



SOUTH AFRICAN
CHEFS ASSOCIATION
EST. 1974

SA Chef Media Conference and Expo 2024

President's Address

Monday 25 November 2024

Maker's Landing, V&A Waterfront

Chef Coo Pillay



Good evening SA Chefs Members, Partners, and Friends,

It is my singular honor and privilege to address you all as the 9th President of the SA Chefs Association, having been elected just six weeks ago. We are here today to celebrate the inaugural SA Chef Conference and Expo, as well as the ongoing celebration of the golden jubilee of our beloved SA Chefs Association.

This moment is a testament to the dedication, passion, and hard work of each and every one of you who make up this remarkable industry. Let us take a moment to celebrate the achievements of the past 50 years, reflect on our challenges, and forge a path of positivity and growth for our industry.

These past few years have tested our resilience, but through sustainability, technological advancements, and evolving consumer demands, we've adapted. Now, we must continue leading the charge, harnessing collaboration and shared knowledge to elevate our craft.

As we reflect on our journey, we honor our founders and the incredible legacy they built. In 1974, six visionary chefs came together to establish the South African Chefs Association. Their work has since been carried forward by each of our Presidents, whose leadership has shaped SA Chefs into the esteemed organization it is today.

I would like to acknowledge the contributions of all our past Presidents, whose leadership has been the cornerstone of our success. Each President has left an indelible mark, ensuring our prominence both locally and globally. We owe much of our growth to their tireless dedication, and I am deeply grateful for the vision and hard work they have imparted.

- Chef Bill Fenname (1974-1976) – A founding visionary.
- The Late Chef Wolfgang Voigt (1976-1979) † – SA Chefs grew in influence and prestige.
- Chef Manfred Muellers (1979-1982) – A distinguished educator and Certified Master Chef.
- The late Chef Dr. Billy Gallagher (1982-1988 and 1992-2000) † – One of South Africa's culinary icons.
- Chef Heinz Brunner (1988–1992 and 2000–2003) – Another icon of our association.
- Chef Martin Kobald (2003–2008) – As Vice President of World Chefs, he elevated SA Chefs to greater global recognition.
- Chef Stephen Billingham (2008–2018) – Well known for his educational prowess.
- Chef James Khoza (2018–2024) – The first South African-born Chef to lead the Association, and his vision for SA Chefs Reimagined.

As we look back, it's clear that the history of SA Chefs is marked by extraordinary achievements and milestones. In 1974, a dream was realized when six chefs came together to create an association that would unify chefs across South Africa. By 1980, our chefs were already making their mark internationally, winning five gold medals at the IKA Culinary Olympics. These early years were defined by a passion and ambition to elevate South African cuisine to new heights.



The 1980s and 1990s saw SA Chefs begin to cement its place on the global stage. In 1986, the legendary Paul Bocuse graced our InfoChefs gala banquet as a guest of honor, signaling our growing prestige. In 1992, our Culinary Olympic Team earned 18 gold medals, a testament to the excellence of our chefs. We hosted the World Chef Congress in 1988, and in 1993, the World Chefs Tour Against Hunger raised R500,000 for Operation Hunger, underscoring our association's commitment to community and global impact.

In the 1990s, South Africa was honored by the unanimous vote of World Chefs to hold the esteemed offices of President, Vice President, and Secretary General. Dr. Billy Gallagher, our beloved Honorary Life President, was elected World President of World Chefs, inspiring generations of chefs. This period also saw the launch of International Chefs Day, a lasting legacy of our association.

The 2000s marked a golden era of leadership and service. In 2005, we launched the Tsogo Sun Centre for Culinary Excellence (CCE), a significant investment in education and skills development. Our Culinary Team SA brought home gold from the IKA Culinary Olympics in 2008. By 2013, the first African Culinary Cup took place, and we were awarded Professional Body Status by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), confirming our commitment to developing culinary talent at the highest level.

