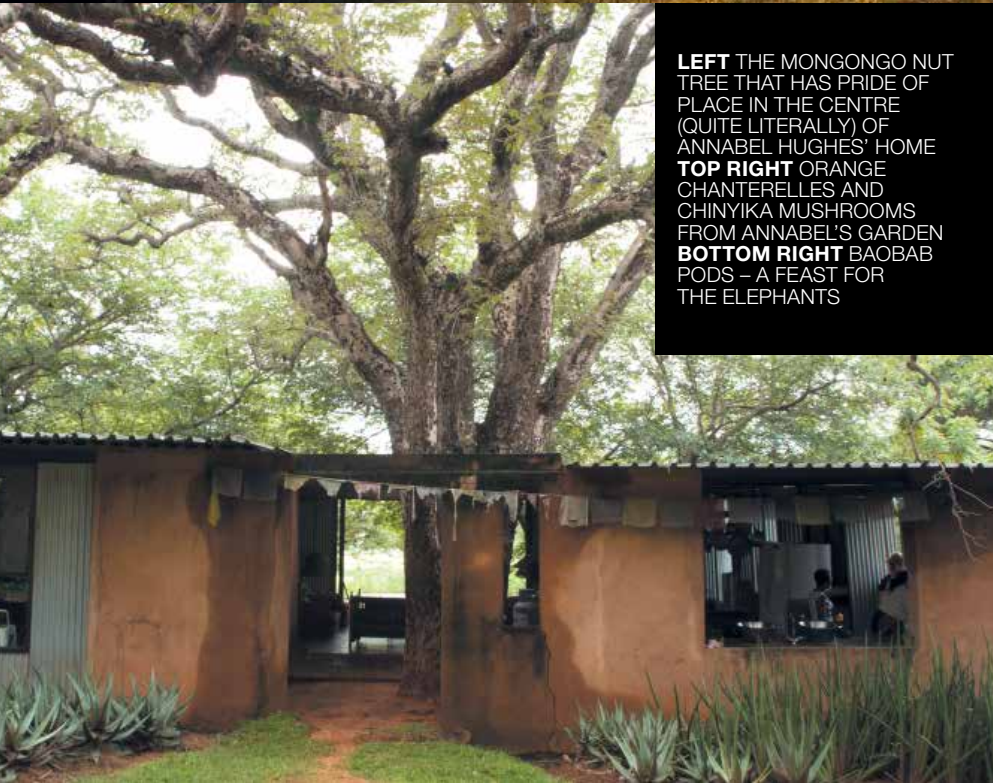




A GIANT *Spirit*



LEFT THE MONGONGO NUT TREE THAT HAS PRIDE OF PLACE IN THE CENTRE (QUITE LITERALLY) OF ANNABEL HUGHES' HOME
TOP RIGHT ORANGE CHANTERELLES AND CHINYIKA MUSHROOMS FROM ANNABEL'S GARDEN
BOTTOM RIGHT BAOBAB PODS – A FEAST FOR THE ELEPHANTS

TAKE A PINCH OF KISMET, ADD A SPOONFUL OF SERENDIPITY, AND WILD AND WONDERFUL THINGS OCCUR, AS OUR ED, **ANDREA PAFITIS-HILL**, FOUND OUT AT THE ELEPHANT CAFÉ ON THE BANKS OF THE MIGHTY ZAMBEZI

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **TERRY McCORMICK, PAUL BUSSELL, SEAN EDINGTON, ANTHONY GROTE AND RACHEL TEMBO**





“This is the tree from whence it began,” says Annabel Hughes, gazing up into a canopy of hand-shaped leaves, at the ends of branches from which mongongo nuts grow. We’re carefully picking our way through the small-holding in Livingstone, Zambia, where, for the past four years, Annabel has lovingly brought to life a rambling organic garden, with everything from pineapples to squash flourishing with intertwined contentment. If there’s a Narnia of organic gardening, this is surely it. Recognising my childlike awe, Annabel grins: “What we do is ‘jungle gardening’ – we plant things at random and if they come up on their own, we leave them. I have a ‘roof’ of indigenous teak trees and their fragrant purple flowers attract the pollinating bees, while other flowers in the garden attract the wasps that prey on the garden pests... it’s such a dynamic and healthy environment that even our guavas never get stung by insects – it’s unheard of that guavas never get stung, but ours never do!”

