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(/)

TGIFOOD

PATHFINDER

Ru Furusa: The foodie who would be chef





 Turnip and beetroot carpaccio salad. Photo supplied

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Unable to rake in funding to get to culinary school, young Zimbabwean Ru Furusa found other ways to achieve her dream of a career in food.

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Virtually every famous chef you know walked the same path to that position: a passion for food discovered early, formal training at a culinary school then the hard work and accolades that follow. This story is not about a household name but profiles someone equally dedicated to food.

It's a story that brought her to a career in food, if not perhaps in the obvious way. Proof, if the pudding needed any, that a dream of pursuing a passion for food need not necessarily involve spending your life in a sweaty kitchen.

Ru Furusa grew up in Mabelreign, a leafy suburb in Harare, Zimbabwe. As the eldest child, she started helping her single mother in the kitchen from the age of five. Furusa giggles, recalling that

in the beginning she was motivated by the treats: licking baking spoons and swiping the occasional piece of meat from the pot.

Her mother took a food preparation course at a local technikon to elevate her skills in the kitchen, which led to a lot of experimentation.

“My favourite food memory is waking up to the smell of delicious food on a Saturday morning. On special occasions it would be Quiche Lorraine with bacon, mushroom and onions in the oven or a pot of *mbambaira* (sweet potato) bubbling away on the stove; we enjoyed it all the same. Something that sounds unusual but tasted divine was roasted bananas with bacon wrapped around them.”

Gradually Furusa was given leeway to cook unsupervised and she fondly recalls being allowed to prepare all the food for her younger sister’s birthday when she was 10. Using recipes from old *Your Family* magazines, a feast featuring mini egg mayo sandwiches and coloured popcorn was whipped up.

But while food was an integral part of her happy childhood, it was never discussed as a career choice. By the time high school was completed, the family was experiencing financial hardship, so acceptance to UCT was received with joy and the future career was considered cast in stone.

The lure of food was too strong to resist, so upon arrival in Cape Town Furusa applied to culinary schools but was constantly faced with the obstacle of funding. None of her bursary applications was successful.

Someone with less resolve would have been disheartened, but this foodie was made of sterner stuff. With the same fierce determination that she drew on to complete her studies to obtain a Masters degree in Development Studies in Sociology, she pursued her passion for all things culinary. By committing to a different cooking class every month and attending all the festivals and events she could find, she built up a solid knowledge base.

Her first foray into cooking was very low key: she was part of a *Come Dine With Me*-style cook-off organised with friends over a couple of nights. After winning the top prize with mushroom risotto and tiramisu, she decided to aim a bit higher. Starting by catering for friends' baby showers and birthdays, soon word-of-mouth attracted more clients, leading to brisk trade on weekends.

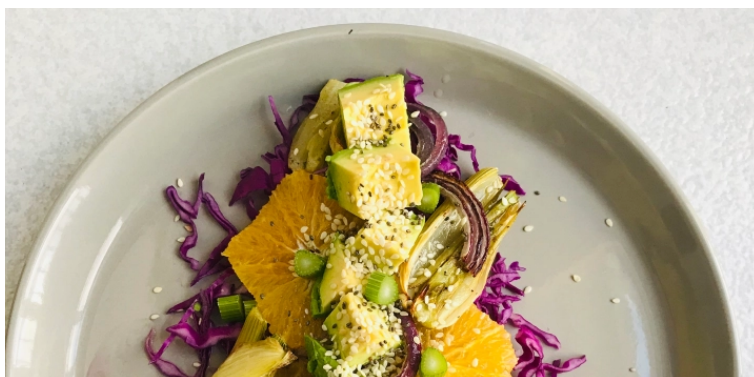


📷 Smothered greens with arborio rice. Photo supplied

Noticing a gap in the market with homesick expats, Furusa began offering dinners serving traditional Zimbabwe cuisine such as Sadza (pap), peanut butter rice, chicken gizzards, deep-fried kapenta, madora (mopane worms) with tomato chili relish, and muboora une dovi (pumpkin leaves with peanut butter). These are not regular as they depend on supplies being brought across the border, so each dinner is eagerly anticipated and quickly booked.

