin and seed the tomatoes. Cut the remaining tomato flesh into a neat dice. Season the squid with salt and pepper and grill on a hot griddle plate or sauté in a fiercely hot wok. Remove the squid from the heat and place in a large bowl. Add one tablespoon of the pesto followed by the chopped tomato and mix together. Add the rocket just before serving, toss and plate, garnishing with the rest of the pesto.

PUMPKIN SEED PESTO

Two cups pumpkin seeds

Three green chillies

15g lemon zest

Six cloves garlic

Three tbslp black mustard seeds, roasted

Three tbslp coriander seeds, roasted

80ml lemon juice

200ml pumpkin seed oil

Put all the ingredients except the oil into a pestle and mortar and grind into a rough paste. Thin the mixture out with the oil. Season the pesto with salt and pepper. Serves six.

BOOK + FOOD

A dish not worth dying for

THE PERFECTIONIST
Rudolph Chelminski
Gotham Books

THE Perfectionist's subtitle, Life and Death in Haute Cuisine, is poignantly apt in its description of one of France's greatest chefs, Bernard Loiseau, owner and chef at the Burgundian restaurant and hotel of Côte d'Or.

He killed himself on February 24 2003, partly because of rumours (untrue and unfounded) that he was to lose his three-star Michelin rating and the fact that he was demoted by two points in the Guide Gault Millau. His death brought a country to its knees in mourning — food and its providers are the ultimate celebrities in France — but it also made food-lovers the world over more aware of the pressure of staying at the top of the restaurant game and how those pressures can be deadly when they weigh on a man battling with bipolar disorder, even when undiagnosed.

Loiseau was one of only 25 chefs to achieve the restaurant holy grail of three Michelin stars, a goal that had driven him to strive for perfection (and driven him to the point of insanity) since an early age.

The Perfectionist is written by an American, which would be bizarre except that Chelminski is an American food writer who went to France 30 years ago and stayed there. He knows the industry on an often too intimate basis, being on first-name terms with not only chefs, including Loiseau, but every editor of the Michelin guide for the past two decades.

The story of Loiseau himself has a sad inevitability about it, but the author is good at the prehistory, explaining how that chef came to be either the summation of a great tradition or a desperate inheritor of an exhausted tradition. He rightly cites the great Ferdinand Point as the founding father in a movement that progressed through the likes of Paul Bocuse, Michel Guérard, Jacques Pic, Alain Chapel and the Troisgros brothers, all of whom were apprenticed to the great master at La Pyramide in Vienne. The great revolution of nouvelle cuisine, now horribly reviled and traduced in equal measure, began with Point and with a doctrine of fidelity to ingredients and freshness of preparation.

Since Loiseau inhabited this tradition by virtue of his apprenticeship with the Troisgros brothers, they play a large part in Chelminski's book. He paints a rather fearsome and oppressive picture of those two respected figures. Their restaurant seemed less grand than most and more rooted in the local community. However, to Chelminski, the brothers are a fearsome pair of martinets, whose fiercely disciplined apprentices subsequently go out into the world on an apostolic mission to spread the word.

The Perfectionist is the biography of an extraordinary man who, incapable of applying his intellect at school, was apprenticed to the restaurant industry and the Troisgros brothers, starting with cleaning bins and carrying coal, from the age of 15. He learned at the feet of the greats and grew to walk among them.

But it is also a fascinating look at the world of French cuisine, unquestionably still the standard by which the rest of the world measures its own culinary skills: its relentless workload and pressure (in Loiseau's time only Christmas Day was taken off); its capacity to kill its top chefs young (not from cholesterol due to an enduring French love of cream and butter, but from exhaustion, usually in their early 50s); and the unavoidable power that the Michelin and other rating systems hold over an entire industry.

When Loiseau died, so did the lifestyle of many French chefs who decided that the work, the time and the terror a subjective rating system placed on them, was simply not worth it.

The Perfectionist is a riveting if sobering read for anyone who loves food and the people who make it their life's, and death's, work. *With Financial Times*

KATY CHANCE

FOOD FIND

TAKING STOCK

POWDERED stock is so dreadful it can barely be called a foodstuff, although I have heard it makes for an excellent snuff. But few people these days have time to create home-made stocks rich with the reduced flavours of whatever you feel like throwing into the pot.

Several retailers now do good ready-made stocks although most of them require freezing unless you plan on using it soonish.

This locally made Famous Stock (Established 1999) Traditional Vegetable Stock Bouillon de Legumes is quite a mouthful for what is really the most simple and easily stored liquid stock around. Besides nifty packaging that makes the whole thing look like a bouillon cube, these long-life stocks stack easily at the back of a cupboard. Not having to defrost means soups can be thrown together in minutes.

Available in vegetable, (with no meat additives, salt, MSG, flavourants or colourants) beef, chicken and fish (none of which have pork additives) for just under R10 at selected supermarkets.

KATY CHANCE

