

Steel magnolia

We cosy up with executive chef Jackie Cameron at Hartford House in the KZN Midlands to chat about the release of her first cookbook, *Jackie Cameron Cooks At Home*, and get treated to a special feast of some of the book's rustic dishes

By TRACY GIELINK
Photographs by CLINTON FRIEDMAN



It feels like you're slowly entering a fairy tale. A dirt road gently sweeps you through the picturesque countryside, passes paddocks dotted with pensive thoroughbred horses and, ultimately, brings you to an expectant stop. Cocooned in an English-style country garden is a stately building etched from stone and a petite woman with Goldilocks good looks appears to engulf you in a warm welcome.

Jackie Cameron's cobalt blue eyes and easy smile belie a steely determination and unflinching ambition, and she is forging ahead to create her own happily ever after. She has earned much acclaim as head chef at Hartford House in the KZN Midlands and it's hard to believe the mature-beyond-her-years young chef has held this position for a decade.

She leads the way to the kitchen where she is busy recreating recipes from her cookbook, *Jackie Cameron Cooks At Home*, which launched in May. With stringent goals to keep her feet on the ground and her mind focused, the launch of her first book at age 30 means she has ticked another item off her bucket list. She calls it a "go-to" book – it has all the recipes you might need as it is divided to follow the natural progression of a day as well as condiments, home-cooked meals, restaurant food made easy, savoury snacks and sweets.

"I chose the title because I want people to use the book. When I'm 60 I can do a coffee table book of all my signatures. This isn't me trying to prove to the world I can cook; it's the bigger picture. If I can get people cooking better at home it will uplift the general home-cooking standard. If people are cooking better at home, they expect a better standard at restaurants, so we chefs naturally have to step up our game," she says earnestly.

Five years ago Jackie started writing a *Witness* (newspaper) column that saw her developing recipes and finding out which recipes people enjoy. "It led to a brainstorm of dishes for my recipe book," she says.

Jackie qualified from The Christina Martin

School of Food & Wine and did a stint at the Mount Grace before moving on to the beautiful Hartford House. Her eating out CV is impressive as it includes elBulli, The Fat Duck, Nobu, Le Gavroche, Gordon Ramsay's Hospital Road, River Café, Noma and, later this year, Thomas Keller's French Laundry. However, it is her family who seem to have made the biggest impact on her career and she often makes reference to happy childhood food memories.

"My grandfather was a butcher and I have included his incredible brawn recipe in my cookbook. I never spoke to him about his butchery in culinary depth – he passed away in the December that I qualified. I spoke to people he trained and asked if I could have his brawn recipe. They said he used to keep it simple and highlight the main flavour, and that's exactly what I do," she muses.

"I always look back at memories to see how I enjoy eating an ingredient. In the case of butternut, there is nothing better than it being roasted with my mother's roast chicken. For the butternut soup, you literally roast the butternut and add vegetable stock.

"The spicy lamb dish is a new take on bunny chow. This is curry as my grandmother and mom make it at home, finely shredded for a bunny or served on the bone. I was invited to judge a chef's competition in Dubai last July, where I tasted the dessert called umali. It means 'queen of puddings' and it's scrumptious," Jackie exclaims.

Jackie is unapologetically feminine and recently launched a super-stylish range of chefs' clothing for ladies, which is both pretty and practical, and available on her personal website. Compulsively ambitious, she hints at other interesting projects that are in the pipeline but plays her cards close to her chest. Jackie, it would appear, is more superhero than fairy princess.

Hartford House, Mooi River, KZN Midlands. Call 033-263-2713 or visit www.hartford.co.za.



Jackie has served the butternut soup with toasted pumpkin seeds and curry oil – see her recipe on our website



Roasted butternut soup

Makes 4 large portions

- 1½kg butternut, peeled and chopped**
- 50ml olive oil**
- salt and pepper**
- 2½ litres vegetable stock or water**
- fine salt and freshly ground black pepper**

Place butternut, olive oil, salt and pepper on a large tray and into a hot oven of 180°C. Roast until the edges of the butternut are slightly charred and the butternut is well cooked. Liquidise with half of the liquid and strain through a sieve. Heat the soup and add extra liquid if needed to get to the desired consistency. Season well.

