

FROM LA COLOMBE TO CAPE TOWN

Ian Evans speaks to **LUKE DALE-ROBERTS** IN SOUTH AFRICA, A BRITISH CHEF WHO HAS TAKEN THE RESTAURANT WORLD AND THE SAN PELLEGRINO LIST BY STORM

He's a British chef who ran the 12th best restaurant in the world last year but is barely recognised in his native land. Even in his adopted home of Cape Town, his face isn't known among the general populace – but that could be about to change with the opening of Luke Dale-Roberts' new restaurant in one of the city's trendiest districts. A modest and unassuming man, the 39-year-old chef from East Sussex says he is daunted but excited about venturing out alone after leaving his post as executive chef at La Colombe on the Constantia Uitsig wine estate, after four years.

Arriving in South Africa in 2006 after stints in Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea and the Philippines, he put La Colombe on the international culinary map by first becoming San Pellegrino's 38th best restaurant in 2009 and then last year its 12th. He said:

“
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“Without a doubt it was the highest point of my career so far – I was ecstatic. It was knowing that so many international people had been to my restaurant and judged it, not just people from South Africa. “We went from number 38 to 12th in 12 months so it was quite a jump. It was the culmination of a lot of hard work, not just by me but the whole team.”

But just months after achieving 12th place, Dale-Roberts was packing his knives and heading on a new venture. “I'd always wanted to run and own my own place and then the opportunity came up,” he explains. “A job came up with a large company for some consultation work and it was big money. I could do that and work on the new project knowing I had money in the bank,” he continues. And the end product is The Test Kitchen at the Old Biscuit Mill factory site in the raw but upcoming Woodstock suburb a few miles east of the city centre which he opened in November. ➔

IMAGE COURTESY OF JÉAN DU PLESSIS



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Surrounded by art studios, designer boutiques, advertising agencies and cafes, the open restaurant can sit 34 people with a giant old wooden fire door on one wall, giving a hint to the room's previous use. Contemporary with an industrial feel and the kitchen on full view, Dale-Roberts said the intention was to create an intimate environment with one evening sitting Tuesday to Saturday as well as lunchtime passing trade. He employs six other chefs, three waiting staff and signed a three-year lease with an overall investment of R750,000 (£72,000). The arcade outside is stylish and packed on Saturdays when a giant warehouse turns into a covered food market full of sole traders selling belly-busting produce. "It's much smaller than La Colombe but I wanted this to be a bit more intimate, bit more special," Dale-Roberts enthuses. "I had the option of a venue in Long Street in the city centre, but I thought this was a more aspiring area and becoming trendy so I opted for here."

Dale-Roberts trained at Baur Au Lac Hotel in Zurich and then travelled to London where he worked at Elenas L'Étoile under Kevin Hopgood. He also had a stint in Sydney at the Greenwood Hotel and then back to London and Soho House cooking for celebrities such as Madonna, Kevin Spacey and Kylie Minogue. In 2000 he became executive chef for the Accor Hotel Group when he opened the Loft in Southwark and two years later embarked on his odyssey to the Far East where he embraced the shunju style of cooking using organic and natural ingredients.

When he moved to Cape Town in 2006 with his fashion designer, South African wife Sandalene and 10 day-old-son Finley, he brought that culture to La Colombe and continues to be influenced by it ever since. He remains a consultant to the restaurant. "My food is obviously influenced by Japan and South Korea because of the time I spent there," he says. "It's a very natural way to cook with a degree of simplicity but varied and exciting. I've tried to include a bit of that on all my menus."

However in a proudly meat-eating country where big steaks on barbecues are de rigeur, it's not always been easy to convert South Africans to new tastes. "Yes, South Africans like their meat but they're not averse to tasting something new," Dale-Roberts assures. "When I started at La Colombe we started a tasting menu and we'd be lucky to sell two a night. Now they're selling 35 tasting menus. Things are changing – we put lamb's tongue on the menu and people weren't taking it but over time it became popular." He aims to source 90 per cent of his ingredients from local producers but is forced to go abroad when stock is not available. Dale-Roberts has also noticed another trait of the South African palate; "they do like a bit of sweetness with their food. Whether it's potatoes, bread, they like that buttery/honey flavour in their food, more so than westerners."

When *Chef Magazine* caught up with Dale-Roberts, he had just returned from a week-long trip to Europe where he ate at The Fat Duck – number three in the Pellegrino table – and El Bulli at number two. He didn't have time to meet too many family and friends on the fleeting trip but said the food was wonderful, "I did a BBC interview with Heston after the awards and we chatted then and keep in touch – he's a really nice, genuine guy."

Dale-Roberts says he is not averse to the celebrity chef phenomena and aspires to one day earning a Michelin star, but not if it takes over his life and cooking. "Obviously any chef would welcome a Michelin star because it's a recognition that you're cooking at a high quality and brings a competitive edge," he admits, "but you don't want it to become everything and lose sight of your customers and what you do each day."

So will be Dale-Roberts be returning to the UK soon and become a better known face on the domestic culinary scene? He's reluctant to move. "I'm staying in Cape Town, especially after all the money I've spent on this place. Besides, Cape Town is the most beautiful city in the world with the mountain, the beaches, the wine-lands. Why would anyone want to leave here?"



TROUT TARTARE, GREEN APPLE, PARSLEY, MISO YAKI AUBERGINE AND CRÈME FRAÎCHE

By Luke Dale-Roberts, Head Chef at The Test Kitchen, Cape Town. Serves 4

Ingredients

marinated aubergine

- 1 aubergine, peeled and diced to 1cm
- 100ml soy sauce
- 1 tsp grated ginger
- 1 tsp sugar
- vegetable oil, for frying

trout tartare

- 4 x 200g salmon trout fillet boneless skinless
- zest of 4 lemons
- 100g soy sauce
- 2 tbsp honey
- 4 tbsp veg oil

apple salad

- 2 Granny Smith apples, peeled and sliced into batons
- juice of 1 lime
- 20g flat parsley, shredded
- pinch of salt

to serve

- 1 tub crème fraîche

Method

marinated aubergine

1. Dice aubergines to 1cm dice. Mix the soy sauce, ginger and sugar together then mix all aubergine pieces with the marinade. Fry aubergine pieces in a shallow film of oil until golden. Drain on absorbent paper.

trout tartare

1. Slice the trout fillets in half lengthways. Slice the two pieces as thinly as for sashimi.
2. Mix all components of marinade and put trout slices in.
3. Leave to marinade for 5 minutes.

apple salad

1. Meanwhile toss the apple batons in the lime juice and parsley, season to taste.

to serve

2. Arrange on plate. Arrange random dollops of creme fraiche and trout pieces and scatter aubergine around. Thinly slice a little more parsley as a garnish. Serve.