

Tasting yesteryear

Nostalgia infuses every dish made by Niël Stemmet, local pioneer of the no.1 global food trend right now, heritage food. The renowned Sea Point food author of the newly published *salt + pepper*, designer guru and owner of koncept design celebrates the heart of the Cape winter season with Nelia Vivier.

Fire in the hearth, the scent of white wax candles, fresh daily bread taken from the oven, home-brewed coffee, farm proteas, the sound of rain pelting the windows, classical music, opera, local cabaret, the cats talking, real homemade food, misty vistas over the bay, winter is Niël time.

When I'm at my modern Mies van der Hohe-style house in De Kelders, hidden behind loads of trees and shrubs, with beautiful sea views over Walker Bay, I close the doors to my guesthouse. The fire is fuelled with bluegum wood. The cats stretch out in front of the fire. Music of Arvo Pärt, Amanda Strydom, Stef Bos and Eleni Karaindou fill the air. At other times, it's just the sound of the rain pelting on the windows. Then there is me, in front of the fire, sleeping or writing. In winter I have such a thirst for words – it engulfs me with clouds of letters waiting to be sculpted into books.

I've always been a child of winter. I love rain, its smell and the scent of winter in my house – cinnamon, fire, tea and candles. I remember the 14th birthday of my childhood, the kapok on the mountains of the Cape. There was the smell of green bean *bredie*, with steamed white rice and home-baked brown bread, served with farm butter and a salad of wild sorrel and

avocado. Now in the early autumn of my own life, I'm reliving my childhood. In winter I re-cook all my favourite dishes from that time, cabbage meatballs, stew and *melkkos*.

I learned to love food as a very young boy. I was always in the kitchen, the smell of fresh bread luring me. I would hold onto my grandmother, to see when she would spread butter over the crust of her "just baked" bread. I loved walking in the fynbos veld ... always said that one day I will cook food that smells like my hands after I've touched hundreds of veld plants. I loved the food that the farm *nannas* cooked – it was always simple, honest, real and presented as *offerkos*, which loosely translates as a simple offering of food, made with care and love that transcends the meal.

My own journey with food began when opened my own restaurant, Le Must, in the 80s in Upington. I bought *Spys en Drank* by Renata Coetzee, the cookbook that would shape my life of taste to be simple, South African, regional and local. I served her food in my restaurant for 25 years to the likes of Madiba and many others, who always returned to savour the tastes of their childhood.

With *salt+pepper* I relive these recipes, but also many others that I have learned through hundreds of old recipe books. It's

heritage fare served around a table where food, as much as stories become the heart of the family. The book tells yesteryear stories interwoven with stories, the same way as my grandfather and my *nannas* used to tell me stories.

I have to say this new English edition is beautiful. The translators managed to capture the best-seller Afrikaans version in its simplicity. As back-page writer for a bilingual magazine, I get incredible feedback from my writing in Afrikaans, then

loads of love. I'd cycle to town (10km) with my backpack and buy according to what I need. If I'm on my own, I'll dine on simple, yet the best comfort food in the world, such as freshly baked brown bread, farm butter and a lashing of Marmite, topped with slices of tomato, green onion leaves, a slice of Kleinriver cheese and two pan-fried eggs.

When guests come over, I'll serve a soup, salad, main course of fresh fish and roast potatoes and a home-baked Elgin apple or pear tart. Samkelo, my fellow cook, bakes

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translated into English stories. Eighty per cent of the feedback comes from English readers, who share the same memories of 'Gran and Gramps' on the farm. There's very little of these food memories and stories available for them in English.

In De Kelders, I serve simple, honest food that reflects the Overberg table. I shop daily, mostly from bakkie traders, my own butcher, the local weekly bazaar. All food is prepared as simply as possible with

all the breads, cookies and rusks and assists me with the jam making. I always make far too much – which finds wings as keepsakes for guests. Long lunch is all about Overberg shoulder of lamb, Sandveld roast potatoes, cauliflower cheese, Baardskeerdersbos sweet potatoes with orange and fynbos honey, *sousboontjies* and Lomond wines.

