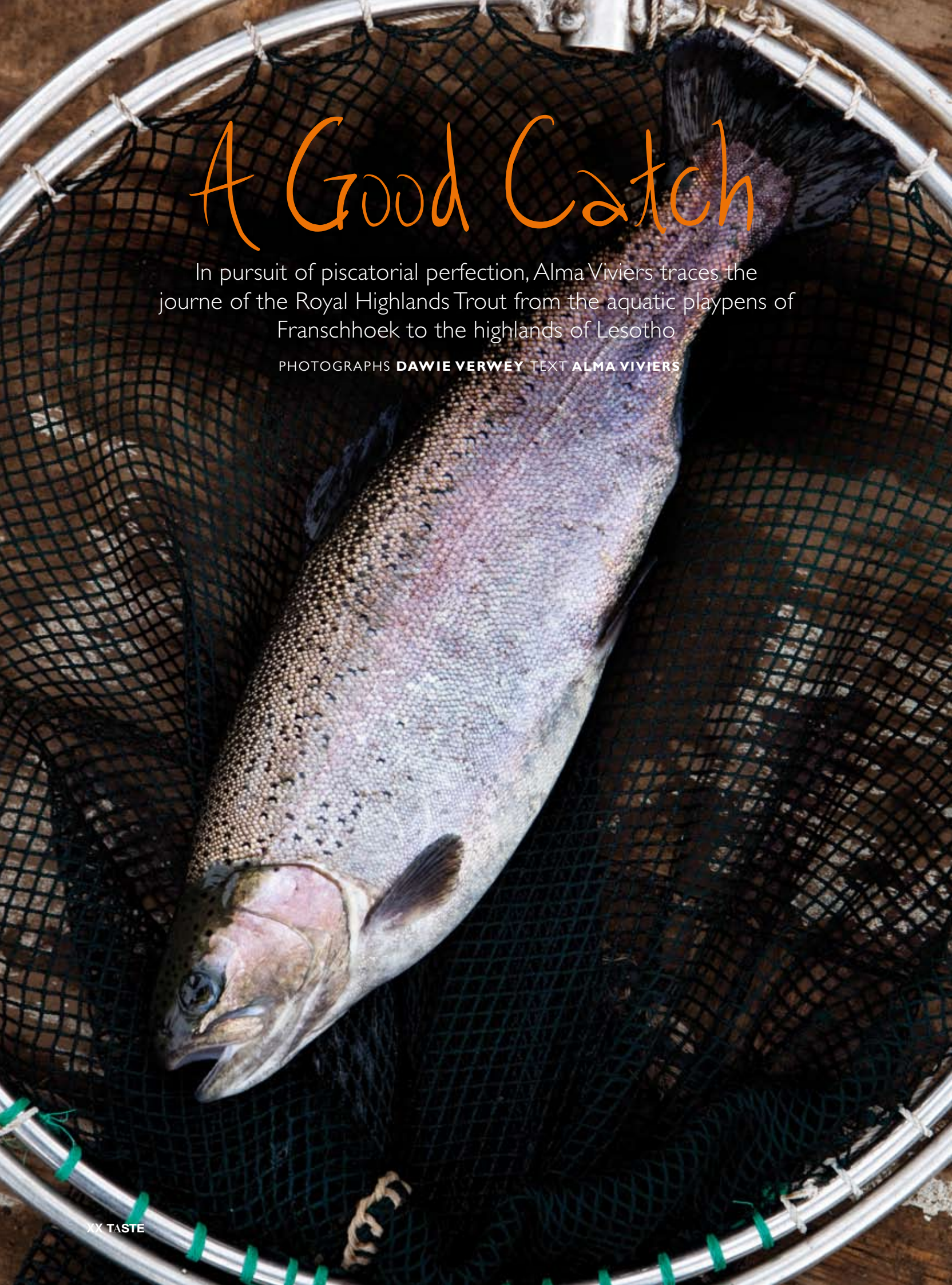


# A Good Catch

In pursuit of piscatorial perfection, Alma Viviers traces the journey of the Royal Highlands Trout from the aquatic playpens of Franschhoek to the highlands of Lesotho

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This page: Aquaculturalist Greg Stubbs (right) and experienced fish farmer, Patrick Mwelase (left) ensure that the Royal Highlands trout are happy healthy fish. Opposite page: A prime specimen displays the rainbow trout's distinct graded pink colouring.

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leary-eyed and feeling a bit like, well, a fish out of water, I step off the flight from Cape Town to Bloemfontein. Ahead, a four-hour drive to the edge of the Katse reservoir in the highlands of Lesotho...

But who am I to complain when 40 000 little trout fry have already been on the road for more than 18 hours? The fry started their journey in Franschhoek at the Three Stream Salmon and Trout Farm. Here, under the watchful eye of aquaculturalist Greg Stubbs, they were hatched and nursed to a weight of about 1 gram. And now they're en route to the pristine waters of the Katse reservoir, where they'll frolic for the next year or so, before they make the return journey.

Why the travelling fish, you might wonder. Greg, who has been in the business of aquaculture for more than 30 years, explains: "Conditions in Franschhoek are ideal for the hatchery because we have complete control over the water source and can ensure disease-free fry. But there are few sites in the Western Cape with suitable conditions to raise juvenile fish." Trout, like their salmon cousins in the Scottish Highlands, require clean and cold, well-oxygenated, fast-moving water at a high altitude, which is exactly what Lesotho's Katse reservoir offers.

