

In search of foodie heaven

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Judges and shortlists announced for the new American Express Dining Awards 2020



The wait is over for curious foodies around the country! After much anticipation, the line-up of judges for the recently reimagined American Express Dining Awards programme - has finally been revealed. Judging has been taking place in eateries of all shapes and sizes since July, and is now closed, but the names of the judges have been kept secret so as not to compromise the judging process.

The iconic American Express Dining Awards programme has been the premier showcase of South Africa's culinary scene for 21 years and now features an expanded range of categories similar to those used in the World Restaurant Awards.

“The aim of the new format is to recognise establishments in a number of different categories that didn’t even exist 20 years ago,” says Chris Wood, Head of American Express South Africa. “The restaurant industry has changed radically since we first launched the programme and we want to recognise that innovation. And we’ve naturally chosen top foodies and media personalities to do the judging.”

Steve Steinfeld, food and wine journalist, food critic, and founder of and content creator for the hugely popular Instagram-based restaurant showcase, The Joburg Foodie, will lead the line-up as Head Judge. He is ably supported by Clive Aaron, who was inspired to train as a chef by the iconic River Café TV series, and Greg Maloka, who played a leading role in the launch of the breakout youth radio station, YFM, in the 1990s and who is today at the helm at Kaya FM.

“The restaurant industry has undergone a revolution of sorts in recent years,” says Steinfeld. “So we’re aiming to assess the dining landscape in South Africa as it is today and to recognise both individuals and establishments that excel in a number of different categories which reflect the full scope of the contemporary scene.

“The American Express Dining Awards are about so much more than food, although that naturally remains at the core. It’s also about the service, atmosphere, décor, personalities, and wine and beverage offerings - all the little things that make a restaurant stand out from the rest.”

Steve’s career started in his mother’s kitchen, where he was first introduced to an exhilarating array of cuisines, flavours and ingredients. Later, while still studying at Wits, he moved a planned career in accountancy onto the back burner when he started The Joburg Foodie, a creative project that soon became a passion. With his nearly 38,000 followers, he has become a leading light and opinion former on the country’s bustling food scene.

Fellow judge, Clive Aaron, was born and raised in Durban and has many fond memories of family meals around tables groaning with delicious food. Inspired by the River Café TV series and a holiday in the food-loving Italian region of Tuscany, he trained as a chef at the Christina Martin School of Food and Wine in Durban, the first independent chef training school in South Africa. His subsequent career took him from the high-end kitchens of top restaurants to makeshift bush kitchens in the Kruger Park, each experience adding to his wealth of knowledge. He later moved into front-of-house, managing the launch of the farm-to-fork eatery, La Tête, in Cape Town.

“I have a deep respect for and understanding of the different roles the kitchen and the front-of-house have in delivering what I like to call the theatre of service,” he says. “Together they create a certain *je ne sais quoi* that transforms a meal into an ethereal experience.”

The third judge in the line-up, Greg Maloka, has had a stellar 24-year career in the media sector, playing a vital role in creating youth-focused media channels that appeal to savvy urban audiences. He believes local media has the power to create an entirely different mood in the southern African region and sees the awards programme as something that can contribute to that process. Just like Clive, his love of good food was formed in his mother’s kitchen, which later led to engagements with top chefs and sommeliers, both here and abroad. “When Steve invited me to be a judge for the new American Express Dining Awards programme, I jumped at the chance,” he says. “I couldn’t resist the opportunity to explore the many eateries and to unearth worthy winners in both the established and new categories.”

Some of the 2020 American Express Dining Awards Winners could also win in the newly-introduced categories below:

1. **American Express Restaurant of the Year:** For the restaurant that receives the highest rating in all categories from the panel of judges;
2. **American Express Members’ Choice:** For the best restaurant as reviewed by American Express Cardmembers;
3. **Best Newcomer:** For the best new restaurant to debut on the American Express Dining Awards list;
4. **Best-Kept Secret:** For the restaurant that isn’t on everyone’s radar, but deserves to be;
5. **Pioneer Chef:** For the visionary chef who has introduced creative and ground-breaking innovations;
6. **Young Talent:** For an ambitious new talent; a young chef under the age of 30 who is running his or her own restaurant, a sommelier with a unique approach, or a waiter with a special talent for delivering excellent service;

7. **Pure SA:** For a restaurant that boldly celebrates inclusivity and community; one in which the both the food and the ambience is uniquely South African;
8. **Service:** For service excellence from the time diners make their booking until the time they leave the restaurant;
9. **Wine:** For the most comprehensive wine selection and the most knowledgeable and professional sommelier service; and
10. **Style:** For an establishment with unique style and flair.

