

MONT ROCHELLE

HOTEL & MOUNTAIN VINEYARDS

PROFILE OF RYAN SMITH EXECUTIVE CHEF

Brief Background:

Although he has a British passport, Smith is a South African at heart. He was born in Durban and was schooled at SACS in Rondebosch, Cape Town. Having grown up with parents and grandparents who were chefs, it came as no surprise when at the age of 16 he announced that he did not want to complete his schooling because he knew that he wanted to become a chef. Therefore in 1991 he left Cape Town for Scotland where his career started with a three year apprenticeship at the Turnberry Hotel, a Leading Hotel of the World.

Smith spent 16 years abroad working in some of the world's best hotels. He met a lovely Russian girl and fell head over heels in love and decided to marry her and start a family. When his wife fell pregnant it was decided that Sasha Smith was to be born in South Africa and so the Smiths headed for Cape Town where Ryan accepted a position at Mont Rochelle. October 2006 was a big month for Ryan, with baby Sasha being born in the same month as the Mange Tout and Mont Rochelle restaurants were opened. However he rose to the challenge, and has made a success of being a father and Executive Chef.

Career Highlights:

Having started his career at the Turnberry, the standards had been set for a career of fine dining and quality cuisine. When he completed his apprenticeship Ryan was accepted at The Connaught Hotel where he worked for 2 years as 1st Commis in their 1 Michelin Star restaurant.

From there he went to work at the top 3 Michelin in London in those days, La Tante Claire, where he worked as Chef de Partie for 18 months. He was then offered the opportunity to work for 6 months at Chez Nico on Park Lane, another 3 Michelin Star establishment.

Ryan had by this time decided that he would like to work in France, after all, most of the great chefs of the world have at some or other time worked there. He accepted a contract to work the winter season at the Hotel Le Lievre Blanc in Serre Chevalier, where on account of his prior experience he was appointed as Head Chef.

Ryan then decided he would like to see more of the world and completed 3 contracts on board the Princess Cruises, Crystal Cruises, where he learned the vital skills of organization in a kitchen.

In 2001 he accepted a contract to work in Saudi Arabia at the Rosewood Al Faisaliah Hotel in Riyadh. Here he learned how the other half live, where money is no object when catering for functions. This hotel is also a member of the Leading Hotels of the World.

In July 2002 Ryan was offered a position as Executive Sous Chef at the Royal Aurora Marriott Hotel in Moscow where he worked for 18 months overseeing a brigade of 60 chefs. He was then approached by the Rocco Forte Group and offered the position as Executive Chef of the Astoria Hotel in St Petersburg, Russia. A member of the Leading Hotels of the World, this hotel had 200 bedrooms, an 85 seater fine dining restaurant and caviar bar as well as a banqueting facility for 450 persons. He had 65 chefs in his team.

When he returned to South Africa for personal reasons mentioned above, he decided that he wanted to work in a smaller establishment again where he could focus on the skills he had acquired in the Michelin establishments and where he could be more hands on with food. He was appointed at Mont Rochelle Hotel in June 2006 and successfully opened the Mange Tout and Mont Rochelle Restaurants in October 2006.

Motivation & Inspiration

Ryan's role model was Chef Koffman at the Tante Claire from whom he learnt a great deal. Today he draws inspiration from Michelin Chef Pierre Gagnier, who has restaurants in France and who more recently started the international Sketch chain.

Ryan loves working with and sourcing fresh ingredients from all over the globe, and at times finds the quality of the produce in South Africa a little frustrating after Russia & Saudi, where money was really no object and the best ingredients from all over the world gathered.

When he is off he loves reading chef biographies as he says it's nice to know that no matter where in the world, or at what level of cuisine, chefs all have similar frustrations and anecdotes to tell.

A lover of ethnic cuisine he uses his leave to travel the world and explore the foods of other cultures. At home he eats mainly Asian food as it is healthy and light and full of fresh flavours.

The Lighter Side of Life:

The biggest challenge Ryan has had to overcome since being back in South Africa was learning to drive. For years he had worked in countries where transport was not an issue. He likes to spend his off days driving around Cape Town and exploring other restaurants and food suppliers.

On a Saturday morning he is likely to sneak into his kitchen just before service starts as he is a rugby fan and likes to start the morning with a Super 14 game before work.

In the kitchen he is serious and disciplined, but when visited by his wife and baby Sasha, turns to putty at the sight of his son. No doubt Sasha will start playing rugby as soon as he can walk!