

Food, travel and everything in-between: Cape Peninsula's Chef Hajie rises to her potential

Luciano Pavarotti once said:

“ One of the nicest things about life is the way we must regularly stop whatever it is that we are doing and devote our attention to eating. ”

This quote stuck with Hajiera Hamit, whose rise to Head Chef at the Peninsula All-Suite Hotel, part of the Dream Hotels and Resorts family, is set to inspire aspiring female cooks and others in her profession.



Image via [DreamResorts](#)

Hamit adds that the art of food, as with travel, immerses us in new experiences. "Both can be strange, sometimes beautiful and they always taste different," she says.

Hamit is from a traditional Cape Malay family. Hajiera, or as she is affectionately known by her peers, Chef Hajie's, food journey began with a three-year apprenticeship and more than 16 years in various hotel kitchens before arriving at The Peninsula All-Suite Hotel.

She has experienced gastronomic hotspots such as The Ritz in London, The Hilton Bankside, The Ivy Soho Brassiere, The Ivy Market Grill Covent Garden and the iconic Japanese restaurant, Flesh & Buns. All of these places have added to her culinary prowess, she says.

In celebration of #WomensMonth, Chef Hajie takes some time away from the kitchen to talk about culinary art, food through travel and fun in the kitchen and, most importantly, the many opportunities that exist for South African women in the food and hospitality industry.

Why did you decide to become a chef?

I started working as a food and beverage academy learner at The Cape Milner Hotel. As a waiter, I saw how the kitchen operated and I loved it... Coming from a traditional Cape Malay family, cooking was very important to my upbringing and because of this, I decided to make a career out of it - to do something I was already doing most of my life, and enjoy every minute of it.

What did your education process involve?

I completed the three-year culinary chef's diploma [City and Guilds] in-service training at the International Hotel School, after which I decided I was not done and finished my advanced diploma part-time.



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Seeing as my initial field of study involved in-service training, I had the opportunity to spend 80% of my time in working kitchens. Apart from my time at the Cape Milner, I also spent some time at Christina Martin food and Wine in Durban and The Peninsula All-Suite Hotel.

I liked that I got to work with some of the best chefs in the industry and loved that I could incorporate my knowledge of Cape Malay cuisine into some of the dishes.

What did you like least?

At first, the long hours and the 'yes Chef, no Chef' attitude I had to adopt, even though I did not agree with everything the chefs were doing and saying. I quickly learned to adapt and that's when my life became so much easier. If you really want

something badly enough, you will do or say anything to make it happen.

How did your travels and assignments overseas influence your style of cooking?

It opened my eyes to many different things, i.e. simpler and easier ways to cook a variety of dishes. It also broadened my mind to become more experimental with certain food products. Of course, I learned a lot of new systems that make food costing and kitchen management pure bliss.

The one thing I valued was that I finally got to know the real me. I was all alone in a big city and every other day I had to walk into a new kitchen, make acquaintances and make the chefs in the kitchen acknowledge me and my skills. It was tough in the beginning, but then I just reminded myself of what I was there for and kept on pushing.

“ If you really want something badly enough, you will do or say anything to make it happen. ”

I remember one of the male head chefs being quite surprised that I was a head chef. His words to me were that women chefs belong in the larder and pastry kitchen, not the hot kitchen or in any head chef position. Survival mode kicked in and I showed him what I was made of. That same chef offered me a job - and I politely declined.

Is being a female head chef in South Africa different from being one overseas?

Very much so, as my above experience shows.

Female chefs in South Africa are more easily accepted and respected. Make no mistake, this, unfortunately, does not come easy and every now again you will be tested for your patience, skills and most of all your ability to do your job. The key point to remember is to know your worth and adapt.



[The Peninsula All-Suite Hotel](#)

Is there a chef you admire the most?

Delia Smith. For one, she is female but she cooks with so much love and passion. Her cooking style is simple, not pretentious, and she cooks food that everyone will eat and enjoy.

What advice do you have for young women who are thinking about becoming chefs?

It is not easy. Firstly, take into account the long hours and working weekends and public holidays. As a woman, it also becomes challenging when wanting to raise a family - especially when you are in or aspiring to be in a head chef position. Chances are you will be at work more than you will be at home.

Be 110% sure of your dedication and motives before choosing this career. However, I have to add, if you have the passion and heart, it will be very fulfilling. There are a lot of career opportunities and there is a great demand for more female chefs in the industry.

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