

SMOKIN'

Mzoli's, near Cape Town, is like no restaurant you've eaten at before and one you're not likely to forget in a hurry. It's the most exciting and unpredictable barbecue Jamie's ever been to - the music was pumping, the people were cool, the meat was fresh and the grill was very, very hot

Words **Jamie Oliver** Photography **David Loftus**





In this job, I am blessed being able to travel to lots of truly beautiful places but, to be honest, I'm often more interested in the gritty underbelly than I am with the pretty stuff. I wasn't travelling all the way to Cape Town to only eat in posh restaurants. I'd heard of a place called Mzoli's that is 15 kilometres outside of Cape Town in the township of Gugulethu. This place does a proper South African braai. Braai is the Afrikaans word for barbecue and they're a really important part of the country's culture. I couldn't wait to experience my first one.

We landed on Saturday morning and within three hours Andy, our magazine editor, David, the photographer, and I were heading to Gugulethu. It wasn't my first time visiting a township: I'd been to some in Johannesburg and Soweto a few years back for Comic Relief, which really inspired me, but it's a real experience, driving into serious poverty, no police around. It's humbling and truly eye-opening. I knew we were going off the beaten track.

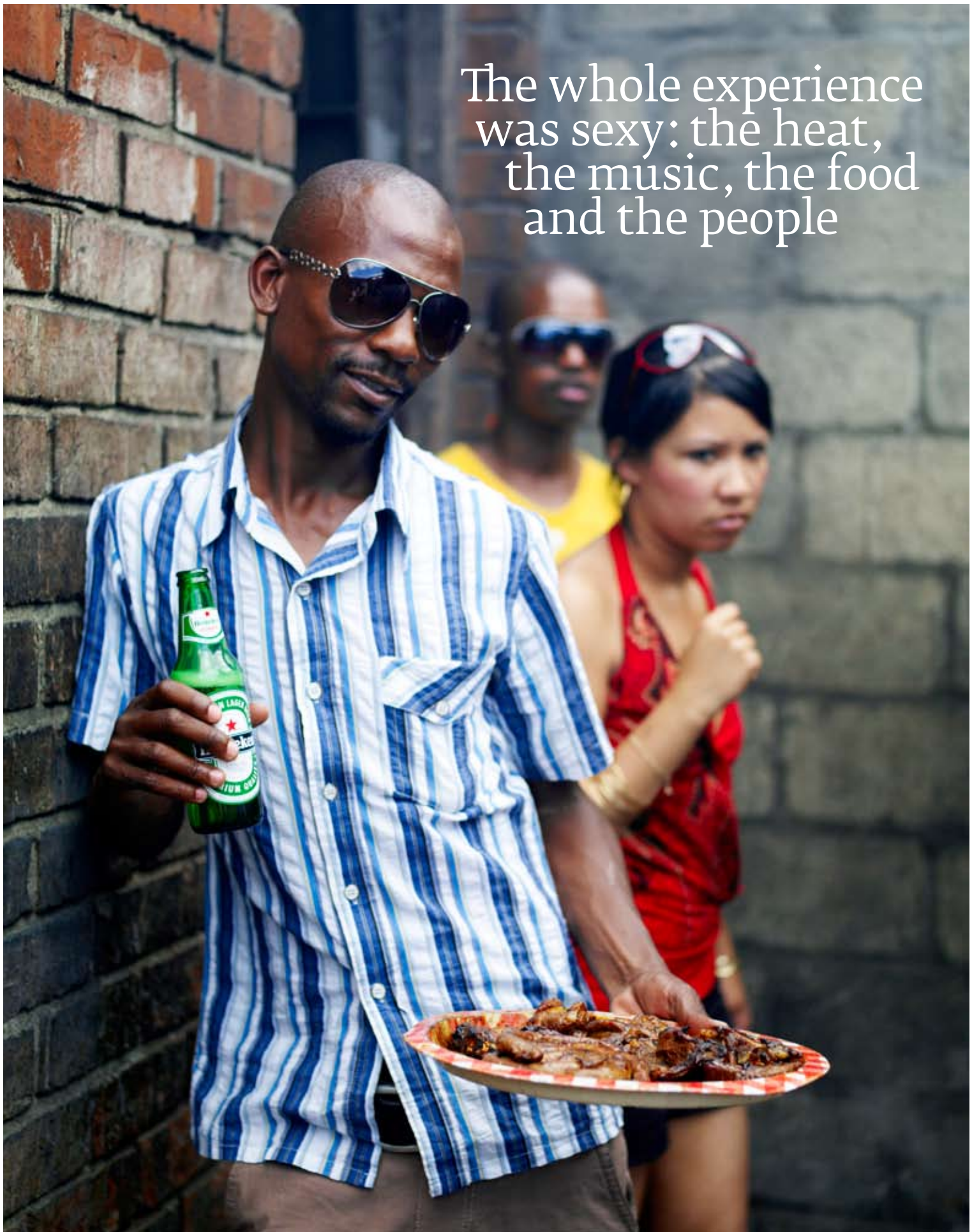
Our driver made it clear that, although the bad days of apartheid are over, there's still a split in the country. Not because you can't go into certain areas, but because things like dialect, where you live and the food you eat still depends on what colour you are. But this didn't put me off. I don't care what you look like, where you come from or who your god is. What I am interested in is what you had for breakfast, what you had for lunch, and what you eat on Christmas morning... Oh, wait. Christmas is religious. OK then, I want to know what you cook for someone you want to fall in love with.