I may serve a salad made with tomato, onion and the fleshy leaves of the purslane, more commonly known as the *Spekboom* tree. It's a traditional salad with vinegar to balance the richness of the South African table. You cut tomatoes and onions in slices, and then layer with the succulent leaves. It gets topped with slices of soft-boiled eggs and served with vinaigrette made with grape vinegar, sunflower oil, honey, mustard and seasoned with salt and pepper.

I leave experimentation to the chefs of the world. I always try to add as little as possible to my meals: salt, white pepper, butter, lemon juice, a pinch of nutmeg. I am a horrific baker, I never measure. I just *gooi alles bymekaar* and cook. Having said that, a good cook adds as little as possible and smells his food, then according to the aroma, adds extra flavourings.

Writing about food

Key to being a successful food writer is to be true to what you write. My advice is to write with passion, in a simple colourful language, so that even children will understand one's writings. When I start writing the words, sentences just flow. I never structure. When done, I normally change two or three words. I think it comes

easily to me, because I always cook to re-create memories of childhood, hours spent with my *nannas*, grandmothers and aunts in the kitchens. So I write about the history of my life.

And there are dishes from my travels that I simply cannot forget. My friend Jacques Erasmus from Hemelhuijs and I had a 17-course Michelin-style dinner in Buenos Aires. We both ended up in tears. The experience was overwhelming.

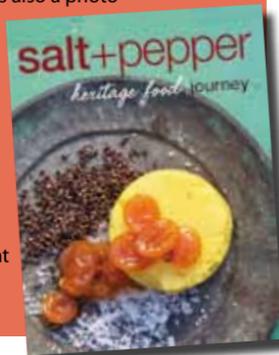
Once in Paris, on my first-ever visit, I went to visit a dear friend who had a restaurant on the Seine. We had litres of Dom Perignon. I spent hours in the kitchen talking to the chef who could not utter a word of English and me not a word of French. That night he served me lamb fillet with a cinnamon-scented mushroom sauce. Heaven.

In Patagonia, a private guide and driver took my best friend and I trekking in the mountains north of Ushuaia. We arrived at a frozen lake with enormous glaciers. Inside a wood cabin, they lit a fire and served homemade chorizo with cheese and olives, Malbec and flame-grilled steaks with potatoes. It was my ultimate lunch experience ever.

Heritage food is the future, all over the world. If we have no unique culture of food and the storytelling of food and recipes, we have no country. I never imagined that people would introduce me as a food author with two more books beckoning on the horizon. Telling these food stories in my books, that is what I want my legacy to be.

Salt+pepper

His mum Elise's heavenly sweet potatoes, the yellow hue of summer peaches, *pinang* meat made by Leipoldt's Aia Hanna, a day in De Kelders so beautiful it could make you cry, the quietness of Sundays on a farm ... but also crackling white and stiffly starched aprons, respect for the simplest of ingredients and the many, many stories and memories that flavour each dish of his childhood – these are some of the inspirations of food writer and author Niël Stemmet, who is also a photo journalist, wine farm and restaurant consultant, guesthouse owner and interior consultant, collector of all things beautiful and traveller. Get your own copy at R350, available at all book dealers.



Photos supplied.

Aniseed tea cakes and rooibos tea with condensed milk

Remember that the chickens of the old folk laid huge eggs, so add two eggs if yours are on the small side. Also, get your smelling salts from a chemist. My Ouma Miemie lived in Koringberg in a humble little home with a longdrop in the backyard. I remember a clean werf and a baboon on a chain. We bulletjies were petrified of the baboon. I also remember Ouma's tea. It stood on the stove, steaming, all day long. Authentic old-style rooibos leaves cooked with farm water and served with condensed milk in old-fashioned porcelain cups. We kids were besotted with it and couldn't drink enough of it. Now once more, I see my Ouma sitting on her chair, calling me Njeel. She could pray beautifully and very seriously. Before she died, she crocheted the Onse Vader, which framed, hung in the foyer of the old-aged home.

