



To the root of good taste

by Lynette Louw

Fine dining and haute cuisine are two concepts that have evaded South African food lovers for many years. But with the local palate growing more sophisticated and consumers demanding true value for their money, the South African restaurant industry has slowly but surely started losing its baby shoes.

More and more restaurants are adding value to their menus by the day, and everywhere we see new or revamped dishes being served to quality-hungry customers. But a twist to the familiar is not what fine dining is about. And a rocket leaf or a dash of beetroot puree does not necessarily constitute a fine plate of food.

Fine dining is all about the “wow”-factor, about reinvention, about keeping a restaurant alive. It is about quality, value for money, and standing out from the rest. It is about being the purple cow. And if fine dining is what you are truly after, then Roots Restaurant is the place to go.

Food philosophy

“Food,” says Roots’s *chef patron*, Philippe Wagenfuhrer, “is about giving. That is why we at Roots firmly believe in giving our customers value for money. For your effort and your money, we give you a dining experience beyond compare.”

And beyond compare it is! Nestled in the Cradle of Humankind in the Krugersdorp vicinity, Roots is the culinary arm of Forum Homini Hotel, situated on Letamo Game Farm. A scenic drive through the farm takes you to the hotel and restaurant, which is situated on a peaceful lake abundant with birdlife. Once you have absorbed the quietness of the natural surroundings and relaxed atmosphere, it is time to sink your teeth into the evolutionary Roots concept of food and wine pairing.

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Menus are created daily and no menu is ever the same. Every menu is paired with a series of carefully selected wines that are offered as an add-on to the food menu, and which aims to enhance the flavour of each dish. The wines are selected from the restaurant’s cellar.

“The fixed menu,” explains Philippe, “has a number of advantages above that of an a la carte menu. Firstly, everything is fresh and prepared daily. In the second instance it is better value for money for our patrons, and thirdly, there are no complicated choices to make. The fixed menu makes it easier for the

customer to enjoy food that he or she would otherwise probably not have ordered. Diners are creatures of habits – we want to break those habits.

“Also menus are balanced and well-planned, using seasonal ingredients. It allows the kitchen to be creative and

encourage new methods of cooking and experimentation. It is also very complicated as dietary requirements are very much part of our concept. We cater for all kinds of diets, whether due to choice or religious reasons. We truly try to accommodate everyone.



On the menu

The menus consist of a four-course lunch, a five-course Saturday brunch, and a whopping six-course Sunday lunch experience. The latter, warns Philippe, can take up to three hours. So sit back, relax and enjoy a fusion of French, African and Asian flavours served by exceptionally well-trained waiters and waitresses on the deck or inside the restaurant.

Roots has been going strong for almost five years now, and has raked in a number of awards during this time. These awards notably include being listed as one of food magazine, *Eat out's*, top ten restaurants for three years running. It has also been awarded the 2010 American Express Platinum fine dining restaurant

award, the 2009 ROC-CI Restaurant Business of the Year (Gold), the Restaurant Association of South Africa's fine dining restaurant of the year, and one of *Wine Magazine's* top ten restaurants in 2008.

These awards are not based only on the food served at Roots. It also gives recognition for the hard work that goes into managing the restaurant as a business and running every aspect of it as professionally as possible. This applies to everything – from the produce to the suppliers to the staff and guests.



Philippe Wagenfuhrer,
chef patron at Roots
Restaurant

Attitude is everything

"A good restaurant," says Philippe, "has 22 elements to tend to. Of these, only two or three relate to the kitchen. Other aspects include management, marketing, PR, suppliers, good cost control, training, development, setting trends, etc. And just as food can make or break the fine dining experience, the same goes for one of the crucial elements, namely service". The staff complement at Roots is therefore trained to deliver the best service possible.

The staff complement at Roots is therefore trained to deliver the best service possible. Philippe chooses to do his own training, which consists of around 12 hours worth of training per week.

"The most important aspect of the training, is attitude. In fact, attitude is everything," says Philippe. "Nice is not good enough when it comes to restaurant service. Service has to be impeccable. That is why the staff at Roots are trained to weigh, measure and anticipate. They learn when to talk and when not to talk, how to read body language, how to weigh up a customer's needs. They are educated in the psychology of service."

Going local

Another aspect that is very important to Philippe, is establishing and enlarging the restaurant's local footprint: "We do this by encouraging local suppliers to supply us with their produce. In addition, myself and head chef, Allistaire Lawrence, visit local winemakers personally in order to understand their wines.

"This is achieved by tasting wine and talking to the winemakers in their cellars – on their home soil. We bring this experience back to the restaurant, by creating and fine-tuning our food and wine teaser menus."

The restaurant industry in South Africa is actually still quite young and, in

Philippe's mind, entering a huge boom into progression. In the past the use of certain oils, for example, didn't matter. Now, many restaurants make a point of serving their salads and bread with olive oil.

Hygiene in the kitchen

Philippe grew up in a family of restaurateurs and has been handcrafting food since the tender age of eight.

One thing that European restaurants are fanatic about and which Philippe feels South African restaurants are sorely lacking, are proper hygiene controls. And here he singles out HACCP or hazard analysis critical control point – a system which gives a common sense approach towards the safety management of food products.

"HACCP is very important in the food industry across the world, but it is still not controlled very well in South Africa," says Philippe.

"HACCP is applied as a natural part of the management process at Roots and we strive to adhere to its principles.

"It is very difficult for any restaurant to apply the rules of HACCP, but if everyone in the food value chain were to comply – from the producer, to the processor, supplier, middleman, and ultimately the restaurateur, it would make things a lot easier for everyone. We really need legislation to regulate HACCP and make it compulsory for all food businesses.

"These things can only be properly put in place if the authorities do their jobs and if a representative body for the restaurant industry in South Africa, starts to insist on correct procedures."

Getting there

If you want to experience the Roots dining experience, phone 011 668 7000 or visit the website at www.forumhomi.com for directions and more information. **M&J**