While this is the first time I’ve met Annabel, the fruits of her green-fingered labours are already well known to me via her garden-to-table blog, SavannaBel: Bush Gourmet in the Zambezi Valley (savannabel.com), featured in *F&HE*’s November 2015 issue. “The blog begets the garden and the garden begets the blog... they work very much in synergy,” Annabel says.

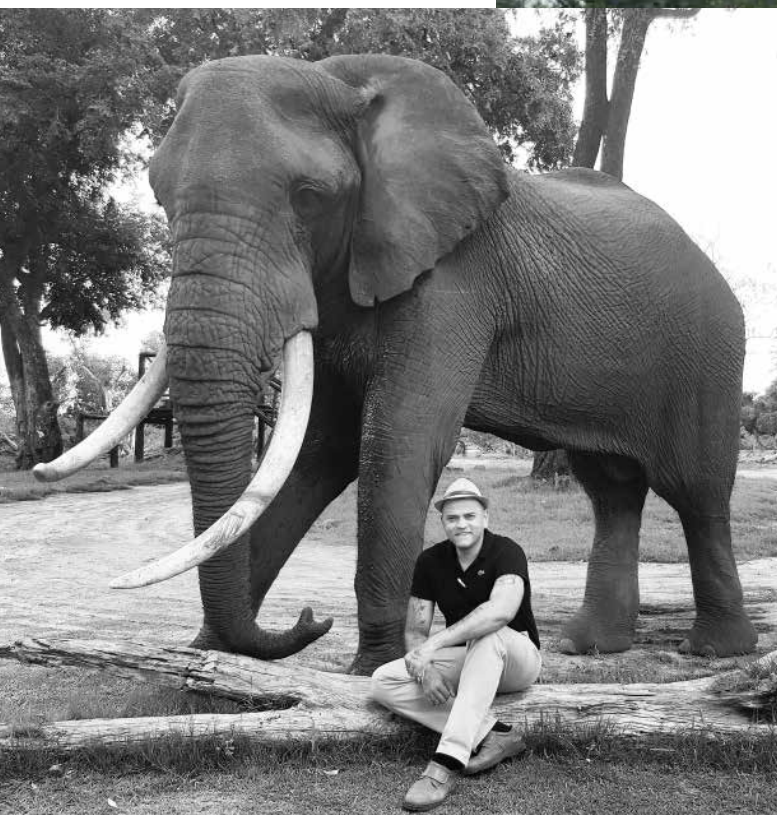
This synergy sparked a trifecta in the form of The Elephant Café, where self-taught Annabel has been executive chef since its inception in June 2016. With the 2017 Luxury Travel Guide award for Boutique Restaurant of the Year (Africa and the Middle East) being the latest in its string of accolades, it’s not just the elephants who are trumpeting about The Elephant Café’s arrival.

Conceptualised and owned by seasoned hotelier, Steve McCormick – founder of Safari Par Excellence, a well-known Zambian tour operation – Elephant Café is an intimate 24-seater restaurant, housed on a Bedouin-tented wooden deck on the banks upstream of the Victoria Falls.

The more I see and learn, the more my anticipation rises! So, when our water chariot (aka jetboat) arrives the next day to whisk us from the David Livingstone Safari Lodge & Spa – the comfortable, sprawling resort where we’re staying – to The Elephant Café for lunch, I’m already hovering anxiously on the jetty. I gratefully accept the hand extended to me by the jetboat’s driver and river guide, Masau Sakla, who tells me: “This is my 19th year working on the Zambezi. I love its mighty vibration. Mostly, I love watching the animals. I was born on the river.”

The confident ease with which Masau steers us through the mini rapids and convoluted channels of his watery domain is comforting. And having only previously experienced safaris on Land Rovers rolling over rough turf, I’m thrilled by the sharp contrast of this smooth glide. Lost in a reverie as we cruise along, I smile as I’m reminded of the words of Wilbur Smith: “They say if you drink Zambezi water with your mother’s milk, you are always a slave of Africa, and I am.”

And if I thought my hair was blown back on the jetboat, it’s the graceful group of gentle giants – namely, Madinda, Marula, Danny and Liwa, which I could swear are smiling as they head towards us in a slow trot, their



BOTTOM LEFT BARISTA AND HEAD WAITER, OLIVER SIANSYA
FAR LEFT ANANT GANESH PATEL WITH DANNY – HE IS THE DOMINANT BULL OF THE ELEPHANT HERD, YET, IN ANANT'S WORDS, "THE MOST GENTLE MAN". DANNY IS ALSO PICTURED ON THE FACING PAGE, MAKING A "TRUNK CALL!"
ALONGSIDE EXECUTIVE CHEF, ANNABEL HUGHES



heads dipping in friendly greeting – that takes my breath away. Accompanied by their attentive handlers, each of these elephants has travelled its own dark and dusty road to this rescue and rehabilitation sanctuary, where visitors are encouraged to interact with them via feeding, not riding.