- 6 eggs
 - 2 kg cake flour
 - 1 kg sugar
 - 2 tsp cinnamon
 - 1 Tbsp smelling salts
 - 1 Tbsp aniseed
- Mix all ingredients, and if dough is a bit dry, you can sprinkle brandy over it, then roll it out 3 mm thick and bake at 190°C for eight minutes. Funny recipe this, but there it is, no butter, but once baked, perfect for dunking into your tea.



was: 'Little, Mum, little, but grënd, very grënd'. We indeed became too grand for a while. Now I once more see people eating simple fare, stretching their rands, and how lovely this is, to eat unpretentious meals sitting around the table, sharing homemade bread, marmalade and rooibos tea in your most beautiful 'Mevrou Dominee' tea cups. Like my Ouma, I always send guests on their way with a bottle or two.

- 5 kg fragrant oranges
- 7 lemons from the garden
- 2 l fresh orange juice, over and above juice of the oranges
- water, to cover fruit
- 900 g sugar for each l of cooked marmalade mixture
- muslin cloth

Cut orange peel into pieces and put aside. It's best to use a cheese grater and cut the gratings into small pieces afterwards. Press juice of lemons (first rolling them back and forth on your work surface), keep aside with all the pips and pulp and throw lemon peel on your compost heap. Cut peeled oranges in half, squeeze juice, then throw juice, pulp, lemon halves and pips all into a huge pot. Press orange onto the bottom, add extra orange juice, and water if necessary, until oranges are totally submerged. Let fruit boil for one hour with the lid on. Remove from stove, stand for 24 hours and put pot back on stove. Let the marmalade boil softly for two hours, then press content through muslin cloth, squeezing the fruit with your hands so that you get each drop of juice. Measure the marmalade you have, and then add 900g sugar to each litre of cooked marmalade. Bring sugar and marmalade to boiling point, and then add the orange peel. Boil until it sets, reaching the point where jam forms. Pour into sterilised bottles, shake to get air bubbles out, put lids on and pack into pantry. For those times when you want to be grënd, serve with a piece of hard cheese.

Slowly, slowly heat milk, sugar, honey and spices in a huge, heavy-bottom pot. We want the spices to infuse the milk. Then put flour, butter and salt (I've abandoned rubbing a long time ago) in a food processor, adding teensy drops of water until you get a crumble or frumble effect. Add frumbles very slowly, a few bits at a time, to the milk once it has reached boiling point. Stir pot until all the frumbles have been added. Take care not to let it clot! I boil this mixture over very low heat – from three-quarters to an hour long, until dish is thick enough to dish up. Sprinkle a layer of cinnamon sugar on each serving.

Lavender salt

- ½ kg coarse sea salt or Maldon
 - 3 Tbsp of dried lavender
- Pound the lavender into pieces with your pestle, mix with salt and rub beef, chicken or veggies with the lavender salt before roasting.

Grënd orange marmalade

My mum remembers Audrey Bignaut once asking her daughter, Hester Heese (both were well-known authors), what one eats these days. Hester's answer

Liesbet's melkkos (a flavourful milk-food dish)

Sometimes I get such a beautiful story that I don't want to fiddle with it. This one comes from my cousin, Elize, who recalls, 'This melkkos recipe I've adapted from a Leipoldt recipe, until it felt just right. Its secret to making it is lots of patience, lots of love and lots of good attitude throughout. And then, you sit down – when that first spoon lands in your mouth and the flavours explode, it feels as if nothing else on this earth will matter, ever again. A very sweet muscadel tastes perfect with my melkkos.' My own mother-in law taught me to eat this dish with farm sausage.

- 1 l full-cream milk (don't you dare use 2%)
- 1 Tbsp brown sugar
- 1 Tbsp honey
- 2 cinnamon sticks
- 4 whole cardamom pods
- 3 star aniseed
- 1 vanilla pod, cut in half lengthwise
- 250 g flour
- 1 Tbsp butter
- pinch of salt
- cinnamon/sugar mix for sprinkling



Niël's dining room at De Kelders. (www.dekeldersprivateretreat.com)

Tante Grieta's golden sweet potatoes

Cousin Marietjie, one of the beautiful daughters of tante Grieta Hanekom recalls 'My mum's shiny sweet potato was heavenly'.

She would put sugar in a heavy-bottom pot, add a dash of oil and, very importantly, a pinch of baking powder. Then it was slowly caramelized. Just before it started burning, she'd add a bit of boiling water – and there you had your syrup. Now the slices of potato (sometimes she would cut the sweet potatoes into 2 x 5 cm cubes) were packed in, and that all-important pinch of salt. Slowly it stewed until everything was golden brown, sticky and shiny.



