



Lehan Botha, chef,
programme manager
and whiz on the Weber

Sing for your supper

Bush weekends are usually synonymous with deep relaxation and indulgence. Days are punctuated with rounds of waking, game-viewing trips, napping and eating exquisite food. KIM HOEPFL recently enjoyed such a weekend, but had to forgo a leisurely lie-in so that she could make it to her cooking lesson on time

Photographs by
VANESSA GROBLER



Kim Hoepfl (far right) and fellow students
prepare for the venison demonstration



Lehan Botha



Samp & Soufflé's Judith Lee (right) paired wines with the venison dishes



The venison is wrapped in caul for basting while cooking



The idea was simple: hands-on cooking lessons in small groups that combined food, wine, a bit of a holiday and learning. It's the creation of marketing and events company Samp & Soufflé, which plans and markets cookery tours as one would in Tuscany, but it all happens here in South Africa. What makes their tours exciting is their vision of getting into the underbelly of South African food, guided by people who are experts in their field. For example, you'll get to know how to prepare venison in the bush, or go grape stomping in Franschhoek or go mampoer-drinking and preserve-making in the Groot Marico.

Each course runs over a weekend and starts with a leisurely Friday-night arrival, followed by drinks and dinner. Lessons begin after breakfast on Saturday. Everything is prepared ahead for you so there is no real grunt work and that night you sit down to a grand supper, one that you helped to make. Wine, matched with the food, flows freely. It's fun, loaded with tips and you don't need a degree in cookery to be able to participate.

Hoedspruit in Limpopo province is a five to six hour drive from Johannesburg. It's a nexus town around which satellite tracts of quintessential South African bushveld reserves orbit. The movie *Jock of the Bushveld* was filmed near here. Bordering on one of these conservation areas, the Klaserie, is a small game reserve called Gwalagwala. For this city girl, it represented a step back into very calm and unpretentious surroundings. Gwalagwala is a tented camp, where space has been cleared in the bush and the tents erected on raised wooden platforms. It sleeps a maximum of 12 and has the smilest staff I have ever seen. A pet warthog, Galube, shows up for snacks and back scratches from time to time.

Although the lodge is home to abundant plains game (no big cats), you scarcely have to get out of bed to experience the wildlife. Bird calls will wring you from your sleep at

daybreak, and at dinner – enjoyed in an open-air boma – a mother genet and her son with their long tails, so unlike domestic cats in their sharpness and caution, watch, waiting until they too receive a snack. Around the same time, a small family of very shy and rarely seen bush babies descends from the trees for a few slices of banana, their eyes like dark pools, before disappearing back into the night.

Surrounded by such abundant game, it's appropriate (or perhaps not) that at Gwalagwala we should learn about venison, accompanied by some sumptuous red wines. Judith Lee of Samp & Soufflé has the gift of the gab as well as expertise in wine, and chose wines for the weekend that would complement the dishes we were to make.

Days are structured leisurely. Upon waking, you have the choice to go walking, a more intimate way to get acquainted with the bush than a game drive. Knowing what lay ahead, I tried to keep breakfast small, but it wasn't easy. One thing I couldn't forgo was the homemade marmalade. On hot buttered toast, there is nothing like it. After breakfast, at about 11am, "instruction" begins.

Our lesson that day was to learn how to carve and prepare venison. For this purpose, an impala had been slaughtered, exsanguinated and hung a few days prior to our arrival. Step number one was learning how to carve the carcass. There was plenty to get squeamish about. For someone used to buying meat in asepticised packets in the supermarket, I saw, in very clear terms, where meat comes from. Giving instruction was Bertus Britz, chef and general manager of Gwalagwala, and a bushveld boy himself. The previous evening he had made a delicate soufflé and the most perfectly textured crème brûlée. Today he was taking a hacksaw to a carcass he had hunted himself.

