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IN MY KITCHEN

# Cape Town Chef Reuben Riffel

A South African who grew up in a household where nobody went out to eat is making up for lost time

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CULINARY FORCE | Reuben Riffel in his home kitchen INGE PRINS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

## REUBEN RIFFEL

grew up in a segregated neighborhood under the shadow of apartheid, and didn't eat in a restaurant until he was 15 years old. After working in construction, Mr. Riffel apprenticed at a restaurant where his mother was a prep chef, and quickly found his future, with South Africa's influential Eat Out Guide naming his first eatery the country's

restaurant of the

year, in 2004. Now executive chef of Reuben's at the One&Only Cape Town, Mr. Riffel, 37, takes a distinctly contemporary approach to the traditional stews and meat pies of his childhood, preparing dishes like grainy mustard-glazed ostrich steak with soft polenta, Cape-style tomato smoor, spinach and jus. When he's not working in Cape Town or in one of the two restaurants he owns near his home in the Franschhoek Valley, Mr. Riffel speeds around in his vintage Mercedes-Benz, or relaxes with his wife, Maryké, their 2-year-old daughter, Latika, and a kitchen full of extended family members.

**I've been cooking** since I was small. When I was 12, one of my duties was starting the wood-burning stove for my mom. When I was 15, I started to cook my own food, which caused quite a lot of problems. My mom would shop for food for the week, and I sometimes used things I wasn't allowed to. I'd invite friends over and make pasta Bolognese.



Kai Shun knife set INGE PRINS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

**I can't live without** a really good set of knives. I use the Kai Shun premier range, beautiful knives with walnut handles. They're very shiny, maybe a bit too showy, but they look beautiful and work amazingly well.

**My pet peeve** is a cluttered kitchen, especially "junk" drawers, where everything goes in and when you look for something it's nowhere. Even a drawer that's nicely laid out eventually gets messed up. The things that get messy are utensils and measuring cups. I have a few boxes where I put them all.

**The most amazing food experience** of my life was going to the Salone del Gusto in Turin, a showcase of artisanal food producers. The thing I remember more than anything, was this amazing girl and her dad were showcasing their white truffles. She was a beautiful girl and she just reeked of white truffle.

**The home-cooked meal** I most crave is pumpkin fritters with cinnamon sugar.

**If I could choose any chef** to cook for me at home, it would be Heston Blumenthal. I like his avant-garde approach to cooking. It's not how I cook, but I find it interesting.

**I'm a big fan of making interesting** sandwiches. I like to combine a sweet type of pickle or an Indian curried pickle called atchar with a little bit of smoked chicken. It's perfect with a couple of beers.

**I've always been surprised** that I can taste something, store it in the back of my mind, and recreate it. Even as a kid, I'd go through the cupboard and look for things that I thought had to go in a dish to make it similar to what I'd tasted.

**I like the intimacy of cooking** at home, and meals are one of the few times where I can spend quality time with my wife and



Homemade fritters INGE PRINS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

daughter. I'm used to a professional kitchen where there's always someone cleaning up for you. I probably enjoy the adrenaline of the restaurant more, but making a great meal is one of the nicest gifts you can give.



Indian curried pickle F. MARTIN RAMIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



Riedel Duck Decanter



Mauviel pots and pans INGE PRINS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

**Latika likes to eat all sorts of different things, so I make her salmon sashimi and beef carpaccio, with lots of Parmesan, arugula, balsamic vinegar and capers. She enjoys food with big flavors. My mother-in-law cooks more blandly and I realized lately my daughter doesn't finish those dishes.**

**In my home kitchen, I struggle if I don't have things like garlic and the fresh chilies that I grow in my garden. In my cupboard, I always have quite a bit of Parmesan and a good selection of spices, like curry powder and garam masala, which jazzes up roasted potatoes beautifully.**

**I'm not a fan of the big fast food chains like McDonald's, but in South Africa there's a Portuguese-style chain called Nando's, and I love their chicken with mayonnaise and iceberg lettuce, served on a pita.**

**My biggest kitchen splurge is my Mauviel pots and pans.**

**Whenever I entertain at home, my wife is very good with setting the table. We enjoy buying different types of glassware. Whether it's Spiegelau or Riedel, we go all out, so we have a decanter and always start out with a cocktail.**

**If I could cook for anyone living or dead, it would be for my**

family. We didn't grow up in this culture of going out for dinner.

**At parties for my friends, I always also try and do steam pots. We have all sorts of raw ingredients and vegetables and a steaming pot of stock and you can cook your own food.**

**Whenever I go to someone's house, I like to bring a nice basket of fruit and vegetables. My wife will present it beautifully, usually in an old wooden box.**

**On a typical weekend, I'd work on a Saturday in Cape Town from 10 a.m. until late at night, drive at home, catch up with my friends and discuss sports over a quick—or not quick—beer. Sunday is my family time.**



His cookbook collection INGE PRINS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

I have about 250 cookbooks. I didn't go through the usual channels to become a chef, and even now I feel I might not be versed in everything.

A well-set table should never have crazy flower decorations. I prefer simplicity.

*—Edited from an interview by Jackie Cooperman*

