

In 2012, Kelvin and Jarlyne Joel founded the Johannesburg Culinary and Pastry School with a dream of training young chefs. Now it's the largest black-owned school for chefs in South Africa, with 250 students. And their students are just as inspiring, writes

Anna Trapido

Kelvin and Jarlyne Joel are in the butterfly business. Well, sort of. At the Johannesburg Culinary and Pastry School (JCPS) they train and transform inexperienced, often economically disadvantaged, students into skilled and sought-after fine-dining chefs.

The couple founded JCPS at Maboneng in 2012 - with eight students and five stoves - because they saw a gap in the market for quality, affordable culinary education. They offer internationally accredited, 12- and 24-month professional qualifications. In keeping with the original aims, JCPS training costs R65 000 a year, which is about 40% less than the average culinary institute. It also facilitates scholarships through its Seabiscuit Foundation.

In 2016 JCPS received a R2 million expansion loan from the National Empowerment Fund. And expand it did. It is the largest black-owned chefs' school in South Africa, with 250 students in training.

The school building is enormous and elegant; an early modernist building - opposite the Rand Club - designed by Johannesburg architectural icon Gordon Leith. It was built in 1940 to house the Transvaal interests of Barclays Bank. Its over-the-top style reflects the status of what was then the world's largest bank in the heart of the world's richest gold fields. Think grey sandstone exteriors, a triple-volume foyer, magnificent marble floors and chandeliers galore.

For every reward there is risk. Jarlyne gave up her job in the insurance industry and used her pension to start the school. She says: "Initially, things were really difficult. We had four small children and for the first few months we weren't even sure how we were going to generate the money to pay the rent."

The couple kept going because "we had a dream and we still have that same dream. We want to create a landmark Johannesburg institution. It is not about us as individuals. We want to make a difference to our country. We want to show that as South Africans we can't just wait for the government. We all have to be part of economic growth and social development."

Co-owner Kelvin is a superb and much-celebrated chef - he is a past member of the SA National Culinary team and was the first black pastry chef at the Sandton Sun. But it is not only his food preparation skills that make him suited to the task of training. Born and raised in Westbury, Johannesburg, Kelvin describes a difficult childhood. "There was no one at home to monitor what I got up to. By Standard 2 I was drinking and skipping school regularly. I am not sure how or why, but when I was about 13, I became aware that I didn't want that life. I could see where it led. So, I went to a church shelter where some of my friends were living."

The ecclesiastical authorities agreed to take him in on condition that he went back to school and did chores. Kelvin was assigned to the kitchen crew, which is where he discovered a talent for cooking.

He says: "By the time I was in Standard 8, I knew I wanted to be a chef."

With no money for culinary school, he secured an internship with Protea Hotel Parktonian. The executive chef at the time, Rudi Liebenberg, recognised Kelvin's talent and arranged for him to work with legendary pastry chef Linda Kotze at the Hyatt Regency Johannesburg. Asked about this time, Liebenberg - now executive chef at the Belmond Mount Nelson Hotel - says:

"There was just something about Kelvin.

A seriousness in his eyes and his character. It was a belief and want that is not often seen. Anyone who has achieved anything knows that they don't do it alone. People took a chance on me when I was young, so I paid it forward. This industry helped me to figure out a lot of different things, including the value of a mentor to give young people opportunities to live up to their potential."



THE butterfly BUSINESS



GREAT SUCCESS The couple saw a gap in the market for quality, affordable culinary education



MENTOR Kelvin Joel 'marks' student dishes



We delight in the beauty of the butterfly, but rarely admit the changes it has gone through to achieve that beauty
- Maya Angelou

MORE OF AN EATER THAN A COOK?

The patisserie students host high teas - R200 a head. The college is closed but, the Covid-19 coronavirus allowing, the next one will take place on May 3. Save space for a feast of macarons, brownies, lemon meringue pies, scones and so much more. For those who prefer the savoury side of life, there are monthly, multicourse chefs' table evening events for R350.

LOOKING FOR A FUNCTION VENUE?

It is impossible to imagine a more elegant, iconically Egoli setting for a wedding than JCPS. There is even a penthouse suite available for overnight honeymooners. Phone 011 024 5277. For more details: info@jcps.co.za; www.jcps.co.za; Facebook: @jhbculinary.pastry; Instagram: jhbculinarypastry



BACK TEACHING Mashudu 'Lucky' Masinya

The task is not without challenges. Jarlyne says: "When they first arrive, many of our students have not eaten in a restaurant and are unfamiliar with a lot of the ingredients with which we work. There can be complex barriers to overcome. Practical ones like transport and accommodation are often exacerbated by low self-esteem. On the plus side, they are very willing to learn and without preconceptions. They are hungry for information and excited by everything. It is very inspiring to be involved in a transformation that results in their becoming productive, confident hospitality professionals."

One such former student is Mashudu "Lucky" Masinya, who had a severely disrupted childhood. "I got lost on a train on the way to school when I was about seven years old. I came from the south of Johannesburg and ended up in Pretoria. I didn't know my mother's phone number or my address so after two nights at the police station they took me to Chance Children's Home. "After that, there were a lot of hands involved in bringing me up. I reconnected with my mother only when I was 14." Lucky attended JCPS on a full scholarship and subsequently spent time working at two Michelin-star restaurants in the UK: Belmond Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons in Oxford and The Ritz in London. He recently returned to teach at JCPS, where he is busy bringing forth his own batch of butterflies.