As we got further into the township we followed the plumes of smoke. The closer we got to Mzoli's the more we could feel the atmosphere changing - it was fantastic. When we pulled up it looked like something from a movie. There must have been 500 or 600 people just chilling out in the sunshine. Car boots were up, people were bringing in their own booze, tunes were going off, the girls were pretty - and not just because of their big sunglasses, the boys were looking sharp. The place was kicking.

It wasn't a rich neighbourhood - there were shacks with corrugated iron roofs and breezeblock buildings - but the vibe was brilliant, and I could smell that we were exactly where we needed to be.

The Mzoli's experience: choose what you want to eat in from the meat counter (top left) and take it to one of the grill guys (top right) who'll cook it with a secret marinade (bottom centre left). Buy beers from one of the shops near the communal dining area (bottom right), then eat, enjoy and get to know your fellow braai enthusiasts (bottom left).

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We walked in and introduced ourselves off the cuff to the guy that runs it, Mzoli Ngcawuzele, and he couldn't have been more accommodating. Basically, it's a butcher's with a plethora of different cuts. I had a good look at it, and it was all proper, fresh meat. In this part of the world, fresh is where it's at. It's so hot out there that they can't be hanging meat like we do in Europe. Just kill it. Gut it. Skin it. Eat it. They'll give it a shake of salt and pepper and maybe a few other flavourings but really, the lovely meat speaks for itself.

Everyone was choosing cuts, from cheap to expensive. I wanted lots of little tastes so I chose lamb cutlets, pork sausages, lamb sausages (to die for), chicken legs, and pork leg steaks. They had some

secret spice rubs and wet marinades that they'd scatter on your meats if you wanted so essentially, you ended up with the most brilliant meat version of a pick 'n' mix. Heaven.

We paid a man in a little booth, he stuck the receipts right in our meat, then we headed down an alley where we stood chatting until it was our turn. The locals wanted to know what on earth three white boys were doing there with a Hasselblad camera and a plateful of meat. Finally, we walked into a big, tarry pitched-up hut where all the meat was being cooked on these massive cast-iron barbecues. This was bloody exciting. This was also 120 degrees! I couldn't even sweat - it was just burning off.

They had six big braais (barbecues) fired up and we handed our plates to the men working them. As different things cook at different times, they've got lots of little techniques and tricks going on. For instance, when you give them a chicken leg, they cut along the bone so the meat almost butterflies out. This way, the bone heats up and, instead of being the thing that slows cooking, helps cook the meat. I also saw them basting meat with the fat coming out of sausages - clever stuff.

So this is where these guys in the red boiler suits just smash it. They stand there and grill away for 12 hours a day. The rack that they cook on is a bit crude, but to one side they've got sort of a traditional English fire happening. As the logs cook down and turn into charcoal they smack them up and then put those coals under the meat so they have a hot side for searing, and a cooler side for finishing thicker meats. It was an absolute honour to watch these boys beating and controlling the fire, handling the heat, and cooking this incredible food.

With our plates in hand we came out of the back of Mzoli's and sat down with everyone else. The meat was beautifully cooked. The simplicity of the rubs and spices they'd used, along with the aromas from the wood, gave it such incredible flavour. The tunes were kicking off in the background and there was some good bass pumping. I just loved it. I felt my age and didn't feel at all uptight or like I was trying to fit into anyone else's situation. Bizarrely, I felt at home. Everyone was just happy to be gnawing on bits of meat, dipping into their chilli sauce and sipping beers on a Saturday.

People might think this is the wrong word, but for me, the whole experience was totally sexy: the heat, the music, the food, the atmosphere and the people. The girls had all made a real effort and dressed up and so had the boys, and that's what makes the world go round as far as I'm concerned.

When I go back to Cape Town, I'm absolutely going to Mzoli's. I was told that on Sundays they fire up another five barbecues and around 2,000 people turn up. That I've got to see! ●

Mzoli's, NY 115, Shop 3 Gugulethu, Cape Town 7751, South Africa; 0027 21 638 1355

The main event at any braai is definitely the meat, such as the spiralled South African boerewors (opposite, centre), and even some meat Jamie couldn't identify but wasn't going to pass up (top). Sides might include pap (on the table, opposite, bottom right), a ground maize that's boiled with water, that's served hard or soft like bread and used to mop up meat juices. Of course, the real attraction of Mzoli's is the social aspect and great vibe.