The programme's new format demonstrates Amex's alignment with the lifestyle interests of its customers and especially its established presence in the culinary space.

"Amex is and always has been a relationship brand," says Chris Wood, "and the American Express Dining Awards are a strategically aligned means of building and securing relationships with customers, partners and merchants throughout the country. The programme demonstrates that we do more than provide transaction and credit services. We also offer our customers preferred access to entertainment and lifestyle experiences, as well as providing businesses with access to the funds and tools they need to be successful and sustainable."

Along with the names of the judges, the names of the candidates shortlisted have also been announced. These include eateries that are experimenting with the very latest trends which are completely redefining the established concept of fine dining.

American Express has wished all shortlisted candidates everything of the very best ahead of announcement of the winners.

The shortlist candidates, in alphabetical order, are:

1. 95 Keerom	Cape Town City
2. 96 Winery Road	Helderberg
3. Abingdon	Midlands
4. Aubergine	Cape Town City
5. Azure	Oudekraal
6. Babel at Babelonstoren	Franschhoek
7. Bellagio	Illovo
8. Bellgables	Muldersdrift
9. Bistro Sixteen82	Constantia
10. Bombay Brasserie	Cape Town City
11. Bud Marsh	Magaliesburg
12. Buitenverwachting	Constantia
13. Café de Sol Botanico	Bryanston
14. Camphors at Vergelegen	Somerset West
15. Cavalli Estate	Stellenbosch
16. Culinary Table Restaurant	Lanseria
17. De Oude Kraal	Bloemfontein
18. DWeleven-13	Dunkeld
19. Eike	Stellenbosch
20. Epicure	Sandton
21. Foliage	Franschhoek
22. Forti Grill & Bar	Pretoria
23. Fyn	Cape Town City
24. Gâte	Stellenbosch
25. GOLD Restaurant	Cape Town City
26. Greenhouse	Constantia
27. Grei at The Saxon	Sandhurst
28. Hacklewood	Port Elizabeth Walmer
29. Hartford House	Mooi River
30. Ile Maurice	Umhlanga Rocks
31. Indochine	Stellenbosch

32. Jardine	Stellenbosch
33. Jordan	Stellenbosch
34. Kurland Restaurant	Plettenberg Bay
35. La Colombe	Constantia
36. La Cucina di Ciro	Parktown North
37. La Tête	Cape Town City
38. Le Coin Francais	Franschhoek
39. Le Petite Colombe	Franschhoek
40. Makaron	Stellenbosch
41. Marble	Rosebank
42. Marigold	Franschhoek
43. Mmosa Lodge	Montagu
44. Mrs Simpson's	Dullstroom
45. NCW	Melville
46. Nobu	Cape Town Waterfront
47. Overture	Stellenbosch
48. Priva Gastrolounge	Pretoria
49. PRON	Linden
50. Protégé	Franschhoek
51. Qunu	Sandhurst
52. Red Chamber	Hyde Park
53. Restaurant 7	Stellenbosch
54. Restaurant Mosaic at The Orient	Pretoria, Crocodile River Valley
55. Rust en Vrede	Stellenbosch
56. Saint	Sandton
57. Salsify	Camps Bay
58. Serendipity	Wilderness
59. Silver Orange	Hartbeespoort
60. Spice	Westbrook Durban
61. Springfontein Eats	Standford
62. Terroir	Stellenbosch
63. The Chefs' Table	Umhlanga Rocks
64. The Foodbarn	Noordhoek
65. The Pot Luck Club	Woodstock
66. The Restaurant at Waterkloof	Somerset West
67. The Shortmarket Club	Cape Town City
68. The Test Kitchen	Woodstock
69. The Werf Restaurant Boschendal	Groot Drakenstein
70. Transkaroo	Great Brak
71. Yamato	Illovo
72. Zinzi	Plettenberg Bay

The American Express Dining Awards 2020 winners for the Gauteng region will be announced on 14 October, while those for the Western Cape region will be announced on 21 October 2019.

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