



UMNGQUSHO (OR POSH
SAMP AND BEANS)

the game changer



You probably think this is a five-star kitchen, right? With food to match? And it is. What you might not guess is that it shares territory with a world-famous lion pride. Welcome to the reimagined Singita Lebombo: food destination in the bush

PHOTOGRAPHS **ELSA YOUNG** TEXT **KATE WILSON**
RECIPES **TESSA ARMSTRONG** AND **ANDREW NICHOLSON**

Liam

Tomlin doesn't smile in photographs. Glowering on camera is his schtick. (He's from Dublin.) So when he sees the pictures of himself and Andrew, taken on our first evening in the bush, he's a bit thrown. "I never smile in pictures," he says. The thing is, sometimes you just can't help it.

Photographers sometimes call it the magic hour. Those precious minutes just before sunset when the light softens and melts the edges of the day. And there is nowhere I have ever travelled, where the magic hour lives up to its name quite the way it does in the bush.

It's enough to prise you from your luxurious, glass-walled suite at the newly refurbished Singita Lebombo, where you happen to have an unobstructed view of an elephant and her calf across the N'wanetsi River, and send you bumping along a dirt road in a Land Rover with two chefs, a chef's wife, TASTE's photographer and a deadpan game ranger.

At 5.30 pm, east of Kruger's Satara Camp and a mere stroll from the Mozambican border, the light sets the Lebombo Mountains on fire. SA's favourite unsmiling Irish chef and Lebombo's head chef, Andrew Nicholson, haul a cooler box of beers through the scrub and break out one of the lodge's new biltong slicers.

We clink bottles, eat spiced nuts and make nervous jokes about being out of the vehicle just metres from a recent sighting of the Shishangaan pride. In other words, smiling is inevitable.

"Luke Bailes called and invited me speak at the Singita chefs' forum," Liam says, back at the lodge. He speaks about Singita's founder and CEO with more reverence than you'd expect from a glowering Irishman, but then everyone does. He is a real, physical presence at the lodges even when he isn't. "He said he wanted to update the food; move with the times. Luke wanted a food destination."

So while the lodge was in the throes of its first major refurbishment – new kitchen and updated communal areas, private villa, second pool, stargazing deck, TV room for Philistines and gentler, more muted interiors courtesy of Boyd Ferguson's crack design team – Liam was working with the Singita chefs at his Cape Town restaurant, Chef's Warehouse.

Andrew was one of those chefs. A 32-year-old marketing graduate, he says he realised halfway through his studies that what he really wanted to do was to cook. He finished his degree and enrolled at Prue Leith. He did a stint under George Jardine at Jordan and has worked his way up from junior sous chef. Unlike Liam, Andrew smiles constantly. There is a lot of locker-room ribbing between the two, but the mutual respect is touchingly obvious.

Andrew credits his parents with his love of food. "We had a huge vegetable garden when I was growing up," he says. "I remember picking tomatoes and artichokes as a child. And Dad braaied three times a week."

Like all lucky Joburg families, they often went on bush holidays and Andrew has a prized photograph of himself as a child at the old N'wanetsi camp, standing in front of one of the original buildings. It is now his quarters at the lodge.

He gets excited about simple foods – sweetbreads by George Jardine, avocado tempura mentioned by a guest that was a "revelation" and when I describe a samp "risotto" made with anchovies, an odd expression crosses his face. It's the same studied look he gets when I tell him, smugly, that I ate my poached egg on top of the bean ragout with bacon crumbs I'd ordered for breakfast. I realise he is considering the combination, storing it away.

There is a beautiful baobab tree just behind the dining area. Andrew wants to use the seeds, which are intensely sour, to flavour some of the dishes. "A panna cotta, maybe," he muses.

