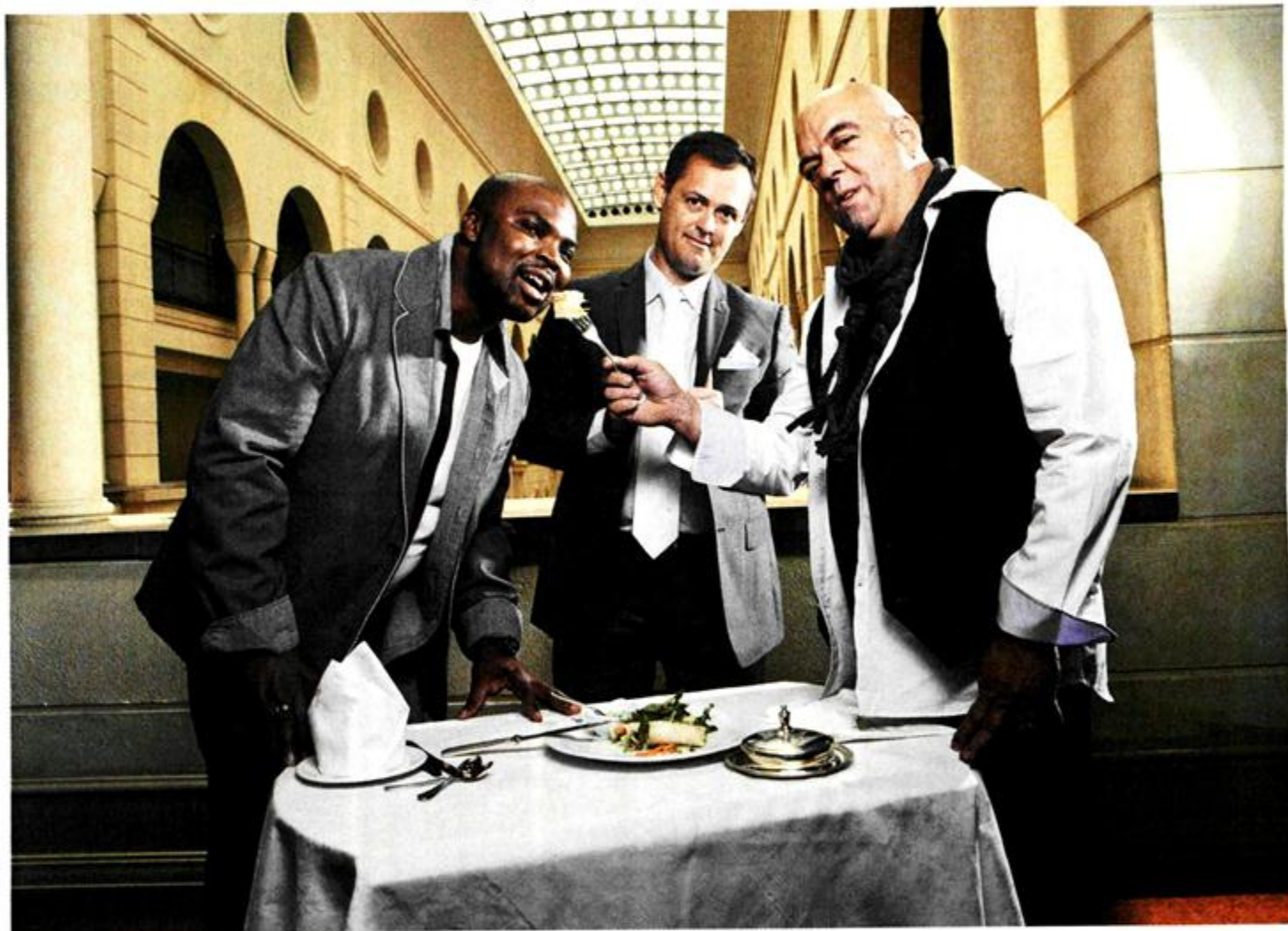


# TASTEBUDS AT THE READY!

They'll eat, drink and be ruthless – meet the judges of the eagerly anticipated MasterChef SA



The MasterChef judges (from left): Benny Masekwameng, Andrew Atkinson and Pete Goffe-Wood.

**T**OSS one kitchen cowboy and one foodie teacher in a top-notch cooking pot. Stir in a master chef known as Ben Myster. What do you get? A hot panel of judges who'll spice up South Africa's first MasterChef series with energy, passion and lots of drama.

The cowboy is Pete Goffe-Wood because he doesn't always follow the rules. The teacher is Andrew Atkinson – he's not really a teacher but he is the strictest of the three. Ben Myster is the nickname of

Benny Masekwameng – no one seems to know why.

This trio will soon be judging the popular cooking show on M-Net with prizes worth R8 million up for grabs – the biggest SA reality show bonanza to date.

