



Annette Kesler



Ina Paarman



Lannice Snyman



Today, simplicity is the key

# Savouring the taste of success

## Three women who got the recipe right

**Three South African women helped shape the way we think about food today. Restaurant critic Brian Berkman asked trailblazers Annette Kesler, Ina Paarman and Lannice Snyman how they started, about the changing world of food, and what we can expect in the future.**

Open a kitchen cupboard today and next to the extra virgin, cold-pressed olive oil there will likely be a jar of Thai curry paste and coconut milk, sushi rice and long-life Indian Korma sauce. With the plethora of cookbooks and availability of international ingredients, we've all become cooks of the world – as happy to throw a chop on the braai as to use Oyster Sauce in a stir-fry.

In her 30 years as the food editor for *Fairlady* magazine, Annette Kesler introduced us to new ingredients such as butternut and taught us how to cook it, as well as to the food of the world through recipe features at iconic hotels like the Ritz Paris and Hotel Cipriani in Venice.

Even today as editor of [www.showcook.co.za](http://www.showcook.co.za), an online food, travel and lifestyle magazine, Annette steers our taste buds. "When we started *Showcook* nine years ago, we didn't tread the well worn path. I decided it had to be beautiful, legible and easy for technology idiots like myself. We succeeded at that, but now we're changing into a new cocktail dress – the site will be bigger and better with all the bells and whistles."

Kesler discovered many cooks, John Jackson now at Royal Malewane and Etienne Bonthuys

at Tokara among them: "We were at Spier and this delicious, utterly delicious food arrived. He and the food were totally unlike anything we'd seen. Etienne, with his bright blue eyes and jeans captivated. He'd worked at The Astoria in Brussels. Just as we were about to publish our feature on him, he called to say he'd been fired from Spier. The reason? He'd served lamb too rare. I helped him find another position.

"We witnessed the end days of Haute Cuisine and beginnings of Nouvelle Cuisine – and the emergence of the chef from inside the kitchen into the restaurant.

"Anne Willen, a well known French food writer, said *Fairlady* introduced paté to the Platteland. South Africa was just emerging from eating only monkey-gland steaks. I remember my first butternut soup with leeks and parsnips. It just took off and launched many variations.

"We helped to change the face of what we ate in South Africa. As more people started travelling, cuisine became more global.

"Food at The Capetonian Hotel was wonderful. This is where the art of service was introduced. They were full for lunch and dinner and there was always a choice of vegetables served in beautiful copper pots. Emphasis was on service.

"Today, simplicity is the key. Chefs today could do with a little more concentration on simplicity. You can achieve a wonderful taste just with rosemary, lemon and garlic."

Kesler says that although she admires molecular gastronomy (deconstructed) as wonderful theatre, at the end of the day she thinks

publicity, as a very potent force, is the reason behind molecular gastronomy. "I do admire their skill – it's an amazing skill, but it isn't my own personal taste of cooking.

"Very good ingredients handled as little as possible is my maxim. Food writer Julia Child commented about all the handling of food when it came to the Nouvelle Cuisine trend – I think the same can be said for today's trend.

"I think people will realise it is theatre. Molecular cuisine is for chefs who have a great deal of artistry. It is bravura cooking. We must quietly forget about it. I see it ending by food becoming much simpler.

"What one admires in a chef is a sense of discipline, but also the respect he has for his staff, and they have for him."

The most famous name in South African cuisine is that of Ina Paarman. She has created a range of help-the-cook products that has made hers a household name.

"I started the cookery school in 1983 and it was very hard. I had one domestic helper, a Defy-sponsored oven and a borrowed table.

"I was the first food editor at *Femina* magazine and previously a home economist. My cookery school was up and running and I was doing a *Good Morning South Africa* TV slot. Jane Raphaely approached me as launch food editor for *Femina*. I said I'm not giving up the school, but she was happy that I did both. It worked well for seven years.

"I'd like to think that my biggest contribution to the South African food scene is that, because of my academic background and greater



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in-depth knowledge, that I was the first person who started thinking intelligently about doing things in the kitchen cleverly.

“Like how to make the perfect chips: Recently we’ve found a method that doesn’t require peeling potatoes, but rather to roll them in pap flour, which gives a dry coating that crisps beautifully. This is a simple thing, but it will change the way we make chips.

“My mission in life has been to teach people to cook.

“No one would publish my book, as we didn’t have money to pay for a colour photographer.

Sue Robinson helped persuade Professor Stanley Pinchas to illustrate the book.

“Graham, our youngest son, who was at university at the time, pushed us to self-publish.

“My husband nearly dropped dead when Graham suggested we borrow money to self-publish using our house as collateral.