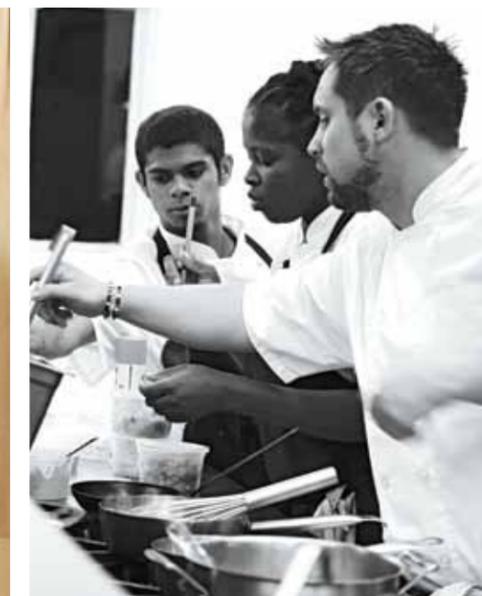
He wanted to put octopus on the menu, but was told it wouldn't do well. The guests, mostly Americans, are more keen on trying zebra (which he sears and serves tataki-style with shimeji mushrooms). But then there were a few requests for octopus and he took the plunge. Half the kitchen staff wouldn't go near it at first. "I had to show them pictures of it alive. Some of them have never seen the sea."

Many of the local cooks are products of the Singita School of Cooking, just one of the group's myriad sustainability initiatives. Tskane "TK" Khoza is a graduate who has just been promoted to chef de partie. On the drive back from the magic hour, Liam and his wife, Jan, want to know how she reacted to the news of her promotion. Andrew says there were tears.

Much like the lodge refurb, the food experience has been simplified and pared down. Instead of high tea and three huge meals a day, Liam introduced a tapas-style lunch similar to his Chef's Warehouse menu. He has added deli fridges to the bar area, so guests can help themselves to freshly made salads, cheese and charcuterie – all painstakingly sourced.

"The guests used to be force-fed around the clock," Liam says, "like foie-gras geese. Now they can graze like cattle."

They've reduced the quantity – although no-one is going hungry here – but increased the quality. "There used to be a starch in every dish," says Andrew, "I hated that." Portions are restrained, but let's be clear – no special requests will go unanswered either. Andrew says a guest tried to slip him \$100 to make sure he was well "looked after". He is mystified by this. "It's not like I make some plates a little better than others." He doesn't do half measures or shortcuts, he fusses over every dish on the line, many of which he has created personally. There is a "posh" samp-and-bean dish, for example, finished with butter and Parmesan and served with charred onion petals. Or my standout dish of our stay, a deceptively simple whole



Clockwise from above: The refurbished dining room at Singita Lebombo has a view of the kitchen; from left, Nathan Coe of Chef's Warehouse, chef de partie TK Khoza and Lebombo head chef Andrew Nicholson; the new pool deck at sunset; whole octopus ready to be cooked; potato-and-rosemary bread with roasted garlic and hummus; a honey badger caught unawares. Previous spread: A selection of tapas served at lunch; Liam, Nathan and Andrew working the pass.



“Perhaps you shouldn’t expect to eat perfectly caramelised octopus or an explosively delicious softshell crab in the Kruger Park”



Cooler kings: the chefs haul beers on an afternoon game drive near the lodge.



Clockwise from above: Liam directing the kitchen in full swing for dinner service; a vervet monkey hangs in the bar after nicking a loaf of potato bread; Andrew showing off his knife skills on a slab of tuna; whole softshell crab with spicy sago, wasabi cream and charred tomatoes.



softshell crab (above) served on tiny coral-coloured beads of sago spiked with citrus and chilli. Andrew admits he nicked the spicy dressing from George Jardine, but the dish is unmistakably his own.

Tourist-friendly dishes have been elegantly updated, so a duck curry is deconstructed on the plate and the sauce (extravagantly made from half a kilo of pine nuts) is a thick swirl encircling pieces of juicy, pinkly-seared meat. For lunch, Liam has added his fusion signature, so there is tuna tartare with creamy avocado and nori, little bowls of saffron-yellow corn soup, an Indonesian-style salad with a perfect quail’s egg, springbok with poached apples and a deeply autumnal dish of roasted carrots, squash and goat’s cheese.

After the initial phase of reinvention,



Liam has kept up a regular exchange programme between Chef’s Warehouse and Singita. So some of his own Capetonian chefs have been able to cook in a Kruger Park kitchen. One of these is 22-year-old Nathan Coe, who is at Lebombo for the first time while we’re there. He literally beams his way through service.

“We serve a staff meal at CW every night,” Liam says, “Nathan thanks me for it every single time.” He lives in Mitchell’s Plain, so they offered to help bankroll a place to live closer to the restaurant. Nathan declined. “He said he’d miss his family too much.” This trip, his first shift in Kruger, makes him the first person in his family to travel by plane.

