

# 'South Africa is such a melting pot'

*Geoffrey Murray, executive chef at Zachary's Restaurant at the Pezula Hotel and Spa in Knysna, South Africa, was born to American air force parents in Rome, New York, 43 years ago. When pop star Grace Jones danced naked on a table at his first New York restaurant, Boom, he was catapulted into the media spotlight and he has been collecting accolades and celebrity endorsements ever since.*

**When I visit my family in the US my brothers' friends in Arkansas ask what country I come from.** I speak slowly so that I can be understood by non-native English speakers. I've worked in a multi-lingual kitchen since I started washing dishes after school 30 years ago.

**I treasure my role as a teacher and mentor.** I have the greatest job in the world. I'm paid to learn about indigenous cuisine – and life – from people that share my passion for food.

**South Africans always ask how I could ever have left New York.** I moved on. I thrived on the constant adrenaline rush in my 20s but I needed something different a decade later.

**Americans put chefs on a pedestal.** It caused me to distance myself from other people. I had been a partner in Boom, and its sister restaurant Bang, in Miami and Mexico City, for six years. New York has a way of zapping you and spitting you out.

**My first three years in South Africa were like living the Discovery Channel.** Having giraffes parade past my kitchen door provided a different kind of buzz. On my days off, I walked in nature. Trekking near a herd of elephants – the most deadly beasts for a pedestrian – taught me patience and humility.

**The women I worked with in Limpopo, South Africa, taught me the secret of happiness.** It has nothing to do with your job title or address and everything to do with living honestly in the moment. My colleagues at Makalali, a five-star game lodge, were stunned that I tasted food from the same spoons they did. This sharing of food fundamentally changed our relationship. We all opened up. I am forever grateful to them for making real some of the concepts I had been reading about in philosophy books.

**After three years in the bush I was ready for a totally different adventure.** One of the Makalali guests asked me



Relaxing views: the hotel overlooks the ocean

to help open North Island, a private sanctuary dedicated to restoring critically endangered flora and fauna on an outer island in the Seychelles.

**Pirates from Africa and south-east Asia used to stop in the islands to acquire provisions.** The cuisine reflects this mishmash of cultures: barracuda poached with tamarind, creole octopus curry in coconut milk, grilled wahoo with passion fruit.

**I operated like a CIA operative, co-opting the traders in the market on Mahi, the main island, to contact me when a new stash of line fish or produce came on to the stalls.** I recognised a lot of ingredients from the Caribbean. It was incredibly tasty stuff – and much more economical than flying in all my ingredients. Most other chefs in the Seychelles imported everything. The only things I flew in were grits for my staff.

**The Seychelles government loved my kitchen because we celebrated indigenous culture.** But I embraced local produce to please my guests – I didn't want travellers that had flown halfway around the world to be served dishes they could enjoy in Europe or America. In food, as in life, awareness brings understanding. I made the Creole culture more accessible by sharing the spices and textures of the local food with visitors. I published a cookbook that celebrates this culture.

**Kelth Stewart, a regular North Island visitor, invited me to Knysna to help open Pezula in 2003.** I was won over by his commitment to environmental restoration. The hotel is situated atop the Knysna heads, a 680-hectare promontory jutting into the Indian Ocean. After removing the alien plants and covering the soil with

manure from the resort's resident horses, I planted an organic garden to cater to the kitchen's needs. It has blossomed. I'm trying to convince the owner to double our plot.

**Our commitment to going indigenous extended to staffing.** We didn't import trained chefs from Johannesburg or Cape Town. We hired grill men from the Spur (a chain of fast-food steak houses) and recent graduates and trained them in world-class techniques. We've achieved a remarkable 85 per cent retention of the kitchen staff that opened Zachary's. I promote from within. Some of my crew are getting ready to move on – I expect several will open their own restaurants. I've taught them the business side of the restaurant so they can manage profitable enterprises.

**My motto is "to gett respect you have to give respect".** You have to understand how to treat people from different cultures. Like America, South Africa is such a melting pot. I instinctively know how to adapt my process to fit the situation. Some people expect a stern boss; others respond better to friendly cajoling. Everyone wants approval.



**My best friends in South Africa are Afrikaners.** I have an affinity for these incredibly hospitable people. They are proud of their culture – and generous to share it with me.

**I am optimistic about the long-term health of the hospitality industry in South Africa.** There are so many unique experiences for a visitor to enjoy. Near Pezula guests can kayak in the turquoise waters of the Indian Ocean beside Southern Right Whales, discover the medicinal plants of the Tskitikami Forest or forage for porcini mushrooms in the Knysna Forest. The adventure-minded can go bungee jumping, kite surfing and abseiling. There's also world-class birding, fishing, golfing, and antiques. The local art gallery scene is vibrant.

**My life has been about combining things that I love.** I studied art history at university, admired architecture on every trip I took and tried to unlock the secrets of biochemistry in everyday experiments. My career in food allowed me to bring together all of these interests. I'm intrigued by the anthropology of food. The masters programme at the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Northern Italy appeals to me. It was established by [Carlo Petrini](#), the founder of the [Slow Food](#) movement. I can't think of a better place to study the origins and evolution of food than in the court of the Medicis – the family responsible for cultivating an enduring gourmet culture.

**During our annual vacation together, my mother gives me a new set of watercolours or pastels in the hope that I will return to the art-making I studied in college.** Right now, I'm content to channel my creative vision in the kitchen but I enjoy being surrounded by great art. South African painter Simon Stone is one of my favourite recent discoveries. He uses colour as an emotion and a source of illumination. I draw immense inspiration from his vast African landscapes.

**Margaret O'Connor**

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'The huge influx of people from all over the world means that everybody, whether they like it or not (and some people don't), has to accept that it doesn't matter where you were born.'  
*Stan Bilic, Australia*

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