

COWBOYS AND SNAKES

IN HER WILD YOUTH, **MARITA VAN DER VYVER** HAD SOMETHING TO PROVE

In France, where I've lived for the past decade or two, people pride themselves on eating the most peculiar things. Snails and frogs and smelly musty cheese and the rotten meat of small birds. To name but a few.

So whenever the dinner-table boasts of my French compatriots start boring me, I casually inform them that as a young girl, way back in Africa, I ate barbecued snake. Even the most adventurous diners find it hard to top this with the usual: 'Ah, *oui*, I've also tried that!'

It happened when I was a teenager and my family moved from a big city to a small subtropical fruit farm in the Lowveld, only a few kilometres from the Numbi gate of the Kruger National Park. Most of our weekends were spent visiting the many game reserves in the vicinity with city friends who couldn't believe our luck. Imagine finding a hippopotamus in your swimming pool (which happened once) or hearing lions roar at night (quite a regular occurrence). This was the Wild West – or the Wild East in South African geographical terms – and my dad, who had always adored cowboy movies, saw himself as Shane or John Wayne.

As for me, I certainly didn't feel lucky. I was a normal teenager, much more interested in wild boys than wild animals, fascinated by roaring rock bands rather than roaring lions, and I deplored our new lifestyle. Still, I had to trek along to these game parks and spend evenings around campfires listening to Dad impressing city dwellers with his tall tales of fleeing charging elephants (which did happen once, but we were in a car).

During one such weekend, Dad boasted to some new acquaintances from Cape Town that he'd learned to appreciate many different kinds of game meat out here in the wilds. Kudu, oryx, even crocodile! What about *snake*?, one of the Capeys asked in wide-eyed admiration.

Ag, we eat that all the time, Dad answered without missing a beat. In that case, the Capey said, he had some road kill in his car boot – a huge black snake that had been run over that very afternoon – and wouldn't it be an unforgettable experience if my dad could cook this for us?

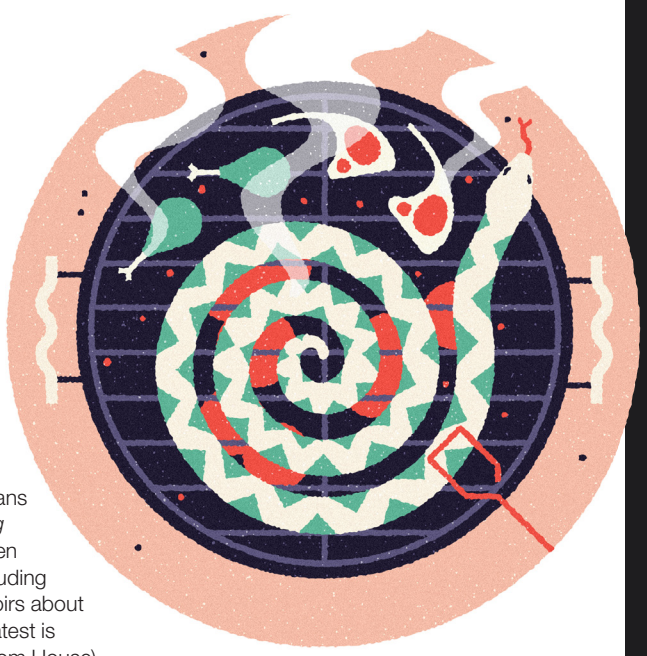
Perhaps the Capey was simply trying to call my father's bluff. But Dad rose to the occasion with true cowboy grit. The enormous snake was skinned and cut in small pieces and roasted over the fire. Not everyone was brave enough to try a piece, but I didn't have a choice. Being John Wayne's daughter, I had to play along and pretend this was a perfectly normal snack.

And, in fact, it tasted disappointingly 'normal'; a little bit like industrial chicken, actually. Which is all I usually tell my French dining companions.

But if some culinary snob wants to know whether we *regularly* ate barbecued snake, back there in Africa, I'm always tempted to answer: '*Ag*, all the time!'

Just like my cowboy dad.

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About the columnist

Marita van der Vyver writes in Afrikaans but her novels (including *Entertaining Angels* and *Travelling Light*) have been translated into many languages, including Chinese. She has also written memoirs about her adopted home, Provence. The latest is *A Fountain in France* (Penguin Random House).



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

COLLYWOBBLES

Seen from the air, the Mbashe River in the Eastern Cape winds tightly around the local hills, its loops and turns as flamboyant as permed curls. This 'sinuous' river is responsible for the name of the settlement in the area: Collywobbles. The river looks much like the convolutions of the digestive tract, and the water tumbling along its course sounds like 'rumbling of the intestines'. Others say the name is linked to a Brit general, Sir George Pomeroy Colley, who was based at nearby Idutywa as Special Magistrate of the Transkei in the late 1850s.* Nowadays, tiny Collywobbles has a micro hydro power station and the ruin of a trading store dating to pre-1900, but it's also home to a colony of Cape vultures (*Gyps coprotheres*). The vulnerable birds have nested on cliffs in the river gorge since at least the 1890s. Want to stop by (martial eagles, black storks and southern ground hornbills can also be spotted)? Email nick.theron@birdlife.org.za for a guide to accompany you. The Mbashe River eventually spills into the sea on the Wild Coast, with Dwesa Nature Reserve on one bank and Cwebe Reserve and the Haven Hotel on the other.

wildcoast.co.za

* Adapted from the *Dictionary of Southern African Place Names* (Jonathan Ball).

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