







# HELL'S ANGEL

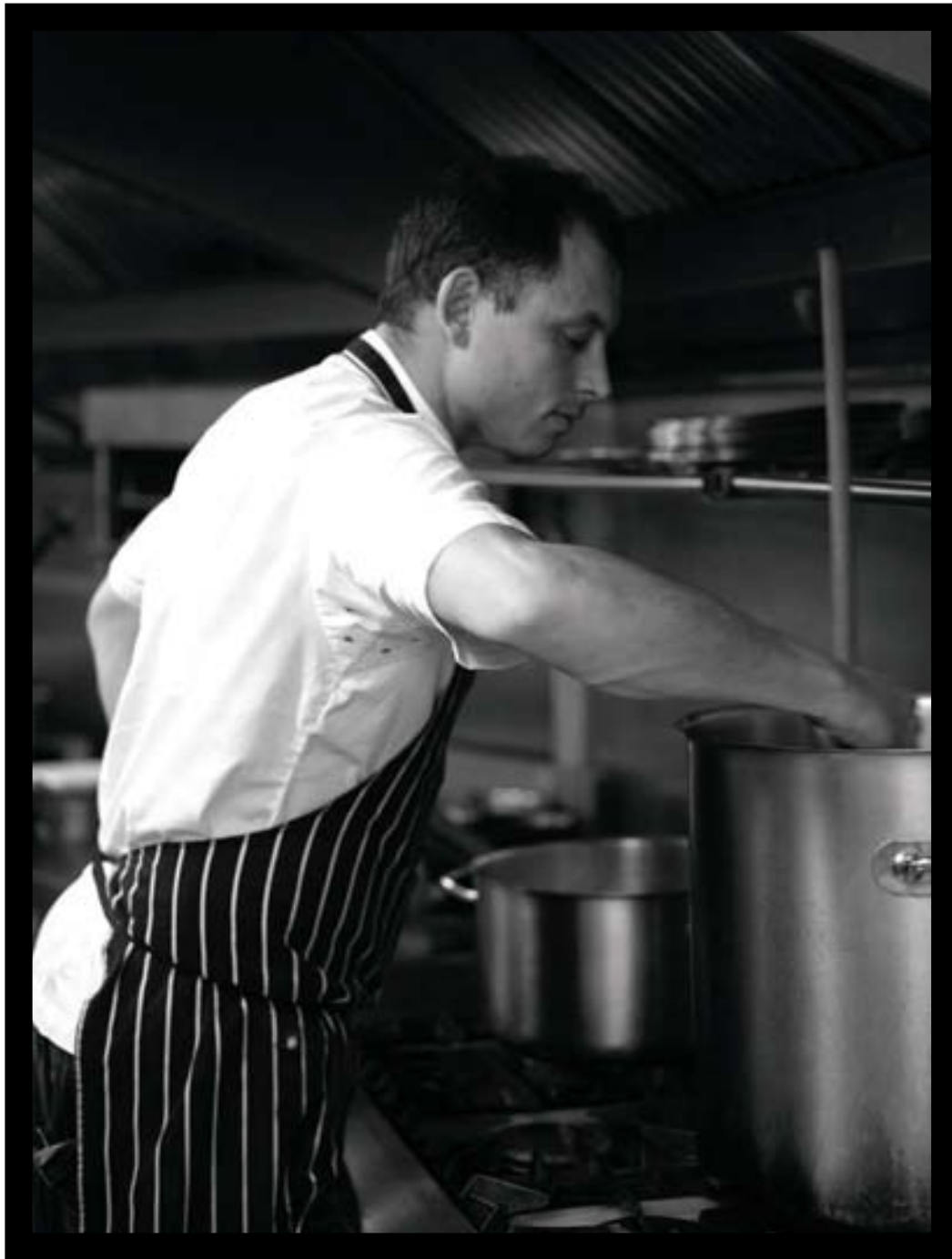
words DONALD PAUL photography DAVID CROOKES

One-time Gordon Ramsay protégé  
PJ VADAS has found *his place in the sun*  
at *The Roundhouse* in Camps Bay



FINE DINING





**DON'T** underestimate the power of television, especially on the young. This is what happened to one youngster. And what you read next might make you reach for the child helpline. Don't. This is a story about a boy watching Gordon Ramsay performing on kitchen TV. Yes, even adults are affected watching this tow-headed, grimacing, head-banger describe to viewers what looks like an ordinary boulangère as an expletive-riddled mash of unspeakable crud. Was the child unsupervised, you ask?

