



BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT

Southern Protea: South African Culture in the American South

Interview with Nanette O'Grady

A young mother of three finds a way to make meaningful connections by sharing her passion for South African culture in a blog which includes the heart and soul of S.A. cooking.



Tell us a little about your family and life in the U.S.?

I currently live in a suburb of Nashville, TN, with my husband, our three kids and our chocolate lab, Sadie. Most of my time is spent creating a home and managing our day-to-day family life, but whenever I have a spare moment, I spend it creating, cooking, photographing and sharing the recipes I cook for my family on the blog www.southernprotea.com. I am constantly trying to find ways to teach my two boys and little girl about our shared South African culture, and they love to learn about all aspects of it (usually evidenced by the 10 million questions in response to my efforts). Additionally, I'm active in the South African community here in Nashville, particularly with the widely-known Tannies Teas, and am a member of the Nashville Cookbook Club, where I get to explore all sorts of cuisine by cooking, gathering and enjoying meals with fellow foodies.

a farm near the Polokwane area, I could experience the slower lifestyle of rural South Africa as well. I always loved my South African heritage and soaked up the culture, food and history every chance I got.

When did you come to the U.S. and why?

We arrived in California in September 2004. My mother is a pharmacist, and at the time, the U.S. was recruiting from outside the country. When my family got the call, we decided to take on this adventure and in the process, opened up a whole new possible future. Sometimes the transition was difficult, especially as an uprooted 11th grader, but looking back now I'm so thankful for the chance I had been given. Having met my husband here and having the family and life I do now, I recognize the immense generational impact my parents' brave choice had on us — not only on our current family, but on those who will come after as well.

Where did you live before coming to the U.S. and what did you do?

I spent my childhood in Centurion, Gauteng, where I enjoyed a beautiful life filled with all the things that make up suburban South Africa. It was a rich and stable foundation that stretched into my late high school years, when my parents, my sister and I emigrated to the States. As a child, I spent summer holidays in Gordon's Bay with my grandparents and winter holidays split between Mabula Game Lodge near Bela Bela (Warmbad at the time) and Pine Lake Resort in White River. With family in Ermelo and family friends who owned



Where is Southern Protea located?

I am based in the quaintest little town in Tennessee named Franklin, about 20 minutes south of Nashville. We are considered one of the American South's "best and prettiest small towns," so I highly recommend a visit if you're ever in the mood for some small-town charm.

How did you get the idea for Southern Protea?

It was the result of years and years of longing to share what I had



left behind in South Africa with new friends and family here. God had graciously provided a way for me to fulfill a desire to connect myself back to my first home by loving on the people here in my new home. I would be remiss, however, if I didn't mention that the name was my sweet husband's idea — he's definitely my biggest supporter and principal recipe-tester!

What has your Southern Protea journey entailed?

As I mentioned, it all began as a personal blog where I could share my experiences and recipes. As I wrote about my life as a South African in the U.S., I also began to explore a couple of different creative outlets. I started posting the S.A. recipes I cooked (all with U.S. measurements), and shortly afterwards, I started dabbling in cake baking and decorating. I decided to start selling some of my treats, and offering custom cakes, and very quickly I found myself booked up! Before I knew it, I was making celebration and wedding cakes on a weekly basis and participating in local markets and pop-ups every few months. As fun as it was, it quickly became a full-time gig and I had a decision to make. So, at the beginning of 2023, I made the difficult decision to slow down and take a hiatus from orders. Then, just recently, I announced that I will be shifting my focus back to sharing my cooking and baking experiences, rather than selling the results. This has afforded me more time with my family, a renewed passion for developing and creating recipes, and clarity of mind to continue planning and dreaming about what Southern Protea will grow into one day.

Where does your inspiration come from?

It comes from a God-given desire to connect my life in South Africa to the one I have here in the

States. I love sharing my culture with my husband, kids and friends. I also have a deep appreciation for fellowship and for feeding those around me. It is the way I like to show people how much they mean and how precious of an addition they are to this world.

What are some of your most popular and requested recipes?

I love using traditional South African dessert-flavor profiles in cakes. For instance, a few of my signature cake flavors include milk tart, Peppermint Crisp tart, and Rooibos. I also regularly get asked for the recipes for my rusks, Romany Cream cookies, coconut ice (*klapperys*) and sausage rolls. My most requested recipe, however, is definitely the Rooibos cake, which I plan to add to my site in the future! I also get questions almost daily regarding the ingredients, vendors, and businesses I use and support, so I've created a comprehensive list on my "favorites" page www.southernprotea.com/favorites.

What would you say is your motto for Southern Protea?

The original reason Southern Protea was created and still exists today will always be a strong motivator and somewhat of a motto: "Sharing my cooking, baking and hosting adventures as I navigate the Red, White and Blue with Rainbow Nation roots."

What do you want people to feel/expect when they cook and enjoy your recipes?

I want people to experience the joy of our South African cuisine and hospitality. I want them to taste those flavors that were so prominent in my childhood and enjoy the feeling of comfort and tradition that

I remember so fondly. I also want all this to be accessible to them if they themselves happen to be a South African navigating this country, by sharing my tried-and-tested tips, tricks and resources. We have such rich and unique flavors and traditions in our culture, which has been greatly influenced by our rich and unique history, and I just love having a hand in continuing this even though I'm so far from my original home.

What are some of Southern Protea's happiest moments and biggest accomplishments?

My favorite moments in this journey have been the ones where I get to share in others' celebrations. Custom cakes have been the perfect way to do so. One of my most memorable cakes was a wedding cake that I did for a South African couple here in TN. It was a rooibos-flavored cake with a beautiful protea arrangement to one side and a little African potjie topper. I just loved getting to do the set-up for this cake as everyone around me was speaking Afrikaans and their joy was infectious! Another fun moment for me was at the SAWITU weekend in Nashville. We held a Tannies Tea in Centennial Park, and I was surprised and honored to learn that my rooibos cake had received the award for best dessert! It was such a pleasure to share that with all the "Tannies" who had come from so far away to attend.

If you could choose one quote to live by, what would it be?

A verse from the Bible that has always inspired and encouraged me as I made the transition between countries and created a brand-new life here, has been Isaiah 55:12 (10 points if you can find it on my website). It gives us a beautiful picture and promise of how God works everything together, even nature itself, to encourage you on your journey home — whatever "home" might look like in the future.

"You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands."

What does the future hold for Southern Protea?

As my children grow up and become more independent, I'm excited to gradually grow Southern Protea into what I have dreamt it to be. I hope to create a space where people can enjoy this take on South African flavors and culture. I want to share South African hospitality and the traditions it encompasses and hope to have more and more tangible ways and places to do so. Until then, I'll continue to share my experience, recipes and food any way I can. Also, maybe a cookbook one day, you never know... 🌿

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www.southernprotea.com or follow along on Instagram ([@SouthernProtea](https://www.instagram.com/SouthernProtea)) or [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/SouthernProtea).

