

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

Abandoning the city for life at a country manor hotel, chef **KATHY ROMER-LEE** unexpectedly discovered the value in both forging enduring relationships, as well as in respecting one's fellow creatures

PHOTOGRAPHS **DOOK** PRODUCTION **ANNEMARIE MEINTJIES** TEXT **NIA MAGOULIANITI-MCGREGOR**



LESS THAN THREE YEARS AGO,

Kathy Romer-Lee, executive chef at Oaklands Country Manor in the Drakensberg foothills, was living in Cape Town, running 96 Winery Road restaurant outside Somerset West and choosing meat and vegetables “wrapped in polystyrene”. Now she is part of the Tullyban – one of three Tully sisters (their maiden name), including Caroline Bruce and Annie Barnard – who helps run the boutique country hotel nestled against a ridge above the famous Van Reenen’s Pass. She runs her kitchen, she says, with love and passion. But more than that, with a profound respect for local producers and a clear philosophy of “know thy farmer”.

“When I was living in the city I had no idea that all this was all going on,” admits Kathy. By “all this” she refers to people dedicated to what they produce and deliver – producers, as Kathy puts it, who are “farmers in their souls” and with whom she now deals directly, having formed solid and respectful working relationships.

Farmers like Jenni Hewat, who produces “the finest Ayrshire milk, yoghurt, butter and haloumi”. “I know how Jenni looks after her cows, how passionate she is about them. All are treated with respect, which you can ultimately taste on your plate.”

Then there’s Julian Vickey, who supplies Kathy with free-range lamb, pork and beef. “He loves his animals. They literally go from veld to fork.” And Caz Griffin from the Midlands, who not only provides Kathy with all her pork products, but peace of mind as to their “genetics and traceability”. Michael Mandy, who is in Grade 9 at KwaZulu-Natal’s Michaelhouse school, supplies her perfect eggs. One couple even feeds their chickens Rescue Remedy before slaughter. “Everything tastes better this way. It’s not about organic or inorganic. It’s about relationships based on respect for your animals.”

As a chef, Kathy claims this is the “ultimate” set-up: “I could never buy directly

from producers like this in a city. At least 95 percent of the ingredients on our menu are fresh and of an unparalleled quality.”

She inherently believes that you can cook two dishes, each as technically perfect as the other, but if one is made with passion and love, with ingredients produced with passion and love, you’ll taste the difference: “Your mental framework has to be correct. It translates though your hands.”

It’s this ethos she has passed on to her right-hand man, Johnson Ndlovu, and the rest of the Oaklands kitchen staff: “I may be the only qualified chef here, but my staff cooks beautifully and gets as excited about the dishes as I do. When training, my bottom line is to instil a love for what we do.”

Kathy started a vegetable garden when she arrived – only ever sprayed with organic sprays. If necessary, she’ll bombard the spaces between her beetroots and baby marrows or tomatoes with marigolds or chilli bushes to scare off the snails.



Don’t imagine you’ll find “fussy food” at Oaklands, says Kathy: “It’s my responsibility that each dish represents its ingredients truthfully – not disguised in foams or decorations! It’s honest food.”

Indeed, it is honest Free State food, but not without global nuances: Cambodian fish curry; Dargle Valley pork rib-eye roast; chicken breast with pancetta, mushrooms, asparagus and capers; spring vegetable and ricotta cannelloni ... Always, though, the focus of the dish is the raw ingredients.

