

BACK TO SCHOOL

Our televisions are saturated with celebrity chefs espousing their culinary wisdom and dishing up gourmet delights that you at home, can potentially put together. But if you want a real hands on cookery experience, there are a growing number of luxury hotels and resorts around the world that offer just that; cookery classes in five-star surroundings with five-star ingredients and the knowledge and experience of a top quality chef. **Russell Williamson** dons the apron at Otahuna Lodge in New Zealand and Cape Lodge in Western Australia while **Nicole Stitch** discovers an exquisite Italian affair at Don Alfonso 1890 on the Sorrentine peninsula



Turn on the television or walk into a bookstore and there is every chance that it won't take too long before you come across the latest works of one of Australia's wunderchefs. It seems every chef from leading restaurants around the country worth his or her salt is beaming from the box or smiling from the printed page encouraging you to don the apron, pick up the wooden spoon and get cooking.

Whether it is Vue de Monde's Shannon Bennett with an Australian take on French classics, Neal Perry dishing up the secrets of Rockpool or Stefano de Pieri tantalising your tastebuds with Italian machinations from the Mallee, we are being urged at every turn to get off the couch and into the kitchen.

And judging by the enormous popularity of cooking shows and cookbooks, Australians and New Zealanders seemingly have an unbounded enthusiasm for food in all its glorious hues. Without national cuisines as such, both nations' gastronomy has long been influenced by migrant communities

largely of European, and in the case of Australia, Asian, origins. There has never been any shortage of talented people wishing to experiment.

With a range of climatic conditions from the tropical north to the near sub-Antarctic of the south, we also benefit from an abundance of fresh food of enormous diversity and variety.

So with the produce at our fingertips, and the vast array of highly qualified experts to lead us to the stovetop, it is no wonder we are constantly being encouraged to, and taking up, the challenge of venturing well beyond the meat and three veg staple that was for so long a familiar feature on the antipodean dining table.

But it is not only the celebrity chefs that saturate our plasma and LCD screens that are urging us to cook with a newfound gusto. For the concept of culinary tourism is also booming and we are not just talking about gourmet tours of foreign climes where you get to taste the work of others. For although



JIMMY MCINTYRE



OTAHUNA LODGE

eating out at the best restaurants has always been an attractive part of traveling, increasingly guests, particularly in luxury boutique establishments, are being offered the opportunity to not only eat in, but help prepare the dinner as well.

Otahuna Lodge, the historic former residence of Sir Heaton Rhodes near Christchurch on the South Island of New Zealand is one such property that has embraced its reputation for exquisite cuisine and aims to pass on some of its secrets to guests.

Under the guiding hands of owners Hal Cannon and Miles Refo, the 1894 residence has recently undergone a multi-million dollar refurbishment to meticulously restore it to its former glory and now offers accommodation in seven luxurious suites.

With a 13-hectare garden recognised as a Garden of National Significance by the New Zealand Gardens Trust, the Lodge grounds are a mix of manicured formality designed over 100 years ago by A. E. Lowe and rambling semi-wild woodlands that are completed by an orchard and potager where a vast array of heritage fruit and nut trees and vegetables are grown to supply the kitchen of head chef, Jimmy McIntyre.

Born, bred and trained in classical French

and English cuisine in New Zealand, McIntyre uses the garden and growing herds of livestock to produce a simple yet extremely tasty seasonal menu for guests that is taken in either the grand dining room or at the long farmhouse table in the kitchen.

He says it is the abundance of fresh produce grown on the property and supplies from nearby producers for those things he doesn't have that drive the daily menu.

'The philosophy behind the food is that we grow and harvest and cook as close to time as we can and that fits in well with the country house atmosphere of Otahuna,' McIntyre says.

'This is as far from processed supermarket food as you will get – what goes on your plate each night is determined by what is ripe that very day in the fields, the forests and the garden,' he says

That philosophy extends to the growing number of home-made products that McIntyre is adding to his repertoire including breads, cheeses such as mozzarella and ricotta, charcuterie such as bacon, prosciutto and coppa and a vast array of chutneys and pickles.

McIntyre says with such fresh produce on hand, the best way to prepare it is to keep it simple and it is this philosophy that he aims

to impart to guests during the three-hour cooking classes that are run on a regular basis according to guest requests.

'It is a lot of fun and the guests get to cook the dinner they are having that evening. They get to make the core ingredients and I finish it off. Some just watch and listen and have a few glasses of wine, others like to get their hands dirty.

'Normally they fall in love with the food so they really want to just try and capture the essence of what we do and a lot of it is extremely simple food and I really just want to impart how simple it can be. It's all about managing the flavours, preparation and teaching them as many tricks as I can.

'If simple things are done well, people really appreciate it. I always say 'don't try and overcomplicate things because all you are doing is making things hard for yourself and the chances of success are a lot less. Do it simple and do it very well and people will be blown away.'

Keeping it relatively simple and using the freshest produce are also the core ingredients when it comes to the lessons that Tony Howell, executive chef at Cape Lodge, delivers to guests on a regular basis.

Located in the southwest of Western Australia in the heart of one of the country's



TONY HOWELL

premier wine regions of Margaret River, Cape Lodge is a luxury boutique hotel that offers guests five-star accommodation in 22 contemporary rooms and suites or the five-bedroom Private Residence.

