

FOOD

San Francisco is, for many chefs and food lovers, the top city in the United States when it comes to quality and variety of eating options. So when, after a stint working in the kitchen of one of the city's most celebrated restaurants you're named "Employee of the Year", flown with a friend of choice on an all-expenses-paid trip to New York City, booked into a stylish hotel, wined and dined at an array of that city's finest restaurants – and asked to "come back to take over the kitchen" – you can be sure you've made it.

But all this is so last-year for Christina Martin School of Food and Wine "Class of 1992" graduate, former Durbanite Elizabeth "Lizzie" Binder. From being a celebrated San Francisco chef, she is now known nationally in the US thanks to the successful TV food series *Top Chef Seattle*, season 10 (coming to SA soon).

Binder now lives in Napa – heart of Northern California's famed wine region – with her chef husband, Mike Binder, and their children Ben and Zaidie. Binder was inspired to cook by her late dad's kitchen passion. "He cooked all the exciting things we ate." Her mom encouraged her to go to chef's school when "I wasn't sure what to do. She said it would stand me in good stead."

Binder, it turned out, did a lot afterwards. She got her first job, at age 18, at the luxury Blue Mountain Lodge near Kruger. She left there three years later lured by pictures in international foodie magazines of beautiful dishes, fancy restaurants and ingredients she didn't know.

Ask her now where she's travelled to and she says: "Everywhere except South America, parts of Africa and a few Eastern European countries." She's lived and cooked in kitchens in South Africa, Australia, England, France and the US. We asked

When business is cooking

After qualifying as a chef, Durban's Lizzie Binder went travelling via the kitchens of the world. Now the talented *Top Chef* luminary is riding a culinary wave in the US



her about the business of cooking.

Q: A lot of chefs say cooking school is a waste of time and money. Your thoughts?

A: *Cooking school gave me a starting point. It trains you in kitchen etiquette, and can be great for networking. But, most of what I know today has been learned through experience. Learning in kitchens through internships is essential; and depends on your personality and what you can afford, so choose well. There are many different personality styles and kitchen environments – it's important to be somewhere you can learn, grow and contribute.*

Q: Any disadvantages?

A: *Long hours, plus the burns/scars and the sore feet. It's demanding and physical. Be prepared to never be off on holidays, and being a chef is notorious for low pay and stress.*

Q: Low pay? In this age of celebrity chefs?

A: *TV/endorsements can be lucrative, but I think around one percent are probably very high earners. Celebrity status gives chefs a voice to talk about sustainability, healthcare, world hunger, nutrition, anti-GMO, fair trade, etc.*

Q: What does a chef need to do to make cooking a

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lucrative profession?

A: *The same in any field. Talent, experience, perseverance and a little luck!*

Q: What possible lucrative opportunities exist outside the restaurant kitchen?

A: *Private chef work, working on yachts, catering, blogging/writing, farmer/food purveyor, food styling/photography, baking/wedding cakes. I have a boutique catering company in Napa specialising in hand-crafted events.*

Q: What did being on *Top Chef* do for your career?

A: *I was well known in San Francisco. Now people nationally are interested in what I'm doing and going to do, and that's really exciting.*

Q: How do people get to be TV chefs?

A: *Who you know. Right place, right time! In my case *Top Chef* approached me. They'd*

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heard about my work at San Francisco's hugely popular Bar Bambino. And Chef Traci Des Jardins, who I worked for at Jardinière (the restaurant that sent her to New York), recommended me when asked about potential candidates.

Q: What were some of the challenges?

A: *For six weeks you're confined to the people on the show. You don't get to talk to outsiders. It's an interesting dynamic that doesn't necessarily bring out the best in people. I got fairly quiet; some people got obnoxious."*

Q: What was the most creative thing you made on the show?

A: *I made lots of great dishes. I did a beautiful herring and sour cream dish; a pork and raspberry cabbage roll steamed in a raspberry liquor; and a pickled peach slaw that everyone thought was the most amazing thing they'd eaten. That reminded me of Durban. A pickled peach done with a bit of chilli and red onion and caraway and finely sliced savoy cabbage. Delicious!*

Binder's compact Napa home, down a quiet cul-de-sac where kids can play safely in the street, is cheerfully filled with colourful African art. She says she feels really proud to be the first South African to represent her country on a US *Top Chef* show.

"Don't expect me back anytime soon ... there's too much to do and too many opportunities when your business is cooking," concludes Binder. – *Wanda Hennig*