The last decade has seen SA Chefs continue to thrive and innovate. The National Youth Chefs Training Programme, supported by the Department of Tourism, has trained over 2,500 young chefs, creating pathways for the next generation of culinary leaders. The World Chefs Tour Against Hunger raised millions for those in need, and our membership has grown to over 9,000. Even in the face of the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, we have stood strong, adapting to new realities and continuing to serve our members.

As I reflect on this extraordinary journey, I am filled with gratitude for every member, partner, and supporter who has contributed to our success. Your loyalty, dedication, and belief in SA Chefs have been the foundation of our achievements.

To all our partners and sponsors, SA Chefs is where it is today because of your unwavering belief and support. As your new President, I am committed to continuing this legacy of excellence and growth.

To our members, thank you for believing in me and for your unwavering encouragement. Your confidence in my leadership inspires me to lead with integrity and purpose. I promise to honor this trust as we move forward together. As I step into this role, I am reminded that our association is more than just a collective of chefs; we are a family united by our love for food, culture, and creativity. Together, we possess the power to elevate our profession, advocate for our community, and inspire the next generation of culinary leaders.



Looking ahead, the values of SA Chefs—passion, excellence, and community—will continue to guide us. Together, we will embrace innovation, push boundaries, and ensure that South African cuisine takes its rightful place on the world stage. In partnership with the University of Johannesburg, we've been conducting important research on nutrition, aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. This includes efforts to end hunger, tackle food insecurity, and improve community nutrition. Additionally, our collaboration with the Department of Tourism on their gastronomic tourism project highlights our dedication to promoting South Africa's indigenous cuisine and supporting destination marketing strategies.

It's important to recognize the pivotal role that professional designations play in shaping the future of our industry. These designations, as part of the mandate of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), are not just titles; they are the right to practice in a field of expertise. In fact, the following designations have already been officially registered: Cook, Chef de Partie, Sous Chef, and Head Chef. Each of these designations represents not only a level of skill and knowledge, but also a commitment to professionalism and excellence in the culinary arts.

Training and skills development are fundamental to the growth and progress of any industry, and ours is no different. This is why initiatives like the Department of Tourism's Artisan Recognition of Prior Learning are so crucial. Such programs aim to recognize and validate the experience and skills that individuals have already acquired, ensuring they are given the proper credentials to advance further in their careers.

Furthermore, we eagerly await the relaunch of the National Youth Chefs Training Program. This initiative holds the promise of addressing the skills shortage that currently exists in our industry. But it goes beyond simply filling gaps—it's about nurturing and developing the next generation of culinary talent. It's about fostering Chefpreneurs—individuals who not only excel in the kitchen but also understand the entrepreneurial spirit, who go on to build and grow their own businesses.

Together, these efforts will not only fill the immediate skill gaps we face but will also drive innovation and support the growth of small businesses within our field. By investing in the development of our people, we are ensuring that our industry will thrive for generations to come.

We will build on the strategic partnership with The Restaurant Collective, and FEDHASA for the opportunity to uplift and professionalize the culinary and hospitality industries in South Africa. By leveraging the strengths and influence of these organizations, SA Chefs will expand its reach, offer value-driven programs, and position itself as the leading voice in the restaurant and culinary sectors.



We are focusing on re-building our National Culinary Team with our goal of sending a full squad of senior, junior and individual competitors across all spectrum of the Culinary Olympics in 2030. At the recent World Chefs Congress held in Singapore, I showed intent of South Africa bidding to host for the World Chefs Congress in 2032, this is perfect opportunity not only for SA Chefs but for South Africa's gastronomic tourism.

As we look to the future, I urge each of you to reflect on a pressing challenge we face: the skills shortage in our sector. This is not just a challenge—it is a call to action for all of us. Let us unite to find solutions, collaborate meaningfully, and ensure a thriving future for our culinary industry.

Gratitude, respect, and pride—these three words perfectly capture how I feel about the incredible people who make up the tourism and hospitality industry in our country. Together, we will tackle challenges and seize opportunities, strengthening our bonds and embracing our vibrant culinary diversity.

Here's to a bright future for the SA Chefs Association and our greater Culinary and Hospitality industry!

Thank you.

Chef Coo Pillay