Spicy lamb 'bunny chow' with mielie bread, relish and sour cream

Spicy lamb neck curry

Makes 2,9kg (with bones) or 1,8kg (without bones)

- 120g butter**
- 200ml sunflower oil**
- 3 large onions, sliced**
- 55g ginger, grated**
- 4 large cloves garlic, chopped**
- 60g Durban masala (or hot curry powder)**
- 2 tablespoons mustard seeds**
- 2 tablespoons cumin seeds**
- 2 tablespoons turmeric powder**
- 2 tablespoons coriander seeds**
- 2 tablespoons fennel seeds**
- 2 tablespoons cinnamon seeds**
- 2 tablespoons ginger powder**
- 185g tomato paste**
- 1kg tomatoes, chopped**
- 4kg lamb neck pieces**
- 4 litres lamb stock**
- 2 large onions, chopped**
- salt and pepper**

Heat a heavy-based pot and add butter and oil. Add onions, ginger and garlic and cook the onions until caramelised. Add the spices and cook until they are aromatic. Add tomato paste and fresh tomatoes and sear until the raw flavour in the tomato paste is cooked. Add meat and two litres of the lamb stock. Cook for about eight hours, topping up with the rest of the

stock and stirring occasionally. Season to taste. Serve at this point or, if making the bunny chow, allow meat to cool, remove from the bones, shred the meat finely, and set aside to heat later.

Mielie bread bunny chow

Makes 1 loaf or 10 mini portions

- 1 can cream-style sweetcorn**
- 3 eggs, lightly whisked**
- 3 tablespoons melted butter**
- 60g white sugar**
- 140g cake flour, sifted**
- pinch of salt and pepper**
- 3 teaspoons baking powder**

Mix the sweetcorn, eggs and butter in a bowl. Add the dry ingredients and season to taste. For mini breads, put a greaseproof paper base into a small tomato paste can. Grease well and half-fill with mielie-bread mixture. Bake at 180°C for about 10 minutes. Otherwise, put all of the mixture into a well-greased standard bread tin and bake for about 40 minutes.

Spicy tomato and onion relish

Aunt May's recipe was passed down the generations. I remember as a young child helping my mom sterilise bottles for this delicious relish. We often ate it with cheese and biscuits but I have recently added it to my spicy lamb bunny chow recipe. Served with a thick slice of homemade bread topped with loads of butter, this relish is a tasty way to satisfy a hollow tummy.

Makes 6 cups

- 1½kg tomatoes**
- 500g white onions**
- ¼ cup fine salt**
- 1 cup spirit vinegar**
- 390g white sugar**
- 2 teaspoons Durban masala**
- 20g cake flour**

Place chopped tomatoes, onions and salt in a bowl. Cover with plastic and leave overnight. Bring the vinegar, sugar, masala and flour to the boil, stirring continuously until the sugar crystals are dissolved. Add the tomato and onion mixture, reduce heat and cook until a relish consistency is reached. This takes about 55 minutes. Store in an airtight sterilised container in the fridge.

PLATING

Place warmed mielie cake in the middle of the plate. Top with heated shredded lamb. Serve with tomato and onion relish, and garnish with fresh coriander, sour cream and a grind of black pepper.



CHEF'S KITCHEN



TO DRINK: Go all-out local with a spicy pinotage





Umafi

Makes 8 large portions

400g ready-made puff pastry (or use leftover croissants from breakfast)

100g raisins

75g pistachio nuts, roughly chopped

100g pecan nuts, roughly chopped

1 litre milk

½ cup cream

235g white sugar

2 teaspoons vanilla essence

1½ tablespoons cinnamon powder

2 tablespoons butter for greasing

Unroll the puff pastry and cut into six pieces. Grease a tray well and bake these pieces at 220°C in the oven for about 10 minutes.

Butter an ovenproof dish. Divide each warm puff pastry piece in half lengthways to form two layers. Place a layer of pastry into the dish, breaking pieces to fit the base of the dish. Top the puff pastry with some raisins and nuts and continue until the dish is full. Ensure even distribution of nuts and raisins between the puff layers.

Bring the milk, cream, sugar, vanilla and cinnamon to the boil.

Pour over the puff pastry and bake at 180°C for about 30 minutes until browned on the top.

Serve hot with whipped cream.



TO DRINK: Try a perfumed 'potpourri' gewürztraminer



One lucky reader and a partner can win a two-night stay at Hartford House in the KZN Midlands, worth R7 720.

On the evening of your choice, you will join executive chef Jackie Cameron in the hotel's intimate kitchen at a special chef's table for two, where Jackie will not only cook dinner for you, but also offer valuable cooking tips – what a prize! Dinner, bed and breakfast included. In-room extras and beverages excluded. Flights and car hire excluded. Offer is subject to availability and is valid until 30 November 2013. To enter, email your name and contact details to foodhome@caxton.co.za with 'Hartford House' in the subject line by 15 June.



Jackie Cameron Cooks At Home (R250) is published by Penguin and available at all good bookstores.