There's another reason we're on sacred ground. For this is where The Elephant Café's manager, Anant Ganesh Patel, has called home for 26 years. "Originally it was family land and it was bought as a farm, but because we're in a national park, the farm didn't work because the animals ate all of the crops! So, the land was leased to a safari camp next door – Thorntree River Lodge – which Steve took over in 1991 and then brought the elephants in. I previously worked at Thorntree and when Steve told me there was a job available here, I jumped at it...

"The elephants are in an environment that's as close as they can be to a natural habitat... we're in a game park, so they go off to the islands and do what elephants do. They are very special to me and my family, especially because we're Hindu and we believe in the Elephant Headed God, Ganesh, which was also my father's name. In fact, we'd named our home Ganesh Nivas, which means 'Home of the Elephant God' – this was before the elephants arrived, so it was pre-destined!"

Anant continues: "We have a very deep connection to the elephants, from the time they arrived to the time my dad passed away. In the Hindu custom, when we have funeral ceremonies, we bring the coffin home and then we take it to the crematorium. On the way out, a herd of wild elephants blocked the procession of about 50 cars. They



wouldn't move for at least 10 minutes. Then they parted and we had to drive through them."

As I blink away tears, the offer of a flute of bubbly is most welcome! Nestling at the bottom of the glass is a burgundy-coloured syrup, which Annabel tells me is made from the calyx of sindambi (rosella). Sipping on this elixir, I peruse the menu, my eye instantly drawn to the warm roasted butternut salad with tahini yoghurt, mixed basil paste, and mongongo nut and baobab dukkah. When I comment on the interesting mix of Middle Eastern flavours and indigenous ingredients, Annabel says: "I develop all the recipes, but the one person I am inspired by is Yotam Ottolenghi, because of how courageous he is with flavours."

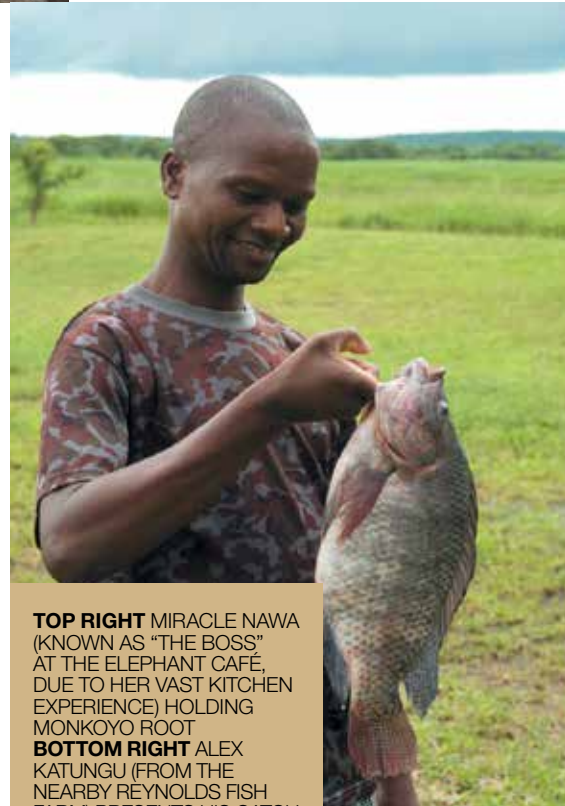
"Thai and South-East Asian cuisines also influence dishes like our duck breast with wild sourplum (which is like a sour maraschino cherry). I mix this with star anise, ginger and red onion,

and we also use a star anise and ginger rub over the duck before we cook it. I believe the protein is the supporting act to everything else – I'm adamant about this, because I think there are so many other interesting elements through veggies and the wild. I also don't do fillet and chicken. I do rib eye and duck," Annabel emphasises.

