

how we feel

Friday, January 7, 2011

## Daughters: I thank God I was born in Africa

In the first chapter of an ongoing series revealing the threads that unite women from all corners of the African continent, we travel to Swaziland to meet five indomitable spirits. Food activist and restaurateur, Dolores Godeffroy, will stop at nothing to see local produce regaining its rightful place in the hearts and minds of the Swazi people...

**Photographs:** Pippa Hetherington | **Words:** Kim Chaloner



*'If I did something wrong, I was always aware of the consequences, although that didn't stop me from wanting to be naughty,' says champion of local Swazi produce, Dolores Godeffroy. 'I've been like that all my life.'*

Dolores Godeffroy's throaty laugh conveys a woman who is authentic to the core. That Africa is starving yet exporting all her produce is a cruel irony she cannot accept. As is the fact that the wholesome nutrition found in traditional Swazi ingredients is being blatantly overlooked in an age of rampant HIV/Aids, and among the affluent, diseases of lifestyle.

Outside her restaurant, eDladleni (Siswati for 'In the Kitchen'), not far from Mbabane, a rooster crows in the background, while a team of noisy builders lays a roof on an adjacent building. Dolores casts a subtle, watchful eye over everything, while greeting, usually by name, the expectant patrons who are starting to arrive for lunch. This weekend, she's juggling another gig: serving up her signature dishes in the food arena at the Bushfire Festival of the Arts. Here, in the warmth of her dining room (where we're made to feel welcome by her attentive trainee-waiter nephew, Boris Godeffroy), we taste fresh-baked mielie bread with lashings of melted butter, and strips of ox fillet and chicken paired

with tintluba beans, marula nut paste, emakhowe (mushrooms) and umbidro (spinach). All straight from the source, and utterly delicious. Her eyes – and memory – sparkling, she tells us about her life's journey...



*Organic ox fillet and spinach served up on a bed of rice at Dolores' restaurant eDladleni, Siswati for 'In the Kitchen'.*

I don't know when I realised I had a love for food and for preparing meals. I've learnt that there is a strong tendency in the Swazi culture for the man to get the choice pieces before the woman and children. It's a power thing. Food doesn't just fill a hole in the body. It's got a lot of other facets to it – chauvinism, and emotional and psychological connotations. It's because our men are bullies that they take the choice pieces.

If you slaughter and cook a chicken, the man will get the Parson's nose, the drumstick and the gizzards. I interviewed this guy some years ago, I said, 'Mr Mashoeshoe, I don't have any man in my house, what am I going to do with the gizzards?' He said, 'Don't worry, madam, you just keep them and when we come we will eat them!' He said it so innocently, he didn't see anything wrong with it! I thought it was brilliant.

We Swazis like our food. It's got to be given its right place up there with everybody else's. I don't like to see the G8 discussing how they're going to feed me. It affects my dignity. I can feed myself.

I've had my restaurant since 2002. It started right here. It's a difficult business. Nobody would believe that it would work, so I had to build it myself on my own piece of land. I was the architect and the building contractor. I opened eDladleni to give a face to what I'm doing, to show local people that commercial food is imported. It's usually second-hand grain. It alienates people from their land. It's not sustainable. I get great pleasure out of fellow farmers working with rural women and trying to get this food moving to a point where my government is even recognising me a little bit.

I don't think you can really describe what it is like to be a woman of Africa. I wish a lot more African women knew how lucky we are. I know the whole world is focused on feeling sorry for us. Here women have crisis, conditions are tough. But I thank God I was born in Africa. I married, I have one daughter, a lovely girl. She's in the United States and is an artist, a poet and a writer. I said to her, 'Honey, this is a global village, so home is wherever you want it to be.'



*Tintluba beans are a staple of the traditional Swazi diet.*

Growing up under the Catholic regime there was no rite of passage into womanhood. I was a nuisance, I wasn't obedient like the other kids, I challenged things. I gave those poor nuns and priests a hard time. They instilled fear in us. I used to get whacked a lot, but I never cried. If I did something wrong, I was always aware of the consequences, although that didn't stop me from being naughty. I've been like that all my life.

God has placed me, I don't fear anything and I don't envy anyone. Unfortunately I've been against the tide with my thoughts as a woman. If I keep bothering about the opinions of others I'll never get anything done. Some of the things Swazi society requires are so stupid, like women having to cover their heads. I say, 'Okay, if a little piece of rag on my head makes you feel happy, I'll put it on!' And I walk away from there and I get on with my life.

If there were people who thought I was wrong, my Papa would always say, 'It's okay.' I owe my success to positive parenting. The first education, the first love, is from your parents, they instill in you who you are, that you have a right to walk this earth, that you have a right to be accepted. I had tons of that. My father and mother loved each other strongly. My papa loved me. I don't have a problem with men.

I go to Italy every two years for the Slow Food movement. Terra Madre [a major bi-annual conference] is my life. Small farmers from all over the world meet in Torino to swap ideas about producing quality food in a responsible, sustainable way. It's also an opportunity to partner up with an Italian chef, and to cook together. I've been there three times now.

Food is about love. If you don't love doing it, please don't! I tease the girls: 'It's why your husbands and boyfriends go for other women, it's because your food is horrible. You have to season it the love, that's the final, main ingredient, put in as much as possible!'

**Dolores Godeffroy, eDladleni +268-404-5743, edladleni@realnet.co.sz**

**Next: Meet a Swazi crafter and landowner who, despite ongoing hardships, has become a role model for young women in her rural community.**