At the back of the kitchen, 29-year-old Alice Wilhelm, the senior sous chef, is sweating

onions on the stove. Six perfect duck breasts, with beautifully rendered, golden skin, are resting on a tray near her elbow. Originally from Somerset West, Alice has worked at *Eat Out* Top 10 winners Terroir and Waterkloof and has, according to Liam, “bigger balls than a lot of the male chefs I know.” When I ask her what it’s like to be a sous at Singita, she describes her life as “the best of all possible worlds.”

There is an American wedding party staying at the lodge for four days.

You can guess how this happened: the 20-something couple came here on holiday, had a bush dinner under the stars and said “wouldn’t it be awesome if we got married *here*!?” So they did – in an intimate, family-only ceremony for 14 people, up on a ridge overlooking the concession. (The big wedding will happen back home.) The groom emerges in a full tuxedo with a cummerbund, in 25-degree heat, and she in a fairytale beaded gown.

We heard the details later. The enormous full moon that rose over their bush-dinner reception was a nice touch. So was the herd of breeding elephants that trundled by mid-speeches. All it needed was one of the younger guests to belt out *Circle of Life* in front of the bonfire, and yes, that happened too. Eat your heart out, Simba.

For the wedding feast, Tessa Armstrong, Lebombo’s 25-year-old pastry chef, has made a white-iced, three-tiered cake with a dozen, silvery-edged, antique sugar roses

tumbling down the layers. A wedding cake from a bush lodge kitchen.

But then, this is no ordinary bush lodge kitchen. Firstly, it is huge and state of the art. Secondly, it is beautiful, with sliding glass doors that look out towards the dining area so guests can witness the silent theatre of food as it is lit up on the pass. At night there is a bonfire between the kitchen and the dining room, and sparks thread their way towards the branches of that watchful baobab.

For Singita Lebombo, Liam designed his dream kitchen. “The cold room is the size of my whole kitchen at Chef’s Warehouse,” he says, with a mixture of pride and longing. The cold room is full of fresh produce and a large supply of Richard Bosman charcuterie, among other supplies,

“The guests used to be force-fed like foie-gras geese. Now they can graze like cattle”
— **Liam Tomlin**

but the plan, says Liam, “is to create a curing room at Singita Ebony where we can do our own meats.

“The idea is to make the lodges as self-sustainable as possible,” Liam explains, invoking Bailes. Nothing can be grown in Kruger itself, so some of the land at Castleton, the original Bailes homestead and first of the SA lodges, will be used for the hydroponic cultivation of produce that will supply all five of the lodges, making them self-sustaining for nine months of the year. In the meantime, the troops fly in blast-frozen tuna from Cape Town and shop for berries in bulk from Woolworths.

Which brings me to a controversial point. One of the unspoken rules of game lodge dining is *always choose meat*. Game just seems like the right thing to eat in the bush, since you’re surrounded by its peers. It’s respectful, like nose-to-tail eating. Also, seafood at game lodges is frequently awful. I once ordered a calamari salad starter at a lodge that shall remain nameless. The table was very dimly lit and

after a few bites it become apparent that there was no *actual* calamari in the calamari salad, just batter crumbs from the bottom of the pan. At the time I remember thinking, well, it’s my own fault really. Perhaps you shouldn’t expect to eat crispy salt-and-pepper squid or perfectly caramelised octopus or an explosively delicious whole softshell crab in the Kruger Park. And I accepted that. Until I saw Andrew expertly slicing an enormous slab of tuna with a Japanese knife, and realised that *this* is a game-changer.

With Bailes’s much quoted vision, Liam’s direction and a team this dedicated, Singita could become something more than just an exclusive, stupendously luxurious yet authentic and eco-sensitive lodge. It could become a destination restaurant.

Yes, there are still huge breakfasts and those boma dinners beloved of tourists, with their buffets and novelty singing. But Andrew has suggested converting an old Land Rover into a food truck and serving guests more contemporary fare, and the game changes a little more.

Everything at Lebombo has been explicitly sourced and sampled and chosen for its quality and provenance. Even the chocolates in the mini-bars in the guest suites are artisanal, bespoke, Alexander Avery fondants, made by a former financier who swapped banking for bonbons.

