

MUNICH FOUND

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Southern Comfort

SOUTH AFRICAN MARLENE DU PLESSIS-ZÖTL IS THE QUEEN OF RELAXED CUISINE

THE RESTAURANT KANTINE ON THE Praterinsel exudes a special warmth, though it may be hard for first-time visitors to pinpoint-that is, until they meet the proprietress, South African-born Marlene Du Plessis-Zötl. Tall with dark, curly hair and a wrap-around smile, Du Plessis-Zötl is clearly one of those restaurateurs whose charisma and energy alone create a special ambience.



Founder of the Kantine and the Cape Malay Kitchen Catering Company, Du Plessis-Zötl is the first to admit that she never intended to stay in Munich. "I had vacationed here, my bags were packed and I was literally heading back home," she says, "when I met the man who is now my husband, here in Munich. "Now, 16 years, two children and one successful catering career later, this native of Cape Town is happy to share her country's warmth, diversity and culinary secrets with the city's residents. "Originally I wanted to

become a Dolmetscher and travel around the world," but Du Plessis-Zötl has no regrets. "Munich really grows on you - it is so beautiful here-and then, you just stay. I guess it means the conservative side of me is coming out."

After a stint at Munich's Sprachen und Dolmetscher Institut and a job at a Munich gym, she took the advice of a fellow expatriate South African who suggested she start a business, cooking African dinners for parties and special occasions.

FEISTY AND IMAGINATIVE

Du Plessis-Zötl wasted no time in following her friend's counsel and in 1995 Cape Malay Catering was born. At first she organized and catered dinner parties, but soon her activities extended to film premieres and other big events. So the word got around. "We went from being party people working at the Leopold Fitness Center to running our own catering service for the film business and private parties overnight."

Du Plessis-Zötl started out cooking in the kitchen once used by the artists who have their studios on the Praterinsel, in a corner of the building that was also at one time a laboratory for the Schnaps distillery, Riemerschmid. "I learned how to cook at home. I never took a class. At first I hired freelance chefs," she says of the early days. When the kitchen space became available to rent, she knew she had to jump at the chance if she wanted her business to move forward. Hence, in December 2000, the Praterinsel Kantine came into being and these days comprises the catering as well as the small inviting bar and restaurant space (open Mon.-Fri, 11 am-6 pm). Du Plessis-Zötl has always been open to experimentation and began with Malay and Creole dishes before moving on to create her own international cuisine. "Not a lot of Germans knew what Cajun was back then. I want to make people feel comfortable while allowing them to try something new, whether they want traditional Bavarian or something really exotic," she explains. This imaginative and feisty lady is obviously passionate about her work. "Malay cuisine is something born of the diversity in South Africa, of the East Indian slaves who brought their spices with them, fusing them eventually with the South African cuisine. The last time I was in Cape Town, for example, I had a lovely ostrich Tandoori - but I won't eat crocodile unless it's as pâté."

Speaking of going home, though Du Plessis-Zötl is not homesick, she does appreciate the relaxed way of life in South Africa, something she wants to share with her children. "I go back twice a year and have been bringing my children (now 8 and 12) with me. They are now beginning to ask, "Can we live there?" Of course nowadays the energy is different in South Africa. It's a trendy place to travel to. The mentality now is to prove that we are on the upward move." Du Plessis-Zötl also doesn't mind admitting that she is teased by friends at home for becoming "too German," meaning, she's always trying to organize everything. But, she adds, "You just can't make comparisons between two places - that's the secret to being happy in both."

When asked what she sees herself doing next here in Munich, Du Plessis-Zötl becomes thoughtful. "I dream of someday being able to open a bigger place, where everything is original, and not only the food." Then, clearly getting into her stride, continues, "Even the wait staff could wear traditional African dress. Perhaps a musical performance sometime during the week - that would be nice. But to present aspects of African, especially South African culture, I need a bigger space. Maybe in the future we will get there. Now Germans are saving their money." In the meantime, we can still stop by the Praterinsel and enjoy the South African warmth - whether she's serving Weisswurst and sushi or kangaroo steaks and crocodile pâté.

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