Cocktails and charming strangers

Unique. The players succeded in making fine dining feel less like a performance and more like a really good night out.





Bar Talk *with* Tony Musho

BY TONY MUSHOBOROZI

By the time dessert arrived at Kardamom and Koffee on Saturday night, strangers were leaning across the communal table like old friends. Art collectors traded thoughts with marketers. Guests laughed loudly over shared plates and raised glasses in an impromptu toast to World Whisky Day, celebrated earlier this month on May 16. That atmosphere captured exactly what The Chef's Table Africa has become known for in Kampala; creating connection through food.

This latest edition, headlined by Nairobi-based Chef Marcelino Dgedge, unfolded less like formal fine dining and more like an intimate dinner party shaped carefully around conversation, storytelling and experimentation. And while the food naturally commanded attention, the evening's quiet stars were the cocktail pairings.

In most dining experiences, drinks exist in the background. Saturday night was different. Before guests settled fully into the evening, bartender Preston Okot explained how the cocktails were designed not to overpower the dishes but to complete them.

"The pairing tonight is being led by Singleton 12. Singleton 12 is known for its soothing, calming and elegant pairing, especially with desserts," he said while introducing a vanilla-forward whisky cocktail served alongside dessert.

The cocktail carried soft notes of vanilla, honey and citrus, balanced gently by oak to mirror the coconut gelato served later in the evening.

The menu

Chef Dgedge's menu reflected his philosophy of restraint and ingredient-driven cooking. After arriving in Kampala earlier in the week, he spent time wandering through Nakasero Market studying local produce before finalising the menu.

"The quality of vegetables here amazed me. So I wanted to focus on humble ingredients instead of luxury ingredients," he told guests.

That approach shaped nearly every course. One standout dish paired beef with peanut curry, sweet potato purée and crisp sweet potato shards. Dgedge explained how the peanut reduction was made by extracting milk from finely ground peanuts before reducing it slowly with aromatics. The result was earthy, rich and comforting without becoming heavy. The fish course revealed the chef's more vulnerable side.

"That was the dish I was most nervous about. You never know exactly what is happening inside the fish. It can easily become overcooked," he admitted.

Wrapped delicately in banana leaf, the dish balanced smoke, acidity and savoury notes with remarkable restraint. Alongside it came a citrus-led cocktail pairing designed carefully to cut through the richness without overwhelming the fish. That balance defined the evening.

The cocktails

Behind the scenes, mixologist Okot and the team reportedly debated tiny adjustments to sweetness, acidity and soda levels for nearly twenty minutes during preparations. Guests never saw that work. But they experienced the finished harmony. Perhaps that is what makes The Chef's Table Africa increasingly important to Kampala's growing culinary culture. It is quietly teaching diners that fine dining is not really about exclusivity or expensive ingredients. It is about intention.

The crowd

The room itself reflected that philosophy. Guests came from different professional worlds and social circles, yet by the third course, the table had settled into the warm chaos of shared experience. And unlike many chefs who disappear behind kitchen doors, Dgedge remained present throughout the evening, hosting and explaining textures, inspirations and even uncertainties to the diners.

"The whole menu is basically my story. Mozambique, Italy, Joburg, Nairobi, now Uganda. Everything I have gathered over time is here," he said.

Dessert

Even dessert carried that sense of narrative. The cassava pudding, inspired by a Mozambican classic, layered coconut milk, coconut crumble and coconut ice cream with cinnamon and vanilla.

By then, however, guests were no longer analysing flavour notes too carefully. They were simply enjoying themselves. Which may ultimately be The Chef's Table Africa's greatest trick of all.

Tiny but time consuming adjustments is what it takes to make the difference between good and unforgettable cocktails. PHOTO/TONY MUSHOBOROZI

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