But this is not a story about copycat adolescent thugs pushing their lunch away with four-letter words. The 14-year-old boy was PJ Vadas, who thought that what Ramsay was doing was a lot of fun. And he wanted to be part of it.

Eight years later, PJ (Peter John) knocked on the kitchen door of Gordon Ramsay's restaurant Petrus in London and said he'd do anything needed of him in the kitchen. He was hired. His tasks were menial and stayed that way for a few months. But eventually he was moved up the hierarchy and was soon peeling vegetables. Cutting them came later. Much later.

'It was long, hard hours,' says PJ. 'I lost about 15 kg. But I needed to.' He's sitting in The Roundhouse, where he has been executive chef for the past three years, sipping coffee. 'And, yes, Gordon was a force to be reckoned with. You could be standing in the furthest corner of the kitchen quietly peeling a baby potato or scraping a little carrot with your back to the door and you would know he had entered the kitchen. You'd just know.'

But you don't get into Ramsay's kitchen because you knock on the door and offer to mop floors and wash plates. Every Polish panel beater can do that. What you do need is savvy, a bevy of credentials and a childhood dream. PJ's got cauldrons of those. His father owns Pembreys (a successful restaurant



## FINE DINING

in Knysna), so he's no stranger to the industry, and he graduated as a commis chef from Warwick's Chef School in the coastal town of Hermanus, winning the Best Practical Student award in the process. The reward was a three-month spell with Roger Vergé at the Moulin de Mougins on the French Riviera.

'I was so nervous, I was shaking when I got there. But Roger was so kind. He was kind to all his staff, greeting them all by name,' says PJ. What seems to have impressed PJ most was the extraordinary generosity of spirit of this grand old man of French cooking – one of the founding fathers of nouvelle cuisine but more famous for his Cuisine de Soleil (cuisine of the sun). It was after leaving Vergé that PJ went to London and knocked on that door.

Soon enough he was singled out by Angela Hartnett, who had joined Ramsay in 1994 at Aubergine – the Marco Pierre White venture – before she became his chef patron at the Connaught Hotel. It was to the Connaught that she moved PJ, and the two became firm friends.

'Angela was something else altogether,' says PJ. 'She would never interfere, but when she saw you weren't handling it she'd give you a look and you knew to step away from the burners. She'd just move right in and sort out whatever it was that needed sorting.'

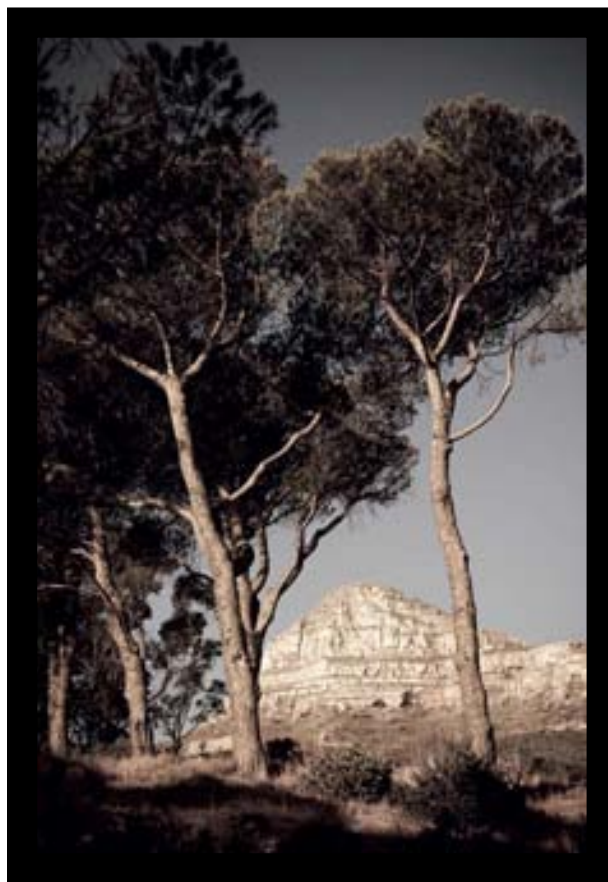
Two years in London for a boykie from Knysna, however, and the lack of sunshine – and a life – begin to get to you. PJ moved back home. 'My dad had said in words that even Gordon would never have used that I was mad to want to become a chef. But once he knew that I was going ahead with it he was the most amazing support. There were days in London when I'd get back from the kitchen and I'd be near to tears. I'd call them and say I was coming home. And he'd always listen to me and then talk me through it. Convince me that I could do it.'