Umthunzi Farming Community is a social enterprise that empowers small-scale urban farmers in low-income townships in Cape Town. Furusa develops recipes that are sent out weekly to customers to give them ideas for what to do with the organic vegetables delivered to them. Recently she has also been a regular guest chef on *Afternoon Express*, delighting viewers with spinach and feta twists and classic pear tart.

Not content to stop there, she wants to bring others on board as the journey continues. One of the biggest challenges facing amateur cooks is the sense of isolation from peers in the industry, which means missed networking opportunities. Her solution for this is an online portal to make connections and create networks with like-minded food creatives.





📷 *Roast fennel salad with red cabbage slaw, avocado, and orange syrup dressing. Photo supplied*

“Think of it as a LinkedIn for food creatives, with your portfolio and experience visually represented while also highlighting what services, assistance, collaboration, opportunities you are requiring or offering to other creatives. I am hoping to get this launched by mid-2020.”

Although the suburb she grew up in was in a city, Furusa recalls having chickens in the backyard and the family growing most of the vegetables they needed in the garden.

“Every December holiday during the rainy season we would use any vacant land in the neighbourhood to plant maize, groundnuts and sweet potatoes.”

This is one of the reasons she develops a lot of recipes focused on vegetables.


“I find it so exciting to think of new ways to cook with veggies that are not the mundane – boiling till the chlorophyll runs out. For many households vegetables are the most accessible thing and there is such a variety, which makes the cooking experience so unique every single time.”

As part of her ongoing love affair with food, Furusa

treats herself to a trip to a different food destination every year. This year's jaunt included Paris, Amsterdam and Barcelona. Coming back, sated and bursting with inspiration, these journeys remind her how important it is for her to focus on African cuisine in her endeavours.

“For too long we have allowed people to shape the narrative around our food. We have not documented enough in history books about how our foods were traditionally used and celebrated. We have watched other people ‘discover’ our foods: marvel at them, interrogate them, define them. Foods we have been eating for centuries. This is something I truly hope to undo through my work. African food should be treated with the dignity and honour it deserves. I would love for all foods to be treated the same, I don't believe in hierarchies of cuisine.”



 *Fettuccine with lemon garlic prawns. Photo supplied*

After many years of people asking her for cooking classes, Furusa has decided to start these in 2020 and use them as a trial run for what she intends will eventually expand into a chefs' school.

“Most culinary training is heavily centred on French methods and ingredients. The French are regarded as the benchmark for international cuisine, especially as the basis for fine dining. In the same way, I want to my future students to recognise what value lies in learning about African food, its incredibly rich history and how to treat the produce with respect.

“I would love for the curriculum in culinary schools to include and reflect our heritage and develop this as the mainstream method of teaching about food. This, in turn, would influence the way society views African food as they become more exposed to techniques, methods and foods that represent diverse African cultures.”

Her cooking school dream would also provide access to those that cannot afford expensive chef school or have no access to bursaries but are passionate about food and the culinary arts.





📷 *Orange-infused mini malva puddings. Photo supplied*

Furusa enjoys the vast offering of African cuisine but is particularly fond of North African especially Ethiopian because of the predominant use of spices such as paprika, cumin and saffron. She claims the best places in Cape Town to try Ethiopian food is deep in the heart of Somaliton in Bellville at restaurants you won't find on Zomato.

“My favourite is Mubarak Restaurant that offers a fusion of East and North African dishes including chapati and injera served with stew, beans and saffron rice. Last year as part of a community project with TedxCapeTownWomen I spent time there cooking and speaking with the chef about the migration of food from other parts of Africa into the South.

Furusa is determined to follow her food journey to the end and believes all her experience so far will stand her in good stead. She does not consider herself a role model but hopes her story will encourage others to be playful in the kitchen and pursue their culinary dreams to the fullest. **DM**

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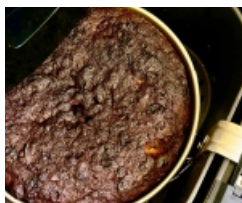
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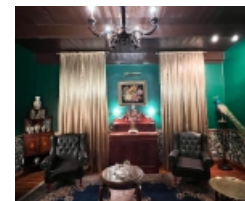
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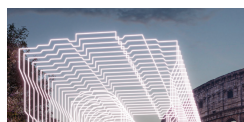
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