

DESTINATIONS

FOOD & DRINK | SOUTH AFRICA

Q&A

ABIGAIL MBALO, MASTERCHEF CONTESTANT AND RESTAURATEUR

INTERVIEW BY Laura French

Q. How did you get into food?

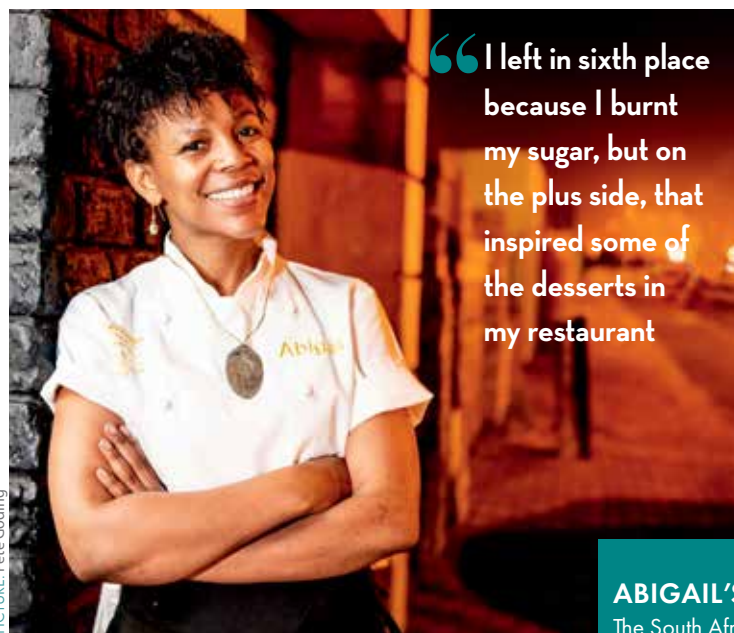
A. I'd been a dental technician for 17 years, but I'd also always loved cooking. I entered *MasterChef South Africa* in 2014 after my husband and kids kept pressuring me to do it. I decided I wanted to use food as a tool to make a difference, and that's how the whole story started. I now have a restaurant, a cafe and a food truck in the township of Khayeliasha, where I grew up.

Q. What was it like being on *MasterChef*?

A. It was nerve-racking! I was living in a house with all the other contestants for two and a half months and it was a challenge emotionally – you're away from your family and never quite know what's going to happen the next day. It was daunting each time you got to the studio – you'd have 45 minutes to prove yourself, and when they say 45 minutes, they mean 45 minutes! I left in sixth place because I burnt my sugar, but on the plus side, that inspired some of the desserts in my restaurant...

Q. What made you decide to open a restaurant in the Khayeliasha township?

A. We have lots of international food in South Africa, but I had the feeling that we weren't really celebrating our own food heritage. I wanted to bring that back and help build the economy in Khayeliasha. When I got my degree I moved away, and a lot of my friends did



PICTURE: Pete Godding

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too. But by doing that you deprive it – when I went back, I saw shops closing down and not much happening – so after 20 years of living elsewhere I decided to go back. We opened a food truck in 2014 to put a twist on basic South African staples. Then at the end of 2016 I opened my restaurant, 4Roomed eKasi Culture, and this year we won a bid to open a second restaurant, Cafe Isivivana.

Q. What's your signature dish?

A. Pap made with butternut squash and nutmeg, served with truffle oil on top. It's our most popular dish.

Q. What's special about South African cuisine?

A. It's the culture and heritage

behind it, and also the fact that even though the whole country shares the same ingredients, they are cooked differently in different provinces. In Cape Town, there's a Malay influence so we have lots of curries, but they're a lot milder than in Durban!

Q. You're an ambassador for the tourist board's Meet Your South Africa campaign. What does this involve?

A. It's about bringing tourism into the township. I do tours around Khayeliasha and partner with other local guides to help visitors see the township differently from how it's portrayed. I think the term

ABIGAIL'S TOP TIP

The South Africa tourist board has a free online training programme to help agents sell the destination. Register at saspecialist.southafrica.net/za/en

'township' gives you a certain perception; they've been labelled as dangerous places, but when you go, you see that's not the case. I would love to see the day when someone visits South Africa and they don't see any difference between a township and the city.

Q. How should agents sell South Africa more generally?

A. Highlight the different angles – nature, culture and heritage as well as the food. There's so much to see here – the winelands, Robben Island, Table Mountain, the townships. I'd recommend a good couple of weeks in Cape Town – I always say to people it's the whole of South Africa in one; it has everything. **TW**