Craig Paterson, a colleague of PJ's from the days when he worked at Parks in Wynberg, was now at the Cape Grace and he needed someone to help out. PJ said yes. While there, he won the Junior Chef Chaîne des Rôtisseurs Competition, went on to the finals in Bermuda and came second, the highest position attained by a South African chef in the competition.

But Ramsay wasn't yet done with him. PJ had been marked to go to New York and be in on the opening of the Gordon Ramsay at The London in New York City (so named because it was located in the London NYC Hotel).

So PJ went across to New York and was there through the planning and decorating phases of the new Ramsay restaurant. 'Look, New York is an incredible place, and it was exciting to be in at that level. But Gordon was hardly ever there once it opened. And it was a huge operation.'

The restaurant was not a success. As an aside, wine suppliers have slapped Ramsay's New York restaurant with two lawsuits. According to court papers filed by wine merchants, Wineberry, at the Supreme Court of New York in May 2010, Ramsay owes them more than \$40 000 (R300 000). VOS Selections said he owes them \$38 000 (R287 000).



After a year in New York and with red tape curling around his work permit, PJ returned to Knysna in 2007 and started working in his father's restaurant. But Knysna was Knysna, and he'd done it when he was a kid.

'When the offer at The Roundhouse came up, I said I'd come down and take a look. I had no idea this place even existed. One look at the view and I was sold.'

From the dining room, through the curve of the window-filled walls, you look down on to the beaches of the Atlantic Ocean and across to the ragged crags of the Twelve Apostles. It's easy to understand his choice.

The Roundhouse – a 42 ha World Heritage Site – was built in 1786 and was used as a hunting lodge by Lord Charles Somerset, the governor of the Cape. It has had many incarnations as a restaurant. In 2007 a company called Let's Sell Lobster, owned by Fasia Malherbe and Dale den Dulk and specialising in hospitality training, bought the concession and management.

Chef and restaurant consultant Liam Tomlinson supervised the renovations and extension of the kitchen. It's a clean, well-lit space. Bright double-bar neon lights, white walls, white floor, scrubbed stainless steel.

Even the black metal-framed gas burners gleam sullenly. The only bit of colour is a large pink apron worn by PJ.

It's a Wednesday night. The restaurant is fully booked but it's only 7:30 pm. The waiting time. The kitchen simmers in readiness. PJ checks the preparations, talks to the sous chefs, asks a few clipped questions. He's smiling – which he does most of the time.

His favourite cuisine is Italian. His favourite pastime is buying and reading cookbooks. He runs and cycles for exercise. But cooking is what he loves – and he's totally in control. The orders start coming in and he stands centre stage, calling them out in a clear voice. Everyone answers 'Oui, chef!'. If someone is too involved in prepping then he'll repeat it, until he hears the response. Everyone needs to be on the same plate.

The time spent with Vergé and Ramsay has not been wasted. His food is clever, clean and relies on the strength of the ingredients' innate flavours. He's not averse to pumping them up, filling a gas-powered Chantilly siphon gourmet whip with the potato and leek velouté so that it emerges as a hot, heavy froth covering for the slow-cooked oysters and bacalhau fritters. He spends time

researching suppliers to ensure their produce is the best, such as Jenny's milk-fed veal ('I've never tasted anything like it') and local ricotta from Buffalo Ridge outside Wellington.

PJ walks away to see what's happening at the other end of the kitchen. Nicola, a sous chef five months out of cooking school, when asked if PJ has any of Ramsay's screamer symptoms, pauses in mid slice of the foie gras and ham terrine. 'Nah,' she says. 'But I've learnt a lot more in five months than I ever thought possible.' etc

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