With its distinctive Cape Dutch architecture, 18 hectares of delightful grounds, its own winery and regular arts, music and cultural events, Cape Lodge is a wonderful retreat for a few days R&R but again, it is the quality of the food that has helped the property make its mark on the world stage.

With a vast array of hotel and gourmet awards, including being voted into The Top Ten in the World for Food in *Conde Nast Traveller's* Gold List for 2006 and 2008, Howell matches the best seasonal produce from the restaurant's own kitchen garden and local suppliers with current and back vintage local wines from the 14,000-bottle cellar to offer the ultimate gourmet getaway.

And of course for those who wish to take their experience a step further, there are the cooking classes. Each Saturday Howell runs a one-hour observational class that is followed up with dinner in the restaurant. For those who wish to be more involved, there are also regular three-hour classes. During these, he offers instruction on preparing and cooking two or three dishes that guests would be able to accomplish in their own kitchens.

'I try and keep it to a desert and a main

or a main and entrée so people can actually go home and prepare and present something for a special dinner. It might be a bit more challenging than what they might ordinarily cook at home but not too daunting that they will never try it again,' he says.

Like the kitchen he runs for the restaurant, he says the classes are fun and relaxed and work well because food preparation and cooking can be a great social leveller.

'Food tends to bring everyone back down to the same level and you see these highly successful businessmen doing it and they really get something out of it. The three-hour classes are great as often people who might not think they have any great skills in the kitchen, particularly blokes, create something from scratch and leave really chuffed.'

Whether or not you come away from Cape Lodge or Otahuna Lodge with the skills to take you to the top of the next series of *Masterchef* is not what it is about. It is about sharing the experience of learning something new or honing your skills with expert tuition in a relaxed and luxurious atmosphere. And if your own efforts don't quite make the grade, then you can be rest assured that Jimmy McIntyre or Tony Howell will guarantee you still partake in a glorious gourmet experience.

www.otahuna.co.nz

www.capelodge.com.au



CAPE LODGE

ALFONSO IACCARINO IMAGE: OLIVER SEIDEL



/AN ITALIAN AFFAIR

The Sorrentine peninsula, between the Amalfi coast on the Gulf of Salerno and the Gulf of Naples, needs little introduction to those in search of exquisite scenery. Long winding roads lead through enchanting villages and offer panoramic views of the stunning coastline making it quite obvious why so many Italians use the word 'paradise' for this stretch of southern Italy. And if your destination is Don Alfonso 1890 in Sant'Agata sui due Golfi, then you're in for the culinary experience of a lifetime.

Don Alfonso 1890 is both a luxury boutique hotel and a two Michelin-starred restaurant and has been run by the Iaccarino family since 1973. The Iaccarino family has been in the hotel business for almost 120 years, and today, Don Alfonso's grandson Alfonso and his wife Livia and their two sons Ernesto and Mario take care of their guests' needs and give new meaning to the terms 'Italian haute cuisine' and 'hospitality'.

As part of the luxury Relais & Chateaux hotel group, the hotel offers just eight suites and one apartment that are elegantly furnished with a mix of vintage artifacts, precious lustres and antique furniture. The attention to detail is exquisite, from the organic handmade soaps to

the colourful tiles of the luxurious bathrooms or the handcrafted linens and mattresses which the family largely acquires from local artisans. The suites' spacious balconies and patios overlooking the flowering garden, the hotel's extensive library, its private swimming pool as well as the outdoor café bar will make your stay a memorable delight.

However, it is the glorious Italian food that becomes the highlight of a stay at Don Alfonso. The Iaccarino's philosophy to preserve their Mediterranean identity with the very best produce available, yet always be open to new techniques, is tangible as soon as you enter the restaurant. The stunning multi-course menus are an excellent demonstration of their talented kitchen brigade and the exquisite local products used.

To ensure supreme standards they not only nurse a kitchen garden but also grow almost everything from artichokes, tomatoes or eggplants to lemons and pomelos at their certified organic farm 'La Peracciole', located on an idyllic slope facing the island of Capri.

To complete the picture, located underground in an ancient Roman tunnel, is 'la cantina', an extensive wine cellar and cheese aging room that will leave nothing

left to wish for, for gourmands and wine lovers alike. With an estimated 25,000 bottles from 1300 winemakers including rare Italian vintages and other stunning wines from across the globe, Don Alfonso's sommelier has little trouble selecting the perfect wine to accompany the delicious food.

And for those interested in more than just enjoying the fabulous Mediterranean cuisine, there is of course, the opportunity to participate in its creation with the cooking school offering classes covering everything from seafood to fresh pasta or the Neapolitan art of making dolci.

With a new 'cooking laboratory' in which to learn, Don Alfonso's team of chefs impart the secrets of combining heritage and innovation to enthusiastic gourmands of all levels in a variety of classes ranging from a few hours to a few days.

For many of us just to eat in a Michelin starred restaurant is an indulgence. But to be able to explore the workings of such a kitchen and gain some of the knowledge of its chefs in a welcoming and embracing atmosphere is truly a unique experience that will be treasured forever. ✨

www.donalfonso.com