“The house cost R75 000 when we bought it 30 years earlier and it cost about as much to publish the book!

“For four months, nobody slept. After four months, we were able to repay the loan.

“A lot of the recipes were traditional good South African dishes like my oma’s lamb bredie. The seasoned sea salt was the first product.

“When Graham joined the business, he hired a building in Diep River and we moved the factory in there. Woolworths brought their executive team to the cooking school and following that, Brian Frost invited us to make a range.

“Because we’re fanatical about quality, we never take shortcuts. It is gratifying when people stop me to talk about the range – I’m proud of what we do.

“If you have a really good curry sauce, for example, it is easy to make a dish that is healthy and tasty.

“We do the slow cooking in the factory so it is quicker for you at home. Many factories buy their equipment off the shelf, but we decided to purpose design our factory to mimic what happens in a domestic kitchen.”

Paarman says her products are available worldwide: “Especially where South Africans have moved abroad like in Dubai, Australia and in Ireland, our products do especially well.

“For us, exports is jam on the bread and not the bread itself.

“The Ina Paarman brand is 55% of the business, but we’re also Woolworths’ ninth biggest

grocery supplier and we supply various food businesses according to their specifications.

“The success of our business is teamwork.

“Graham says: ‘you can cook and I can count.’

“He is the MD of the company and the right man for the job; my husband Ted is the visionary. We support 120 staff in our factory. We still work every weekend.”

Lannice Snyman wrote *Free from the Sea* in 1979. Since then 150 000 copies have been sold in 10 impressions. “It was my first book and I’ve been professionally involved in the food industry since then. I’ve had a twin career of food writing, restaurant reviewing and book publishing, which brings everything together.”

Snyman has published 11 books that are still in print, including *Vin De Constance* with Michel Roux Jnr, which won the 2007 Gourmand Award: Best Food and Wine Matching Book in the World.

“Cookbooks are still vibrant and where there are books written by people that readers know and trust, they will do well. I will, however, be way more careful who I publish in the next years.

“Today South African book publishing has to be as good as books that are published abroad – we’re in a global market. Good books will always find a home.

“What I’ve learned from food writing, restaurant writing and book publishing is that the products need to be personal. The people who produce all three must be accountable and must communicate a sense of the personality of the writer or cook.

“Diners want to go where they are welcome and it concerns me that there are lots of faceless restaurants where there isn’t a visible manager.

“At the basic entry level, you need management present. You simply want someone to meet and greet you and take care if you have a problem. In many restaurants, there are mostly waiters, but no one else. Problems fester because staff are not watching.

“Over the last 30 years, we’ve moved towards reclaiming our culinary heritage. We’re at the tip of the iceberg. The tourism industry needs it, and we need it for our own self esteem. We understand the (political) reasons why we haven’t done so before, but not enough food writers are dipping into the spices that are inherent in the Malay and Indian contribution

to South Africa. We’re still very Eurocentric. A very important move is towards local ingredients, which are way better than they have ever been in the past. Often of good quality and often close by – it’s a dream to have it grown down the road. I think we’re doing better.

“Each local ingredient is a cornerstone of our cuisine.

“In terms of progress, we have met the expectations of the larger global village and are regarded among the best. When we have restaurants and cooks that are in the Gourmet Cookbook Awards and Restaurants in the Top 50, we can be proud. *Vin de Constance* won best of the best in the food and wine matching category.

“If this is what South Africa can do, then anything is possible. *Posh Nosh* won the 2006 Gourmand Award: Best book for Entertaining in the World.

“*Tortoises and Tumbleweeds*, dedicated to my parents, is my 16th book. We’ve sold, in total, more than half a million copies over the years.

“I’m truly amazed when people come up to me and talk about my books, but I realise that in terms of my own books, my sales are big even when compared with international writers. Selling 4 000 books in South Africa makes you a best seller. Unfortunately, you can hardly break even at that point.

“In recent years, publishing has changed dramatically. Now it’s about pre-press production and printing from discs, so the skills have changed. A lot of the digitising is done by the photographers, so there is consistency.

“Both because of cost and quality, we print abroad, often in Singapore. Foreign exchange is making it more costly at the moment. The cost of paper has increased by 45% internationally and shipping costs are up by 25% in the last year alone, so we will see more expensive books on the shelves. For a 224-pager, you should expect to pay around R350.

“Over the next 30 years, I see a greater focus on eating at home around the dining room table.

“We need to teach our children our culinary heritage. The writers will provide the ongoing interest of what’s local in terms of recipes, but we must pass on our own recipes to our children.” ▲

Brian Berkman