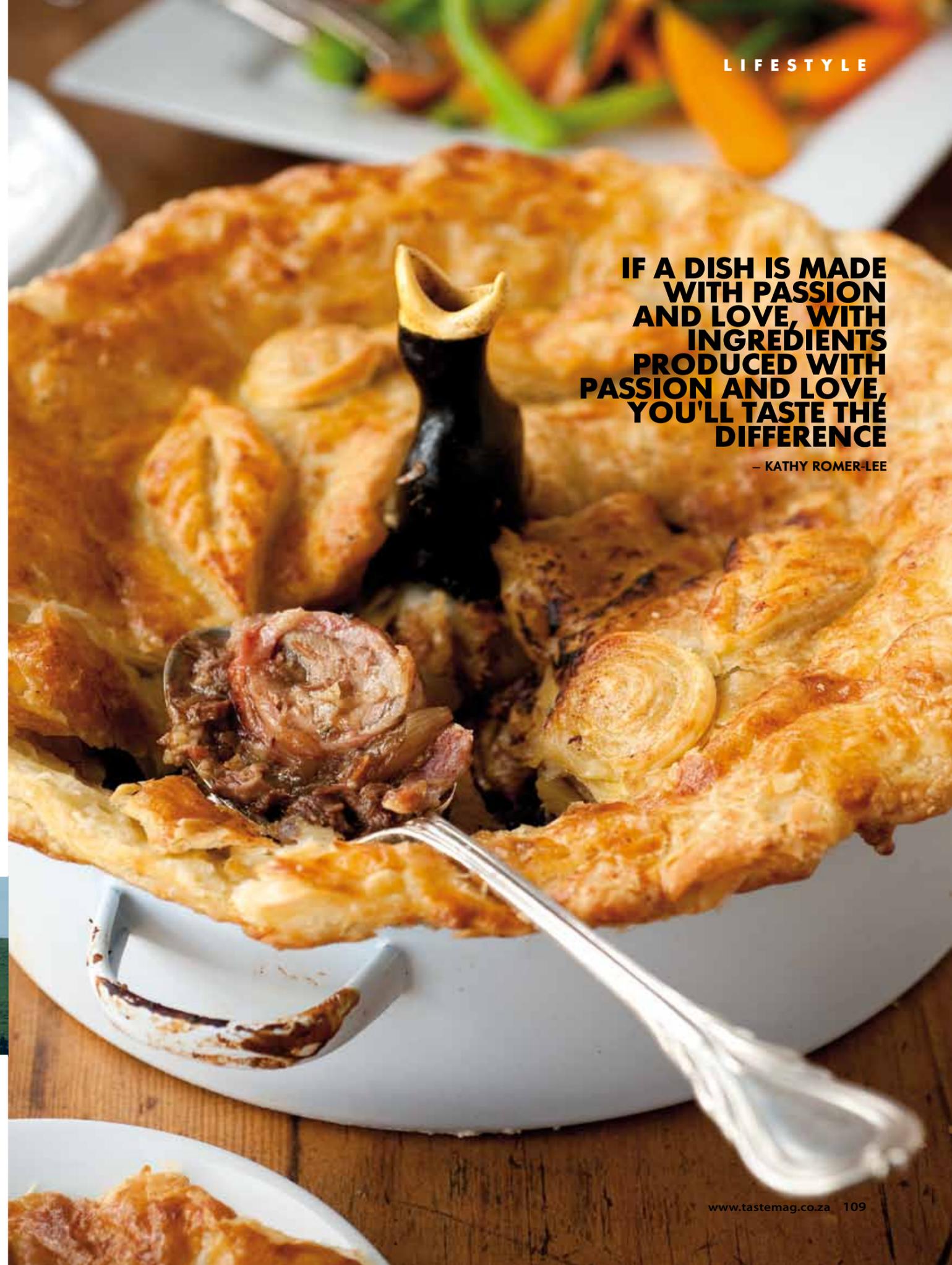
Kathy has never regretted packing up her Cape Town life and her two daughters, Josie, 11, and Georgie, eight, after her divorce to take over the position of chef at Oaklands ... and to be with her sisters. “It was a defining moment,” she says. Like the guests here (“mainly families who appreciate the space and tranquility, or those who book all the 14 suites for a special occasion”), she enjoys the walking, horse-riding and views of the mountains.

It’s a long way from deciding to study at Cape Town’s Silwood Kitchen Cordon Bleu School of Cookery because, as her dad put it, “At least that way you’ll never starve.” One of her first jobs after travelling to the UK at the age of 21 was working for author Roald Dahl and his family. “I joined an employment agency who said, ‘Mrs Dahl is looking for a chef’. I took the train to their house in the north of London and, even though I couldn’t figure out how to open the train door to get out, they liked me. It was amazing to be interviewed by one of my favourite childhood authors.”

This was no small feat as Roald and his wife, Liccy, knew food. They had just put together *Memories with Food at Gipsy House* and were working on *Roald Dahl’s Revolting Recipes*. Kathy stayed with the family – “a loud, happy home” – for just under a year. Their favourite recipe was from their own cookbook: Norwegian meatballs (Kathy’s favourite Dahl recipe – which she still makes

COARSE PORK AND HERB TERRINE





IF A DISH IS MADE WITH PASSION AND LOVE, WITH INGREDIENTS PRODUCED WITH PASSION AND LOVE, YOU'LL TASTE THE DIFFERENCE

– KATHY ROMER-LEE



This spread, clockwise from top left: Great Danes Caesar and Indi and horse, Geronimo, are part of daily life at Oaklands; a Hunter's game pie in the making (see www.tastemag.co.za for recipe); Kathy's daughter Georgie at full gallop; Johnson Ndlovu with freshly picked produce; guests young and old enjoy the outdoors.

LIFESTYLE

today – is Dahl's Thai peanut chicken curry).

Upon her return to South Africa, Kathy worked in the kitchen of the Boschendal Restaurant, at Londolozi as a game ranger, and, for a summer (having bought a pizza oven and trailer), at Plett's Lookout beach selling pizzas. Then, in 1996, she opened 96 Winery Road with Ken Forrester and Devon Valley winemaker Martin Meinert at his vineyard outside Somerset West, and followed this with a catering stint.