“We have one more thing for you to taste...” says Tessa. Minutes later she sets down a board of still-warm doughnuts. Giraffe-shaped doughnuts with caramel-filled bellies, to be exact. That picture got a lot of likes on Instagram.

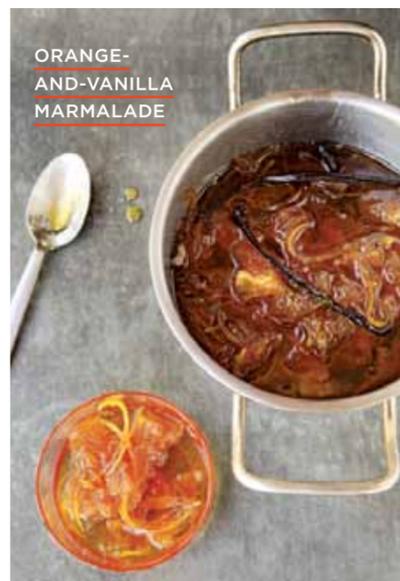
It may be because I was introduced to all and sundry and poked my nose in every fridge, or it might be because there are few locals about, but there’s something decidedly cool about being able to help yourself to a some deli meats and a glass of chilled white wine at the bar in one of the most beautiful, least contrived lodges in the world. There’s something special about feeling so at home that you don’t need to be waited on – though of course, you never have to wait for anything.

Because when an experience is this exclusive, and you’re only able to hold onto it for the briefest possible moment, feeling like you belong there is pretty damn cool. **W**

For more info visit singita.com



Senior sous chef, Alice, with salad for the deli fridges.



ORANGE-AND-VANILLA MARMALADE

Makes approx. 2 litres

EASY

GREAT VALUE

Preparation: 10 mins

Cooking: XX minutes

oranges 6 (peel of 3)

water 2 cups

white sugar 1 kg

vanilla pods 3

1 Peel 3 oranges and chop all the flesh.

2 Squeeze out any juice that may be left in remaining pieces. **3** Place all the ingredients into a saucepan and bring to the boil. **4** When tiny bubbles start forming and the mixture starts to caramelise (at 105°C on a sugar thermometer), simmer for a further 15 minutes, then remove from the heat. **5** Cool overnight at room temperature, then spoon into sterilised jars and seal.

RECIPE INFO

UMNGQUSHO (OR POSH SAMP AND BEANS)

Serves 4

EASY

GREAT VALUE

Preparation: XX minutes, plus overnight soaking time

Cooking: 1 hour 20 minutes

samp 300 g

sea salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

vegetable stock 6 cups

DRIED? kidney beans 50 g

DRIED? chickpeas 50 g

DRIED? cannellini beans 50 g

butter 50 g, cubed

Parmesan 50 g grated

spinach 60 g, sautéed

1 Soak the samp in water overnight, then drain. **2** Place the samp in a deep saucepan with a pinch of salt, cover with 4 cups stock and place over a medium heat. Simmer for 1 hour. (This can be made ahead of time and reserved until needed.) **3** To finish the dish, heat 1–2 cups vegetable stock in a medium-sized saucepan over a medium to low heat. **4** Add the cooked samp, while stirring with a wooden spoon. When the samp



A sunset snack: Liam with TASTE’s editor, Kate, taking advantage of magic hour.

has warmed through, add the kidney beans, chickpeas and cannellini beans. **5** Add the butter, one block at a time, while stirring and follow with the Parmesan (as for a risotto). If the mixture is too thick, add a few ladles of the remaining stock. **6** Stir the wilted spinach through the samp and beans. Season to taste and serve warm.

RECIPE INFO

WINE

ROLO COOKIES

Makes 64

EASY

GREAT VALUE

Preparation: 20 minutes

Cooking: 8 minutes

butter 280 g

brown sugar 400 g

white sugar 400 g

free-range eggs 4

milk ¼ cup

vanilla extract 2 t

cocoa 200 g

cake flour 200 g

baking powder 2 t

salt a pinch

Rolos 8 tubes

caster sugar, for dusting

1 Preheat the oven to 160°C. Cream the butter and sugar in a mixer.

2 Add the eggs, milk and vanilla.

3 Add the dry ingredients and mix.

4 Spoon tablespoons of the mixture onto a baking tray, then place a Rolo inside each tablespoon and roll into a ball. Dust with caster sugar. **5** Bake for 8 minutes. Allow to cool. **WINE:**