

The Big Easy Durban chef dishes on seasonal produce

Head chef of The Big Easy Durban Winebar & Grill by Ernie Els, located in the Hilton Durban, Janine Fourie says "Veggies should be colourful and crunchy on the plate and say 'Eat me!'" She advises that one should make the very best of fruit and vegetables in season.



Head chef Janine Fourie

"Not only will the produce be fresher than any other time of the year (when it may have been in cold-storage for a while) but also be far more affordable. Brighten up your meals by incorporating fresh, vibrant and colourful foods to boost the soul, mood, and system – an easy winter booster!"

Chef Fourie explains how she plans her menus around what produce is in season, the climate and diners' preferences. "On cool, gloomy days I create a hearty meal to add to the menu. In spring and summer, I find there is a demand for lighter dishes. Events - like the recent Euro football championships - are also deciding factors when compiling the list of specials."

Local suppliers

Although farmers' markets where one can shop for veggies straight from the farm are popular in the northern hemisphere, "they are not as prevalent in and around Durban. The Shongweni Market is probably the most well-known with the locals. The challenge in sourcing from an individual farmer on a small scale is whether they can provide the quantities required by The Big Easy Durban."

Chef Fourie explored the province thoroughly before securing her preferred suppliers – most of them being in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands area. “We obtain our top-quality beef from Hope Meats, Wayfarer Trout supplies the very best cold smoked trout (which is ideal for salads) and Gourmet Greek provides delicious cheeses and to-die-for yogurt.”

Although meat and steak dishes are still the most popular choices on the menu (80%-90%), the vegetable does feature more predominantly now than it used to as a standard side dish of predictable creamed spinach, peas, and carrots. “Veggies should complement every meal!” says Chef Fourie.





Experimenting with dishes and making the most of seasonal produce

“There is more of a demand nowadays for healthier and lighter meals in the evening – with less cheese! We do get the occasional “banting-type” order for our Burger ‘without the bun’ and are always willing to accommodate these types of request and have delicious options for vegetarians and vegans.”

Chef Fourie is constantly experimenting with new dishes. “My favourite new trend is grilling veggies – our Grilled Broccoli and Biltong Salad (with red onions, garlic croutons, and shallot dressing) is a winner.” Another menu favourite this winter is a chef Fourie original: “The Maize Rice Risotto is very much a ‘comfort food’ and so popular even non-vegetarians order it.” The description is mouthwatering – roast butternut, zucchini ribbons and thyme oil with white wine, garlic, cream, and parmesan.

The menu at The Big Easy Durban is changed every three months to make the most of seasonal produce.



Staying true to natural flavour

“While our winter menu features heartier dishes – like creamy Calamari Steak Strips, rich Cauliflower and Almond Soup (cauliflower is my personal veggie-favourite must-have with a Sunday roast) and the Baked Mixed Berry and White Chocolate pudding (a warm winter pudding served with a wild berry sorbet) – the upcoming spring menu will feature lighter meals with a “snack-type” feel to them.”

Cooking trends come and go but Chef Fourie believes, “If it’s bountiful, fresh produce, one should eat it in as natural a form as possible to enjoy and appreciate its true flavour. Everyone should go back to one’s roots and get to know how fresh produce really looks, smells and tastes like. This is when it’s evident that not much has to be done to veggies to enjoy them.”

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