

The art of sailing close to the wind

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Mandy van Zuydam invited two yachtsmen from Ocean Rover to a home-cooked meal. What followed was a fascinating insight into food rituals on the BT Global Challenge.

When you invite crew from the BT Challenge – the world's toughest yacht race – to enjoy an authentic home-cooked South African meal, you feel challenged to produce something a little more tantalising than boerewors rolls and koeksusters.

When you've seen the tiny galley in which your yachtie guests have had to cook up a storm for 14 wet, hungry crew, and when you learn that Prince Michael of Kent prepared them his speciality on a tiny gas stove, you feel even more obliged to produce something sensational.

Amid all the mod cons in my (comparatively) palatial kitchen I faced my own tough trial. How could I be expected to cook things like waterblommetjie bredie and bobotie without an ouma tucked away in the pantry, and where would I find a bakery that makes a good melktert?

Thanks to a constant flow of a venerable local vintage, and the British politeness of our guests, Jon and Robert, our home-cooked fare appeared to be as well-received as a bottle of rum would be on a stormy night at sea. But, if truth be known, these men would have been grateful for anything that hadn't been boiled in the bag, tinned or had its life lengthened by other dubious means.

Braaied fillet, butternut bake and mielie bread might not have been the most unforgettable foray into South African cuisine, but we were rewarded with a fascinating insight into mealtime rituals aboard Ocean Rover – one of the 14 yachts competing in the BT Global Challenge.

Of the 14 crew members aboard, everyone (except the skipper and first mate) is required to cook. The menu operates on a basic nine-day

schedule, but when you are at sea for 40 days at a stretch, those who can make magic from mince are considered master chefs. Breakfast is always freshly baked bread – made from packet mix – and cereal.

'Robert couldn't cope with the after-dinner belching of one of the crew'

Lunch is usually sandwiches or pizzas and dinner might be a tuna and pasta bake, a meal in the bag or the inevitable mince. The crew consists of 12 permanent members and two "leggers" – people who join for just one leg of the Southampton, Rio, Wellington, Sydney, Cape Town, Boston voyage.

It's the leggers who often find it hardest to get their sea legs in the kitchen, and Robert and Jon still get an afterburn sensation when they recall the chilli-con carne made by one enthusiastic 17-year-old legger.

"We didn't want to hurt his feelings but, after two mouthfuls, all 13 of us had to down forks and admit defeat," recalls Jon. Occasionally special guests join the boat for a brief visit. One such VIP was Prince Michael of Kent, who joined Ocean Rover for a seven-day spell.

Although he was not expected to cook, he did treat the crew to his version of that classic English delicacy, "the bacon buttie". These bacon sandwiches proved an instant hit with the rest of crew and were fondly recalled for the rest of the journey as "bacon butties a la Windsor Caff".

"Treats" for the crew of Ocean Rover are a daily cereal bar and a Mars Bar, but Robert and Jon agree that even chocolate loses its appeal when you eat it 40 days in a row.

What kind of foods do they miss the most? "Fresh vegetables and roast dinners," answers Jon without hesitation. And what won't they miss. "Salt," is the obvious answer.

Mealtimes can be a nightmare. Robert, for example, couldn't cope with the deafening after-dinner belching of one of the crew. "I asked him to refrain," says Robert with typical English restraint, "but was told it was a sign of appreciation of a good meal.

"I told him that in my book it was a sign he'd eaten too bloody much, too bloody fast. Unfortunately I soon realised that nothing I could say was going to break the habit." And this, of course, is when the real challenge of the world's toughest yacht race comes into play. Learning to rise above the irritations and horrible habits of 14 people from completely different walks of life – some of whom you wouldn't normally even drink with – is another way of weathering the storm.



Crew: Simon Hirsh, Claire Stanley, Jon Hirsh, hostess Mandy van Zuydam, Robert Bruce and Simon van Zuydam tuck in