

# Meet the food 'gangster'

**SHOOTING FOR THE STARS:** EARLY RECIPIENT OF A PEERMONT LEARNERSHIP

» **Mabuza dreams of 'making the world taste great'.**

**A**s a 15-year-old boy being brought up by his grandmother in a disadvantaged environment in an East Rand township, Meshack Mabuza's dream of becoming a chef and following a career in the hospitality industry seemed like a fantasy.

A few years later, as he prepares to celebrate his 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday on 18 April, he is well on his way to making his dream of "making the world taste great" a reality, thanks to the Peermont Community Benefit Trust (PCBT), a CSI initiative of Emperors Palace, and his own hard work and tenacity, not to mention talent.

It wasn't all plain sailing. After matriculating from Ponelepele Oracle Secondary School in Tembisa in 2014, he had to work in a national chain store's warehouse in Centurion because there was no money for a tertiary education.

A move to become a call centre agent followed, again putting his culinary aspirations on hold.

In 2016, however, his life changed course when the PCBT, in partnership with the City of Ekurhuleni, established the Peer-

mont Hotel School (PHS) at Emperors Palace.

Aimed at less fortunate youngsters from Ekurhuleni who have their sights set on becoming chefs, waitrons or housekeepers, the school offered 12-month fully funded learnerships to 72 deserving youngsters when it opened its doors in May 2016.

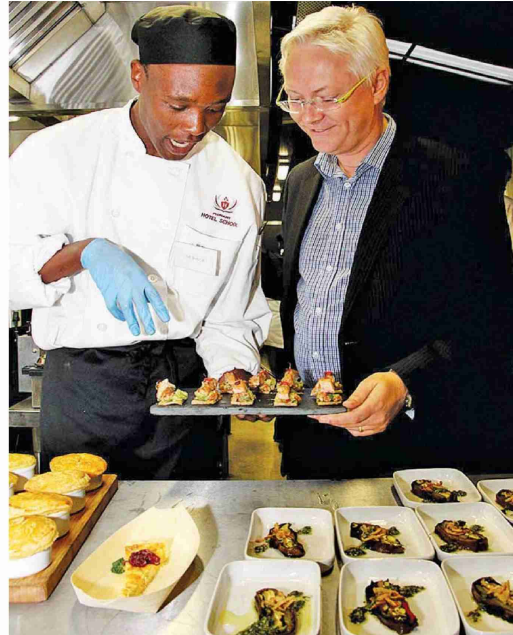
The PCBT has since provided 1 114 people with fully funded sponsorships to the school.

Among the fortunate recipients of the Class of 2016 was a thrilled Mabuza, who had been accepted into the chef's programme and that started his journey to becoming known by colleagues as "The Culinary Gangster".

"When I received the news I was going to the hotel school I couldn't believe it, it was one of the best days of my life," says Mabuza. "The PHS created a platform for me to make my mark as a young chef in this industry with proper guidance and basic education."

"It also gave me all the tools I needed to make it to where I am now, I'm just so grateful."

He quickly became one of the stars in the programme and after completing his theoretical training under the guidance of chef Lehan Botha of Celso, the accredited training provider for the PHS, Mabuza moved on to his practical training in the kitchens of



**PRESENTATION.** Meshack Mabuza shows Peermont chief executive Nigel Atherton his craft.

Emperors Palace, helping him gain much-needed experience.

On graduating among the top students in his class, Mabuza didn't let the grass grow under his feet and he boldly approached My Kitchen Rules SA judge chef David Higgs for a job at his Marble Restaurant.

Much to Mabuza's delight, Higgs gave him a chance to work and learn alongside one of the best-known chefs in the country.

In the beginning, he often worked the late shift, finishing at 11pm or later.

With transport back to Tembisa from Johannesburg not easily available at that hour, Mabuza showed his determination to succeed and spent many a night sleeping at a garage before taking a train home in the morning.

His determination to prosper has stood him in good stead, earning him the position of chef de partie at Higgs' new trendy Saint restaurant in Sandton.

He said: "[Chef Higgs] has

taught me how to be an old-school professional chef, from respecting my ingredients to mastering flavour combinations and creating great-tasting, delicious food."

"When he moved me to Saint restaurant, he started teaching me Italian cuisine and I'm still looking forward to learning from him because he has been my role model."

Not resting on his laurels Mabuza plans to pursue a tertiary education in hospitality and tourism while he sets new goals and bigger dreams - like one day owning his own restaurant.

"Meshack is a walking example of what can be achieved with talent, hard work a touch of *chutzpah* and the help of a fully funded learnership from Emperors Palace's PCBT to attend the Peermont Hotel School," says Trust manager Jenny Findlay.

"What he has achieved from such humble beginnings in such a short time just proves if you can dream it, you can do it."

► For the PHS application form go to [www.peermonthotelschool.co.za](http://www.peermonthotelschool.co.za).

- Citizen reporter



**TEAM.** Meshack Mabuza with chef David Higgs. Pictures: Supplied