I'm one of those women who, while relatively competent in the kitchen, still cannot put together a braai. I wouldn't even know how to light it. That day I learned. Working alongside Bertus the effervescent Lehan Botha, chef and programme manager



Irresistible hot buttered toast with homemade marmalade

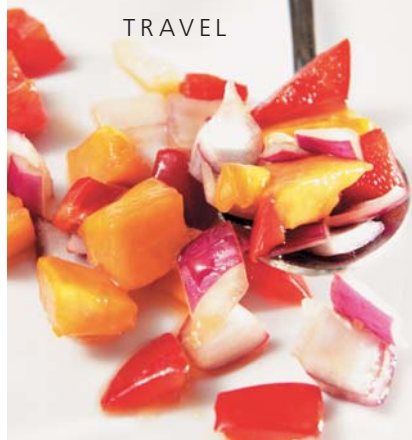


GOURMET TRAVEL



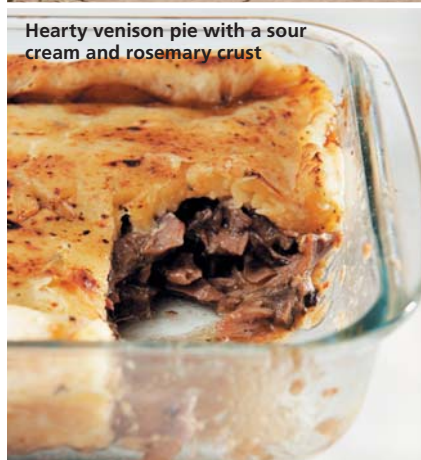
Laid-back living at Gwalagwala

TRAVEL



Galube the resident warthog and chef/GM of Gwalagwala Bertus Britz

Hearty venison pie with a sour cream and rosemary crust



at Legend Hospitality School outside Pretoria. Lehan had been roped in to do the actual cooking. He is also a whiz on Weber braais (to which I'm a convert) and all our venison cooking was to be done on them. From Lehan I learned about direct (to quickly cook thin pieces of meat like chops) and indirect heat (great for smoking and big cuts needing long cooking times). I also learned how to smoke meat, smoking two tender impala loins to use later for carpaccio.

In his recipes Lehan strives to use ingredients one would normally have at home and that simultaneously love venison. He's also a fan of using white wine in meat marinades, not red. While we were busy getting our coals hot, the day's temperature itself took a dip. Never one to miss a beat, Judith disappeared, only to re-appear with a tray clinking with glasses of sweet red muscadell to fend off the cold. It also injected our little gathering of 12 with a dose of relaxation, and within half an hour everyone had become a lot more talkative.

Later in the day, after tea and a feet-up session, we took to our Webers in earnest, two to a braai, snacking on some of the smoked carpaccio we had made earlier (the dissonance between the bloodied carcass and these delicate, delicious canapés was almost surreal). By 8pm, under Lehan's mothering, we had a roasted leg of impala wrapped in caul fat and jammed with wedges of cabanossi sausage for succulence, grilled venison fillet steaks with green peppercorn sauce, venison pie with a sour cream and rosemary crust, and a bubbling dish of bacon and mushroom samp.

It was wholesome, pure and delicious, the kind of food I imagine pioneer great-grandmothers used to make. The genets were still patient, taking it all in from their roof-top perch, but not hanging around, unlike my cooking companions and I, who

did what all people in the bushveld do at night: circle the fire with glasses of wine, and later, glasses of brandy, in hand.

COOK'S TIPS

Lehan advises the following when working with venison (or meat in general):

- Pour marinades into large zip-lock plastic bags, then add the meat and toss together. This gives the meat an even coating, makes it very easy to stir the marinade and plastic does not react with the acidic ingredients of the marinade as some metal dishes would.
- Leave meat to marinate overnight in the fridge.
- Plan! Never cook meat straight from the fridge because its internal temperature will be very low. This means while the outside may look cooked, the inside will remain cold and may not be sufficiently cooked. Take food out of the fridge an hour before you intend cooking it.
- If meat is frozen, begin defrosting it the night before. Don't defrost it in microwave ovens as this can partially cook the food. Don't defrost in warm water either, a method that causes dilution and loss of flavour and nutrients.
- Sharpen your knives at least once a month – Lehan uses a sharpening stone.
- When smoking food using wood chips, dampen the chips beforehand to soften the smoke. Dry smoke is a lot harsher in aroma and effect.
- Venison lends itself to partnering with the sweet/acid combination of fruit as a side dish. Try stewed dried fruits or sambals that combine fruit and vegetables such as red pepper, pawpaw and onion.
- Forgotten the firelighters? Don't worry – by pouring a little cooking oil into a cardboard egg box and lighting it you can achieve the same effect.

Samp & Soufflé Culinary Tours take place in Cape Town, the Winelands, Groot Marico, Franschhoek, Ficksburg during cherry picking season and in the bush, averaging R4 000 per person for the weekend. Visit www.sampsouffle.com or call Cheryl Adamson or Zhana Ramalho on 011-728-4032 or 082 444 2884.