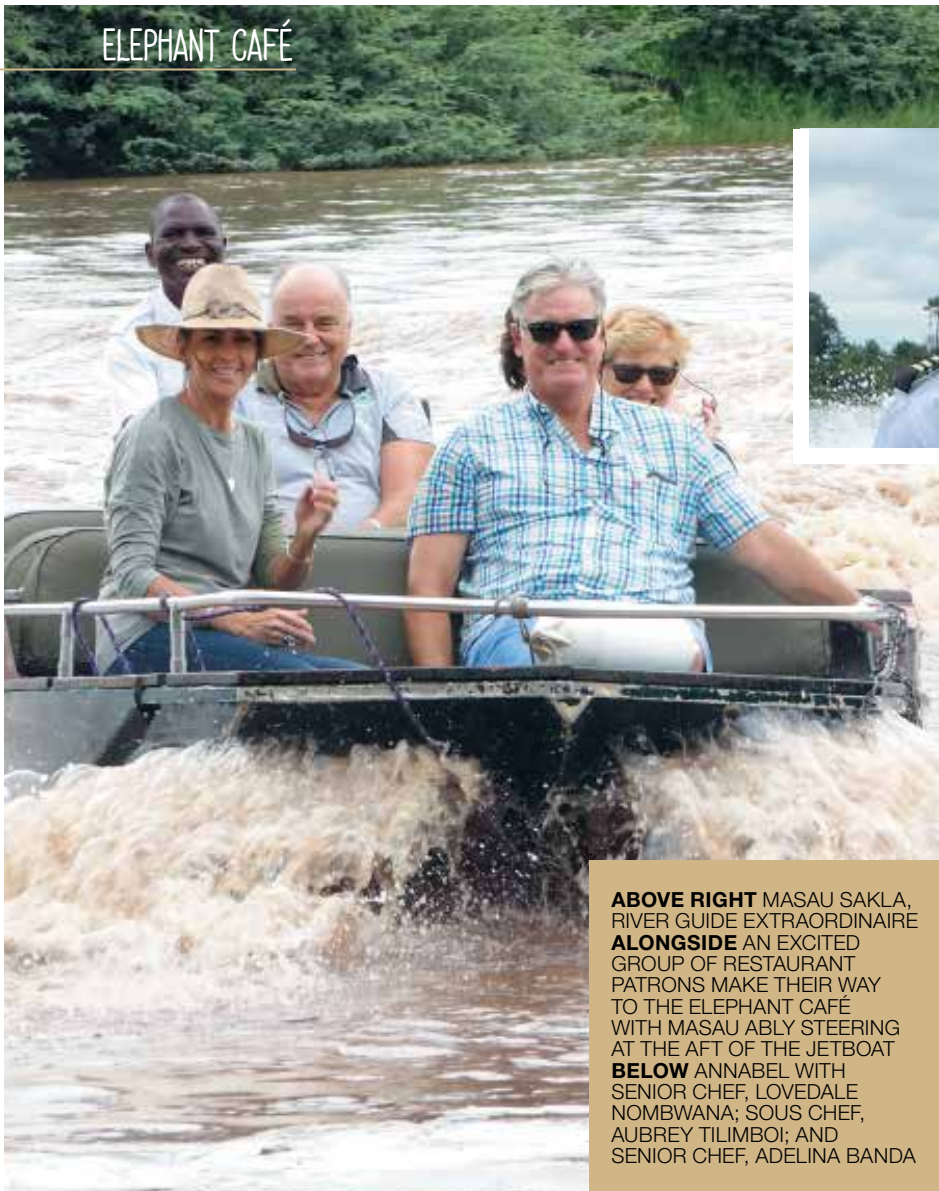
I spot a dish comprised of Mongu rice and nzembwe with peppery leaves, mixed nuts and dried cranberries – I ask Annabel to tell me more about it. "Mongu rice is fragrant and soft, and we use nzembwe instead of quinoa. It's a gluten free seed, a finger millet we find at the market... it has large grains and is quite a mouthful, so the Mongu rice eases it a bit."

"None of our patrons have tasted nzembwe before, apart from locals, but even they have never experienced nzembwe cooked like this – Zambians would normally turn nzembwe into porridge and they're wowed by how we incorporate it in our dishes. The same goes for the other indigenous ingredients."