Greg has turned what started out as an experimental fish farm and small smoking shed into a thriving business. The Three Streams Smokehouse has been supplying

Woolworths with arguably the finest trout in the country since 2002. It's also the first provenance brand introduced in this category at Woolworths: what this means is the product is fully traceable and each step of the life cycle of the fish can be traced and controlled.

The Katse dam was originally built to supply Gauteng with water. Since 2006 it's been home to the Katse Fish Farm project and is currently producing 300 tons of trout per year. The project is a joint venture between investors, Three Streams and the Ha Lejone village, which is where the farm is located. It has been so successful that there are plans afoot to start a hatchery there and eventually to grow the capacity to 3 000 tons of fish.

At the water's edge we meet up with the Katse Fish Farm's general manager, Mike Kruger. With his right-hand man, Patrick Mwelase, they have more than 50 years combined experience in fish farming.

As the thousands of newly arrived silvery bodies slip into the nursery pens, Mike explains the cage culture system: "The fry will stay in the nursery cages for two to three weeks to get accustomed to the water and to grow to about 30 grams in size," he explains. "Then they are moved to the large floating pens, where they will stay for about 12 months before returning to Three Streams Smokehouse to be processed."

A low stocking density is one aspect of their rearing philosophy that ensures healthy, happy fish – as Greg puts it, "99 percent water, 1 percent fish". The trout are fed a special, secret diet to keep them lean and fit while preventing any harm to the aquatic environment. The water is tested regularly, both upstream and downstream, to avoid any negative impact on the quality of the water or indigenous species.

A happy by-product of the fish farm has been a major boost for subsistence fishing in the area. This is not only from escapees that now populate the dam but also because resident fish benefit from the regular feeding. Local fishermen are now almost guaranteed a regular catch.

Another benefit is that for every Royal Highlands trout sold, the local Ha Lejone community receive a cut in the form of an annual royalty cheque. During our visit we attended the handover of the second cheque by Lesotho's Minister of Natural Resources, the honourable Monyane Moleketi, to the chief of the community.

The Minister was a proponent of the Katse Dam project from the start and is passionate about the opportunities aquaculture holds for the people of Lesotho. He jokingly tells how

the Basotho people used to refer to the English as *maji hlapi* – smelly fish-eaters. Fishing was never part of traditional life in this landlocked country of goat and cattle herders, but the Katse Fish Farm is opening up new doors. The chief affirmed this in her acceptance speech: "I now know that the Lesotho Highlands Water Project is not just about dams and providing water but it means roads and electricity for our communities. The Katse Fish Farm is a symbol of a new relationship and a bond of friendship between a community and other role-players."

Afterwards the special occasion is celebrated with a feast fit for a chief, with chef Tim McPherson showcasing the wonderful versatility of trout. A crisp rocket salad with salty capers emphasises the velvet melt-in-your-mouth texture of ribbons of cold-smoked trout, while hot-smoked peppered trout is teamed with a trout and fennel mousse, topped with cream cheese and caviar. For mains we sample the freshest seared trout served with a honey-pepper hollandaise that highlights the trout's fresh, clean taste and buttery texture. Luckily dessert is fish-free!

It seems that the old adage "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day, teach a man to fish and you feed him for life" should be altered to include "Teach a man to farm fish and you create prosperity for all." **W**

**GRILLED TROUT WITH A GRANADILLA AND CITRUS DRIZZLE**

**Serves 4 ■ EASY**

**Preparation: 10 minutes**

**Cooking: 10 minutes**

**1 x 800 g side of trout or salmon**

**2 T olive oil**

**sea salt, for sprinkling**

**6 granadillas, halved**

**1 lemon, segmented**

**juice of 1 lime**

**a handful of fresh mint**

Rub the trout with olive oil and sprinkle with sea salt. Place under a hot grill until firm but still succulent – about 8 to 10 minutes, depending on the thickness of the fish. Scoop out the granadilla flesh and combine with the lemon segments, lime juice and mint. To serve, pour the granadilla, citrus and mint dressing over the cooked fish.

**This page: Large nursery pens float in the reservoir. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Definitely no traffic jams here as one of Katse's staff members heads to work at the nursery cages; picturesque Lesotho landscapes epitomise the area; feeding time is a spectacular sight as calm waters come alive with a thousand glimmering bodies.**





**WAYS WITH TROUT**

Serve it fresh or enjoy it in one of the following guises. Trout is treated much the same as salmon, and it's just as delicious

**CURED TROUT** Fillets of trout are cured in salt, sugar and dill to make gravdax.

**ROAST-SMOKED OR HOT-SMOKED TROUT** This is a process similar to slow roasting. Using oak-wood chips, raw fillets or whole fish are smoked for four hours at around 70°C until they are fully cooked and have a flaky texture. The fish is often prepared with a black-pepper crust.

**COLD-SMOKED** Trout fillets are cured for 12 hours in a salt and sugar mixture. The cold-smoking process takes much longer than hot-smoking – the fish is smoked for approximately 21 hours at a temperature never exceeding 27°C.

This page, clockwise from top right: Traditional transport, well suited to the mountainous terrain; a sumptuous salad of cold-smoked trout with sour cream and chive dressing; having travelled for almost 20 hours, thousands of trout fry are introduced to their new home.

Opposite: A feat of structural engineering – the Katse dam wall is the highest in Africa at 185 meters and now also proves the ideal environment for fish farming.

