

# MAX-IMUM BENEFIT

**M**AX'S Lifestyle is Durban's best-known township hangout. The Umlazi *shisa nyama* hot spot is a party palace for the well-heeled and has become a popular venue with tourists and locals keen on an authentic township experience.

When I went there for the first time a few months ago, the sole dining option was to choose a pile of meat from the butchery counter, which someone then took out back and cooked over the coals. Meat and beer was, essentially, it.

But now, a small casual restaurant has been added, serving breakfasts and daily specials. And there are plans to expand the menu. If Chef Jabulani "Jay-Cee" Zondi has anything to do with it, the sky might be the only limit.

Zondi, 28, doesn't plan to mess with the popular *shisa nyama*. But given that he has worked in restaurant kitchens in the UK and in Finland, including one that had a Michelin star, all manner of inventive options are possible.

At Tastes of Durban, on at Suncoast next weekend (from July 27 to 29), he will be doing his culinary thing for Max's Lifestyle Umlazi alongside top chefs representing Café 1999, Hartford House, 9th Avenue Bistro, Simply Asia Ballito, Jewel of India, Havana Grill and Little Havana and Versailles at the Blue Waters Hotel.

Zondi will present traditional African dishes and flavours – done his way. So there will be samp (he prepares it the traditional way but adds what he calls "a modern twist" in terms of what he leaves out and puts in) served with a spicy herb-infused lamb casserole; tripe with pumpkin, fennel, carrots and a touch of mint (I had a taste and it was delectable); and maize meal *pomme purée*.

"Like a mash, but with a twist," he explains, adding that mashed in with the maize meal will be potatoes, chives, cream, butter, milk and a touch of cheese. This will be served with Max's Lifestyle home-made boerewors.

It's not surprising to learn Zondi is an adventurer in the kitchen when you sit down with him and ask him to share the story of his journey to chefdom.

Jabulani Zondi, of Umlazi tavern Max's Lifestyle, is cooking at the Taste of Durban festival, writes **Wanda Hennig**

Born in Hammarsdale, he was brought up by his gran after both his parents died. She instilled in him the need for a good education – and made sure he took his turn cooking and helping with the family chores.

He says he liked cooking from a young age. But not thinking of it as a thing guys did, he enrolled at a Pietermaritzburg college to do an engineering diploma specialising in mechanics.

He was well on his way when the college announced a cooking contest. He entered and made a carrot cake. After tasting it, the lecturer-judge asked him why he wasn't cooking. Zondi learned that guys did do chef work – and moved to the Durban University of Technology, where he did a three-year hospitality diploma specialising in professional cookery.

After completing the course, he decided to broaden his horizons by travelling and working abroad. After applying online, he got an offer from the the Greenway Hotel in Cheltenham – if he could get all his papers in order.

"I learned that to go overseas, you had to have a passport, a reference letter and some money in your account. Then you had to go to the British embassy in Pretoria to process the application.

"It was hard, but in the end I qualified for a two-year working holiday visa. My grandmother

didn't believe it. She said this kind of thing was for rich people. My family weren't poor, but nor were they rich."

He was the first person he knew to "crack my way out" and go overseas. He arrived in bleak London, wearing a red jacket and red trousers, on a January day and walked right into something new to him – snow.

"My first thought was: how am I going to live here?"

But he did, and extended his time in London by a year. In those three years, he worked with some remarkable chefs, who taught him every aspect of restaurant work – including what hard work is really like. He often worked from 5am to 11pm.

"They put you through hell in those English kitchens, then they make you someone. I thought my first chef an ass. But by the time he left and I moved to my next kitchen, I thanked him."

Zondi went to the Washbourne Court Hotel to work in a restaurant kitchen



under Mat Pashley. There he moved up from commis chef to senior chef de partie.

He would continue the rise up the ranks, specialising in French cuisine. After a few months in Pashley's kitchen, "I started to feel I really needed to play with the big guys". So he moved on to work in a kitchen under Michelin-starred chef Toby Hill.

"I learned five-star and seven-star service from him – and that I had a talent for pastry. He changed the roster every day. He said a chef had to know how to do everything in the kitchen, including management."

Zondi married a Finnish woman he met in London (they're now divorced) and managed a staff of 15 in a Finnish kitchen when he couldn't speak their language and they couldn't speak English. "I owe so much to computer and translation programs," he says.

Zondi caters weddings, parties and other functions at Max's and has his own catering company. He dreams of having his own restaurant. He has big ideas on where he'd like to take Max's. He's a chef to watch – and you can meet him next weekend at Taste of Durban.

● To book or find out more, visit [www.tasteofdurban.co.za](http://www.tasteofdurban.co.za)

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*Chef Jabulani 'Jay-Cee' Zondi has taken charge of the kitchen at Max's Lifestyle in Umlazi, above. Picture: Wanda Hennig*