Mince meat pie with potato dough

- Potato dough**
 - 250 g mashed cooked potato
 - 4 Tbsp butter
 - 118 ml flour
 - ½ tsp baking powder
 - pinch of salt
- Rub butter into flour, add baking powder and salt, then mix together with mashed potato, adding a bit of water here and there to make a thick dough. Roll dough 2 cm thick.

Mince

- 1 kg mince
 - 250 ml boiling water
 - 3 onions, finely diced
 - 15 g butter
 - salt and white pepper
 - 4 cloves
 - pinch of nutmeg
 - 8 tomatoes, diced
 - sugar to taste
 - Marmite and butter
- Pour boiling water over mince, stir and put aside for 10 minutes. Fry onions soft in butter and add to mince. Season with salt, pepper, cloves and nutmeg, add tomatoes and simmer for 10 minutes, taste, then add sugar. To assemble pie, rub inside of an oven dish with Marmite and butter, put mince in dish, cover with potato dough and bake until golden brown. Serve with green salad, homemade bread and farm butter.

Heritage Renaissance

I believe the future of food lies in the past. I love to see heritage food on South African tables. I can't put it more plainly that **it is not only boerekos, but dishes from all local cultures.** Stripped of all pretences, it must be cooked simply and with love, with the knowledge of where it comes from – which should be 'a stone's throw away' from you.

Rejoice in **the big move back to simple food**, which can be a roast shoulder of lamb served with roast potatoes and a tomato and onion salad. Serve farm sausage with home-baked brown bread and peach jam. Make bredies, bake apple-pie with fresh apples, trickle brown sugar and farm cream over. Sprinkle a few potatoes with coarse salt and bake them in the oven. Shop like the French and Italians, buy daily what you need.

Restaurants should all have a chef's menu, the best plate of the house that reflects the produce of that particular area. I hardly look at menus. I always ask what the cooks recommend. The future of food lies with the great cooks of our nations. **May I say that I do hope the days of celebrity chefs are numbered?**

Niël's winter pantry

- In his fridge:** Farm butter.
- In his pantry:** Green figs.
- On his cheeseboard:** Kleinriver Cheese, Stanford ☎ 028-341-0693, www.kleinrivercheese.co.za
- Fruit-in-season platter:** I always use what I can buy from the bakkie traders.
- Favourite spices and herbs:** Nutmeg and lemon thyme.
- Most exciting ingredients:** I get excited when I see real fruit, meaning those with sun marks, that are in different shapes and sizes, that smell like real fruit.
- Touch of magic:** Just before serving a stew, top with butter and fresh lemon juice.
- Vino and after-dinner aperitif:** Lomond Wines (any), Slanghoek or Nuy red Muscadel.
- Favourite chocolate:** Lindt Orange or Chilli.
- Best timesaving kitchen tip:** Clean as you work.
- Kitchen must-haves:** A Kenwood chef and old Le Crueset casseroles.
- The extras a meal needs:** Flowers or greens from the garden, normal white candles, white cotton napkins, old silver, vintage cut crystal glasses, iPod-compiled mood music and my two cats purring away in front of the fire.
- Expert tips:** Keep plating simple, all on one large platter.
- Stockists:** Atlas Trading Co, 94 Wale St, Cape Town ☎ 021-423-4361.
- Favourite markets:** Local bakkie traders.
- Favourite restaurants:** Hemelhuijs, 71 Waterkant Street, Cape Town, ☎ 021-418-2042, www.hemelhuijs.co.za; Towerbosch, Knorhoek Rd, Koelenhof, ☎ 021-865-2958, www.knorhoek.co.za; Sloppy Sam's, 51a Somerset Rd, Green Point, ☎ 021-419-2921, www.sloppysamrestaurant.co.za; and Ocean Basket.
- Most used cookbooks:** *Spys en Drank* by Renata Coetzee and *African Kitchen* by Josie Stow.
- Favourite new destination:** I'm on my way to Copenhagen – I know I am going to love ...
- Follow Niël's blog** on <http://soutenpeper.com>