Tasting my way through these dishes, including a heavenly Thai-inspired tilapia (bream) ceviche, its marriage of flavour,



TOP RIGHT MIRACLE NAWA (KNOWN AS "THE BOSS" AT THE ELEPHANT CAFÉ, DUE TO HER VAST KITCHEN EXPERIENCE) HOLDING MONKOYO ROOT
BOTTOM RIGHT ALEX KATUNGU (FROM THE NEARBY REYNOLDS FISH FARM) PRESENTS HIS CATCH OF THE DAY – FRESH TILAPIA FOR THE ELEPHANT CAFÉ



ABOVE RIGHT MASAU SAKLA, RIVER GUIDE EXTRAORDINAIRE **ALONGSIDE** AN EXCITED GROUP OF RESTAURANT PATRONS MAKE THEIR WAY TO THE ELEPHANT CAFÉ WITH MASAU ABLY STEERING AT THE AFT OF THE JETBOAT **BELOW** ANNABEL WITH SENIOR CHEF, LOVEDALE NOMBWANA; SOUS CHEF, AUBREY TILIMBOI; AND SENIOR CHEF, ADELINA BANDA



texture and colour a sublimely crafted balance, I tell Annabel her menu should be called “yin and yang”! With a wide smile, she replies: “I would never be at The Elephant Café without Adelina Banda. She is the yin to my yang there. We are so good together.”

As I am introduced to Adelina, her demure demeanour clearly belies a steadfast will to expand her horizons. Since 2012, Adelina has worked with Annabel in her home kitchen, as well as catering for events: “Everything Annabel and I did in our kitchen at home, we had to teach the staff at the café and we continue to teach them.”

When I ask Adelina what her favourite ingredient is, she doesn’t hesitate: “Mongongo nuts. Many Zambians ignore them, believing they are for poor people only, but that’s not true. You can make many different types of dishes with them, like we do here at the café.” As she says this, dessert is placed in front of me, in the form of musika (Zambian tamarind) ice cream with a mongongo nut Florentine. The earthiness and crunch of the Florentine is offset by the ice cream, which is not too sweet and has a moreish tartness to it. Watching me savour this dish, Annabel says: “If you’re enjoying the tartness of that, you’d love the panna cotta I do with a wild root called monkoyo – it’s very white and Zambians make a drink out of it that has a sour taste, almost like a lassi.”

Sipping on one of the best coffees I’ve ever had, I tell the barista, Oliver Siansya, that I could come back just for his brew!

Chuckling, Oliver replies, “Everything we do at The Elephant Café is unlike anywhere else.” And as I look out over the deck to where Annabel and Anant are feeding Liwa and her calves, Nandi and Nyami, I think Ganesh would agree.

MOSI-OA-TUNYA GATE, LIVINGSTONE, ZAMBIA; +260 97-340-3270; ELEPHANT.CAFE



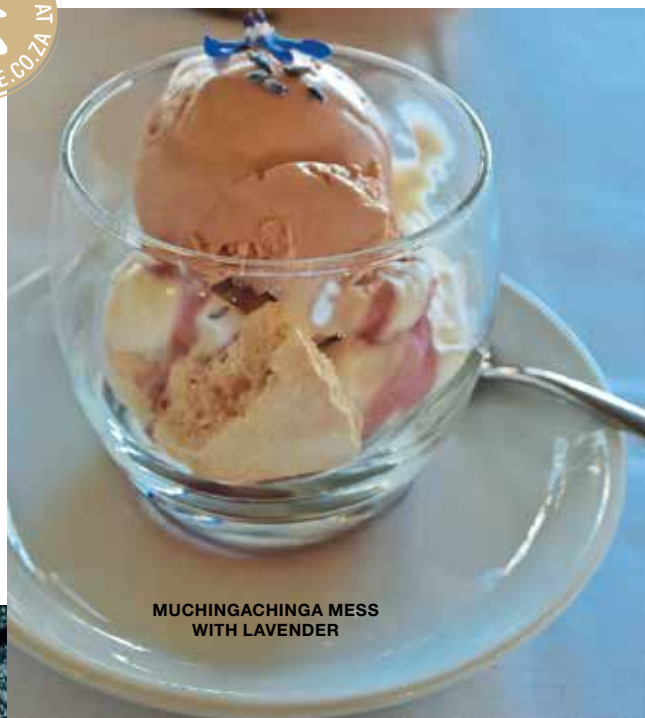
Visit our website at foodandhome.co.za/lifestyle/travel to read about more fantastic Safari Par Excellence adventures on offer in Livingstone, Zambia.



**HUMMUS WITH MONGONGO NUT AND
BAOBAB DUKKAH**



**THAI-INSPIRED TILAPIA CEVICHE WITH SESAME-INFUSED
LIME, CUCUMBER, AVOCADO AND PICKLED RADISH**



**MUCHINGACHINGA MESS
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