

# Luke Dale-Roberts expands his culinary empire



By Eugene Yiga

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One of the big winners at 2018's *Eat Out* Mercedes-Benz Restaurant Awards was The Test Kitchen. Not only did the Cape Town restaurant rank second overall, but it also won the *Eat Out* Diners Club Award for Service Excellence.

"We've never won this award," says British-born chef Luke Dale-Roberts. "I'm humbled by it and extremely grateful. When I opened The Test Kitchen I had two waiters, a barman, and a manageress that handled all the bookings. We gradually added people and slowly grew to where we are today."



## Starting simple

The Test Kitchen is currently ranked 50th in the world (and Africa's number one). And yet Dale-Roberts doesn't feel a massive shift in the amount of pressure he has as a result of these achievements.



### The Shortmarket Club expands with The Commissary

Eugene Yiga 12 Dec 2018



"To be honest with you, I put a certain amount of pressure on myself, anyway, day in and day out," he says. "We just stay focused on the job at hand, which is to make sure that our food is consistently good. I don't all of a sudden say, 'Oh my gosh! We've got to come out with a whole new range of things!' As long as there is new stuff in the pipeline, then I'm comfortable that we're going forward."



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Indeed, The Test Kitchen has come a long way since it opened in November 2010. At first, the intention was to create a small restaurant with few seats and few members of staff. And although the restaurant isn't just a "warehouse with a kitchen right in the middle," as he imagined it would be at first, the core has stayed the same.

"We started small and we kept true to our initial policy," he says. "We have grown the staff more than we have grown the number of seats. Our central focus is still the same - exploring food and flavours - and I think that translates well. And we have two or three little projects or new dishes that we're busy tinkering with. That's what always happens."

## A sharing concept

When the space next door to The Test Kitchen became available, Dale-Roberts had two options: either expand the existing restaurant or try something new. And while the former would have been easier, he had bigger plans.

“I had these ideas that were not 100% suitable for The Test Kitchen, but I just loved the ideas,” he says. “And I thought, ‘What the hell. I’m just going to do a new restaurant and make it a sharing concept. And we’ll see how it goes.’”



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The result was The Pot Luck Club, currently ranked 20th in South Africa. At first, it was quite easy to manage because he could “take one step to the left and be in The Pot Luck Club and take two steps to the right and be back in The Test Kitchen.” But although it was easy to keep an eye on how things were going, space became cramped and crowded. At that point, he knew it was time for a move.

And so the restaurant relocated to a new space at the top of a silo at The Old Biscuit Mill, home of a weekend market that’s popular among Cape Town’s hipsters and other bespoke residents. Taking the glass elevator to the top floor is likely to leave one feeling like one of those giddy children in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* or crazy adults in *Westworld*. But even more impressive than the spectacular view is the tapas-style menu, which features favourites like fish tacos and smoked beef fillet with black pepper and truffle café au lait.



## Creative energy = common thread

But wait, there's more. Dale-Roberts, in partnership with Ryan Cole, who was head chef at The Test Kitchen for the past three years, recently opened another Cape Town restaurant called Salsify. Occupying the upper level of The Roundhouse, a historic building dating back to 1786, the restaurant offers an experience that's even more incredible than the ocean views.



### Contemporary class at Luke Dale-Roberts' Salsify

Ruth Cooper 21 Nov 2018



"I want the team here to grow into space, to develop their own culinary handwriting and to make it something completely different to The Test Kitchen or Pot Luck Club," Dale-Roberts says. "Ryan is a quick-minded natural talent. He's one of the best technical chefs I've ever worked with and I trust him implicitly. I'm ready to let key members of the team take the reins in different places. I'm excited and they're excited."





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The public is understandably excited too. Salsify - named after a root vegetable with an oyster-like flavour, popular in old French and modern British cuisine - is a treat for its bold dishes. Indeed, the best way to savour the innovative flavours is to opt for the tasting menu, with a signature cocktail and optional wine pairing if you'd like to enhance the experience even more.

"I think it's important to honour the legacy of The Roundhouse and to do it justice with seriously good quality food and service," Cole says. "We want to push boundaries of flavour and technique but we're not trying to be a Test Kitchen. We will develop our own signature and style as we go."



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Running all these restaurants isn't easy. But even though they all serve different purposes, Dale-Roberts is confident that he can stay focused on what matters most.

"The creative energy is a common thread," he says. "For me, creativity is the thing that keeps me going. That feeling of being able to think of an idea and to execute it so that it turns out the way I hoped gives me more joy than anything else."

### The power of mentorship

More than that, Dale-Roberts remains a firm believer in the power of mentorship and has confidence in his team. Over the years he's realised that one of the things that motivates him is helping team members reach their potential and find their own way. Getting to play a part in that journey is exciting.



Markus Fiedler, Chef Ryan Cole and Luke Dale Roberts © Andy Lund

“I really feel that in this past year I’ve been privileged to see people that work with me grow into new positions,” he says. “And way below that, there’s a whole bank of people that are learning to be chefs. I get choked up when I think about that because that means a lot more than any award. We’re making a difference. That’s more important than anything.”

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The Test Kitchen is at The Old Biscuit Mill, Albert Road, Woodstock, Cape Town. Call 021 447 2337, [reservations@thetestkitchen.co.za](mailto:reservations@thetestkitchen.co.za), or go to [www.thetestkitchen.co.za](http://www.thetestkitchen.co.za).

The Pot Luck Club is at The Old Biscuit Mill, Albert Road, Woodstock, Cape Town. Call 021 447 0804, email [reservations@thepotluckclub.co.za](mailto:reservations@thepotluckclub.co.za), or go to [www.thepotluckclub.co.za](http://www.thepotluckclub.co.za).

Salsify is at The Roundhouse, Roundhouse Road, Camps Bay, Cape Town. Call 021 010 6444, email [reservations@salsify.co.za](mailto:reservations@salsify.co.za) (for additional information, not for bookings), or go to [www.salsify.co.za](http://www.salsify.co.za).

## ABOUT EUGENE YIGA

Eugene graduated from the University of Cape Town with distinctions in financial accounting and classical piano. He then spent over two-and-a-half years working in branding and communications at two of South Africa's top market research companies. Eugene also spent over three-and-a-half years at an eLearning start-up, all while building his business as an award-winning writer. Visit [www.eugeneyiga.com](http://www.eugeneyiga.com), follow [@eugeneyiga](#) on Twitter, or email [hello@eugeneyiga.com](mailto:hello@eugeneyiga.com) to say, um, hello.

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