



Tsogo Sun Group executive chef, Benny Masekwameng enjoys a latté at Explorers restaurant at Emnotweni Casino.

From humble beginnings to culinary success

Benny's interest in food started with his helping his mother in her informal catering business in Alexandra

Susanna Oosthuizen

NELSPRUIT - As a young boy in Alexandra, Benny Masekwameng would never have dreamt that one day he would be on TV, never mind in one of South Africa's top shows.

However, he relishes his role as judge on M-Net's *MasterChef SA* and describes it as a dream come true. "I got to do what I love all day long, meet a lot of people and have fun," he says of his *MasterChef* experience.

Chef Benny, as he has become known due to the show, is also Tsogo Sun's group executive chef. In this capacity he paid a visit to Southern Sun Emnotweni Hotel to host an exclusive dinner party with the casino's executive chef Wendy Dunn and Emnotweni Sun Hotel executive chef, Phillip Yowela.

His interest in food started with his helping his mother in her informal catering business in Alexandra township. "My mother sold vetkoeke in the mornings and fried hake over weekends to workers in the area. Later on she expanded to stews, pap, vegetables and salads over lunchtimes.

She taught me one of the most important lessons in the industry, namely how to shop and compare prices. This is one of the things that can make or break you in the restaurant business," Benny explains.

Today his mother is extremely proud of her youngest's achievements. After graduating in catering management from Natal Technikon, he first worked for the Hilton Hotel group before joining Southern Sun Hotels in 2006. His rise within this group is largely due to working hard and staying true to himself, Benny says. "I work hard, I love food and at Southern Sun I receive the support required to excel," he explains.

About *MasterChef SA*

Being selected as a judge out of

181 hopefuls is no mean feat and Benny succeeded thanks to having the right mix of characteristics. "The producers knew exactly what they wanted.

The show needed three different types of expertise and personalities in the judges in order to make the competition as fair as possible," he says. According to him, the chemistry between the three was immediately evident and he thoroughly enjoyed spending time on set.

"We were not given any roles to play but had to be honest and give constructive criticism and advice to build the contestants' confidence," Benny comments. He added that any one of the top 18 could have won. "They can all really cook!" he confirms.

The chef, the husband and the father

Being the wife of one of the country's best-known chefs might seem like a dream come true to many, but Benny insists that his wife is the better cook in the family. Also a professionally trained chef, it is his wife that prepares most of the meals at home. The couple also have an eight-week-old daughter, the proverbial apple of Chef Benny's eye. "Whether she will one day follow in her parents' footsteps will be entirely in her own hands," says Benny.

About the Lowveld

He says he wants to break away for a week with his wife and daughter and travel through the Lowveld, which they have never visited before. "Out of all the hotels I have been too I have never had such a warm welcome as the one I received at the Southern Sun Emnotweni Hotel," Benny remarks.

He adds that he is aware of the acclaimed eateries in the region and can't wait to pay a visit to these in the near future.

Asked if he now judges every plate of food put before him, Benny comments that he can easily switch from judge to normal mode, and that he enjoys a lot of people's food.

His first choice on a menu would be seafood, with any pork dish a close second. Fresh goat meat will, however, not tempt this chef's palate. "One cooks for the guest, first and foremost, to meet their expectations, and then you can add a bit of your own flair," he says with regard to what marks a good chef. "The menu is a contract between the guest and the chef and each must hold up his end of the bargain."

What's next?

In the future, Benny would like to give underprivileged youngsters an opportunity to develop their talent and skills. "I would like to, one day, host my own TV show that provides a platform for these youngsters to showcase their talent," he explains enthusiastically. He believes that this could give another hopeful would-be chef a chance, like he was, to excel.

Benny remembers with obvious pride his first media success as a student, when the *Natal Mercury* featured his Thai smoked chicken salad with papaya and a mango, coriander and lemon juice dressing. And this feeling of pride is what this passionate man would like to pass on to another generation.

Another opportunity to feel part of the *MasterChef SA* action, is to visit the Emnotweni Sun Hotel on a Wednesday night when its executive chefs will host *MasterChef SA*-themed dinners. Each week, the chefs will pull out all the stops with dishes similar to those prepared in the challenge during the previous evening's *MasterChef SA* show on M-Net.