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French-born chef Laurent Deslandes's career in the kitchen has spanned three decades, numerous awards and a trio of continents, taking him from Paris to New South Wales and Cape Town.

WORDS BIANCA COLEMAN PICTURE MICHAEL LAGRANGE (PHOTO) & ABBEY (TASTE)

Laurent Deslandes

French chef par excellence

When it comes to classic cuisine, the world has always turned to France for inspiration.

While we might commonly associate French cooking with rich, heavy sauces made with lashings of butter and cream, you'll not find much of that at Bizerca Bistro in Cape Town, owned and run by Laurent Deslandes and his South African-born wife Cyrillia van der Merwe.

The food of France is diverse, varying widely from region to region according to produce and seasonal specialities, from the fruits of the Loire Valley and the fish and seafood of Normandy and Brittany to the Dijon mustard found in dishes in Burgundy.

In Alsace, on the French/German border, the neighbouring country's influence is apparent in food, as well as wines and beers. This is where Laurent spent two years, specifically because of the different culture and food.

Born and raised in Angers, 300 km south-west of Paris, Laurent loved cooking from an early age. "I was not necessarily influenced by my mother, but she was a good cook, as most French women are," smiles Laurent. When he was 15, Laurent attended hospitality school for three years, followed by a year's military service.

Released from the navy, Laurent headed for the bright lights and thousands of excellent restaurants in Paris, intending to spend a year there honing his skills.

Appropriately, given its reputation for romance, it was also in Paris that Laurent met

his future wife. He ended up living and working in the French capital for 17 years before moving to Australia.

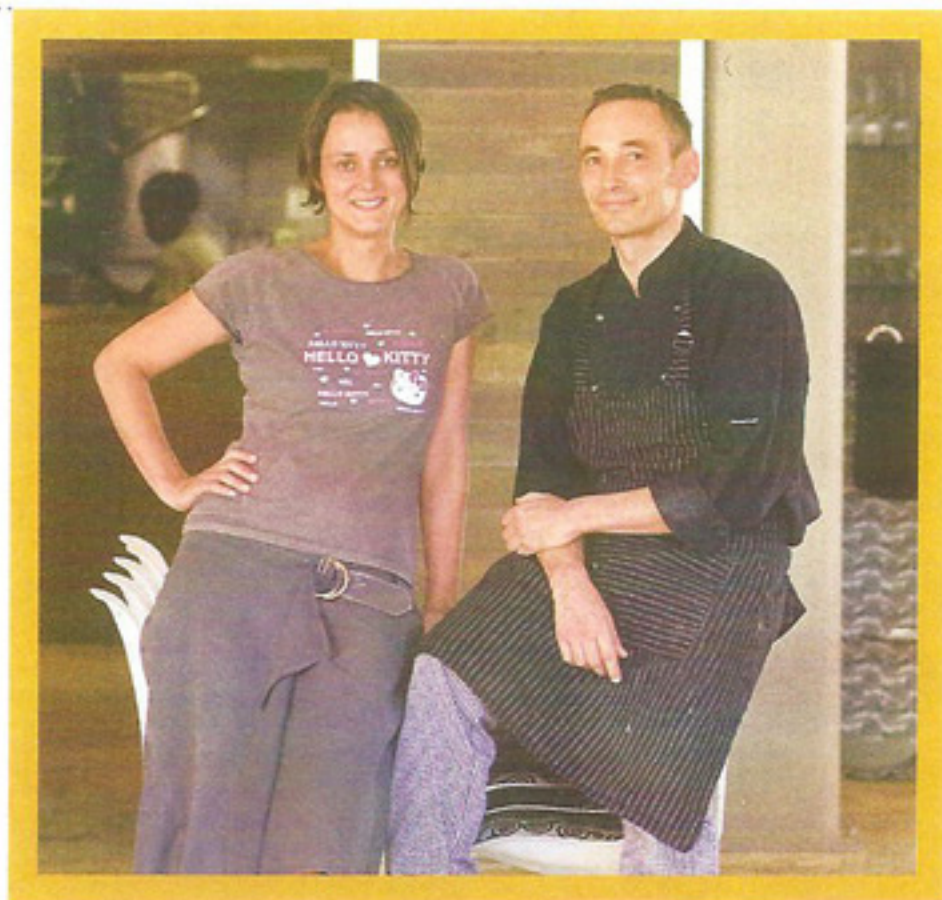
"It's difficult to move from Paris to another city in France. It's easier to go to another country," says Laurent.

In Australia, Laurent embraced the vastly different cuisine and produce and went on to run the wildly successful Collit's Inn in the Blue Mountain region of New South Wales. While there, his culinary passion and talent earned him many awards including two prestigious Chef's Hats.

After five years it was time to move on again, and after marrying Cyrillia in Cape Town in February last year, the couple decided to settle in the Mother City and embark on their latest venture.

At Bizerca Bistro, Laurent not only applies his classical French training but also the philosophy of the French style of dining, offering several small entrées as well as main courses from a menu which changes every six weeks, and daily specials which depend on availability and quality of ingredients.

"It's not fancy French dining, which can be stuffy and intimidating," says Laurent. "It's true bistro style, which is relaxed without compromising on quality."



Laurent Deslandes and his wife Cyrillia van der Merwe.

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BIZERCA BISTRO

The menu at Bizerca Bistro changes to reflect seasons and ingredients (look out for rabbit cassoulet and venison) but there are some mainstays like braised pig's trotter with seared scallop, truffle oil and petite salad and lamb ragout. Bizerca is open for lunch Mondays to Fridays, dinner Mondays to Saturdays.

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