All that was before she came to Oaklands to make up the missing third of the "Tullyban". It was Caroline's late husband, and Kathy's brother-in-law, Sir Jamie Bruce, an ex-major in the British army, a "larger than life character" and the original owner of Oaklands, who coined the label after he decided, laughs Kathy, that we had "ganged up on him one day".

"He died last year leaving a huge gap. Caroline didn't know whether to sell or stay on at Oaklands. It was a huge decision – after all, a whole community relied on Oaklands for employment. We decided, with hands on our hearts and a huge belief in ourselves and in each other, to continue. And I've never regretted the decision. I don't miss the city for even half a second."

Would you? **W**

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COARSE PORK AND HERB TERRINE

Serves 8 ■ A LITTLE EFFORT

Preparation: 40 minutes

Cooking: 1½ hours, plus chilling overnight

2 T olive oil
175 g onions, finely chopped
1 kg rindless pork belly, cut into small pieces
175 g rindless back bacon, cut into small pieces
175 g lamb or pig's liver, cut into small pieces
2 small cloves garlic, finely chopped
a large handful parsley, finely chopped
1½ T chopped rosemary
1½ T chopped thyme
1½ t salt
1½ t freshly ground black pepper
crusty bread, for serving

For the pickled blueberries

(makes 2 x 450 g jars):

1.2 litres distilled malt vinegar
30 cloves garlic
12 allspice berries
2 cinnamon quills
4 small dried red chillies
900 g granulated sugar
175 g blueberries



Above: The breakfast spread at Oaklands includes home-made croissants, Dargle Valley pork and poached pears.

For the beetroot chutney

(makes 7 x 450 g jars):

900 g beetroot, peeled and coarsely shredded
450 g onions, chopped
750 g cooking apples, peeled, cored and roughly chopped
450 g raisins
3 T ground ginger
2 t dried chilli flakes
900 g granulated sugar
1.2 litres malt vinegar
1 T salt
juice of 1 lemon

1 Preheat the oven to 180°C. Heat the oil in a large frying pan, then add the onions and gently fry until soft but not brown. Transfer to a large mixing bowl and leave to cool.
2 Put the pork belly into a food processor and chop, using the pulse button, into a coarse mixture. Add to the onions.
3 Put the bacon and liver in the food processor and again, coarsely chop, then transfer to the mixing bowl.
4 Add the garlic, chopped herbs and seasoning and mix everything together very well – the best way of distributing the ingredients evenly is with your hands.
5 Transfer the mixture into a lightly oiled 1.5-litre terrine dish or loaf tin. Cover with a lid or some foil, put into a small roasting tin and pour enough hot water into the tin to come halfway up the sides of the dish. Bake for 1½ hours, then uncover the terrine and cook for a further 15 minutes, or until it is lightly coloured on top.
6 Remove the dish from the roasting tin and leave to cool. Then weight down the terrine and refrigerate overnight – the easiest way to do this is to cut out a piece of cardboard that will fit inside the rim of the dish, cover it with foil, then place it on top of the terrine

and place a few weights or unopened cans on top.

7 Unmould the terrine and slice. Serve with crusty bread, pickled blueberries and beetroot chutney.

8 To make the pickled blueberries, place the malt vinegar, garlic cloves, allspice berries, cinnamon quills, chillies and sugar in a saucepan and bring to a boil, stirring to dissolve the sugar. Remove from the heat and leave to stand for 2 hours. Pack the blueberries into sterilised jars and pour over the cool syrup. Seal and leave for 2 to 3 months before using.

9 To make the beetroot chutney, place all the ingredients in a preserving pan and heat gently, stirring, until the sugar has dissolved. Bring to the boil and simmer gently, uncovered, for about 2 hours or until well reduced and quite thick – don't forget that it will thicken even further as it cools. Spoon into warm, sterilised jars, cover with waxed discs and seal. It will keep for up to one year.

• WHEAT- AND GLUTEN-FREE

WINE: Avondale Organic Julia Red Blend 2008

STEAMED ORANGE PUDDING

Serves 4 ■ EASY ■ GREAT VALUE

Preparation: 20 minutes

Cooking: 40 minutes

100 g unsalted butter, softened
100 g caster sugar
100 g self-raising flour
½ t baking powder
2 free-range eggs
2 T milk
grated zest and juice of 2 oranges
4 T golden syrup
cream or crème anglaise, for serving (optional)

1 Cream the butter and sugar then fold in the flour and baking powder. Beat in the eggs, one at a time, then beat in the milk, orange zest and orange juice.

2 Grease 4 Dariole moulds or ramekins. Put 1 T golden syrup in each, then pour in the batter. Fasten foil loosely across the tops to act as lids.

3 Place the moulds in a steamer and cook for 40 minutes. Turn the puddings out into warmed bowls. Serve with cream or crème anglaise, if desired.

WINE: Stellar Organic Heaven on Earth Natural Sweet Nonvintage



STEAMED ORANGE PUDDING