Each brings a different dimension to the series which sees contestants toiling over their pots to produce dishes that will impress the snooty judges.

MasterChef, originally a British series, became a worldwide hit when the Australians breathed new life into it. America, New Zealand, Portugal and Israel have all

made their own versions to cash in on the show's new-found popularity.

The second season of the Australian series was broadcast here earlier this year and had local viewers and foodies glued to their TVs. And now there's MasterChef South Africa, which starts on M-Net on 20 March.

The three judges who will tell contestants how things are done were carefully selected and are among the best chefs in the country, producer Mariki van der Walt says.

About 150 chefs invited for interviews



were eliminated in various rounds until only 35 remained – and these three made the final cut.

"Andrew is the funny one," Benny says when we meet at the Michelangelo Hotel in Sandton, Johannesburg. "He's also the sternest and we call him Mister Atkinson. Things have to be planned, done in a particular way and the right steps followed.

"Pete doesn't follow rules at all and I'm the peacemaker. We gel well together."

And you can call him Mr Cool.

PETE (46) spent 10 years living and working in London and loved watching MasterChef, which has been on TV there since the '90s.

"I was keen to get involved right from the start," says Pete. He's the owner of the Kitchen Cowboys cooking school in Hout Bay, Cape Town, where he lives. "I teach men how to cook and I'm a consultant to hotels and restaurants."

He was born in London and his parents emigrated to South Africa when he was five. "The first time I learnt to cook and discovered my passion for food was when I moved in with a group of guys. The rule was if you cooked you didn't have to do the dishes!"

While pursuing a BA at the University of Cape Town, his budding culinary passion took over and he decided to switch to a food service management course instead.

Since then Pete has become one of the country's leading chefs. He was GQ's food editor for eight years and has written about food for years for publications such as Men's Health and Fresh Living.

There's little he doesn't know about judging food – he's done it for five years for food magazines Eat Out and Eat In, and is on the San Pellegrino panel which nominates the 50 best restaurants in the world each year.

Sounds as if contestants will really have to know their stuff to impress him.

"I'm not just looking for a winner but for a contestant who can go on a food journey with me, someone who can work out in 18 episodes if they want a career in the food industry or not, someone with passion, enthusiasm and imagination.

"You can teach people to bake a cake or fry an egg but you can't teach them to think about food all the time. I'm looking for someone who's brave and wants to experiment."

**“ I'm looking for someone who's brave and wants to experiment ”**

Judge No 2, "Mr Atkinson", adjusts his red braces and puts on a black jacket. He likes dressing formally, Andrew says. "Are you standing for the senate?" Pete jokes.

Andrew (41) is the only judge with experience in front of the cameras.

"I presented 32 cooking programmes on SABC2 during the Soccer World Cup," he says, modestly neglecting to mention his other TV and radio cookery shows.

In his 22-year career he's won just about every major food award. In addition he's been part of many judging panels and associations – from the SA Chefs Association to the World Association of Chefs Societies. And he's worked in several top local hotels.

"I'll be looking for a contestant who thinks about their food," says the chef who's served meals to Nelson Mandela, Thabo Mbeki, Bill Clinton, Queen Elizabeth and Prince Charles.

"It's one thing to walk into a kitchen and start cooking but looking at a plate of food you can tell whether someone has thought carefully about the composition.

"I'm looking for a contestant who can show me their personality through their food, someone who can plan and think. And there must be a lot of passion."

Yes, he admits, he's a perfectionist.

BENNY (36) says his culinary journey started in his mom Margaret's kitchen in Alexandra, Johannesburg. "She sold food to workers in the townships. I had to jump in and help cut up vegetables."

After school he worked for her company for two years and saved enough to study.

He initially wanted to study electrical engineering but when he wasn't accepted he looked at courses offered at Technikon Natal. Catering management caught his eye – and he knew his search was over.

"At first my mother wasn't happy about it but now she's very proud of me," says Benny, who is the executive chef at MondoVino restaurant at SunSquare Montecasino, Johannesburg. And it's this restaurant the MasterChef will win as part of his or her prize.

Benny's career has taken him around the world, from London to Jamaica, Turkey and Madagascar, and many politicians and heads of state have sampled his skills.

"I'm so privileged to be a judge. Now perhaps I can give someone the opportunity and direction I got in my career, and hopefully inspire them with the story of where I come from." □

\* Watch MasterChef South Africa from 20 March, Tuesdays at 7.30 pm on M-Net.

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For details on how to download the app go to [www.drum.co.za](http://www.drum.co.za)



**Calm and collected Benny hopes he can touch people with his inspirational background.**



**Watch your step with Andrew: he's full of jokes but that smile can be deceiving.**



**Pete's a food connoisseur who's been preparing and judging food for 25 years.**