

## Taste of the Wild

When South African-born chef Craig Pienaar returned to his homeland last year to run the kitchen of the 10,000-acre Ulusaba Game Reserve, he had more than local cuisine in mind for guests of this ultraluxe wildlife compound. Instead, the 28-year-old combined his love of Pan-African cuisine with his passion for modern European dishes, resulting in a unique fusion of flavors. His menu includes innovations such as roasted kudu stuffed with Yorkshire pudding as well as traditional Algerian specialties such as goat meat or ostrich shish kebab marinated in garlic, chili pepper, and spicy green paw paw. The young chef was never daunted by the challenge of bringing refinement to the remote African bush. "I visited the property on a Friday and began working the following Thursday," he laughs.

Pienaar's diverse training at various five-star properties throughout Tanzania and Algeria and at several upmarket hotels and resorts throughout England led to the creation of crossbred menus that are as unique as Ulusaba, an extraordinary \$10 million safari compound. Part of the northwestern edge of Kruger National Park in the 145,000-acre Sabi Sand Game Reserve, these ancient traversing grounds are prolific with the "big five" of the wild game world—lions, leopards, elephants, rhinoceroses, and Cape buffalo—in addition to zebras, cheetahs, giraffes, and hippopotamuses. Accommodations range from 10 cottages that span the cliff face of Ulusaba Mountain, overlooking the game preserve's miles of sprawling bushveld below, to a more secluded enclave of 10 elevated chalets at the base of the escarpment that are linked by a series of Tarzan-style wood-and-rope swing bridges.



Ulusaba's treehouse-style Safari Lodge



Chef Craig Pienaar

While the lodge's remote location is exotic for guests, it proves to be less than practical for running a first-rate restaurant. "My greatest challenge," says Pienaar, "has been sourcing all the products I need and training the kitchen staff—many of whom were totally unfamiliar with a modern kitchen

and with the dishes that we prepare." In addition to a head chef and a sous-chef, he employs five native Shangaans—members of an indigenous tribe who are descendants of the Zulu—to cook most of the traditional African dishes.

Since South African cuisine tends to be too bland for most Westerners, Pienaar relies heavily on red wine sauces, fresh herbs, and spices such as cumin, coriander, and paprika to flavor many courses. He also uses a broad range of local products, including organically fed beef and pork, cheeses that are trucked in from Nelspruit, two hours away, and fish flown in from Cape Town. For more exotic staples, such as truffles, olive oil, and vinegars, Pienaar relies on his European connections.

As for the game on the menu, guests are presented with an array of interesting opportunities. Pienaar's recommendation for first-time tasters: the springbok carpaccio with strawberry and balsamic dressing. For those looking to graduate to more unusual dishes, the offerings are many. "Be adventurous with your palate," Pienaar suggests. "Try everything, because you probably won't find it anywhere else in the world." He is especially proud of his crocodile served with smoked salmon salad in a lemon and mustard sauce. The combination of flavors is brilliant, and the meat is as mellow as chicken or turkey. "Warthog is delicious too," Pienaar says with a smile.

We'll take his word on that.

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