

Travel

Destinations Escapes Trip tips



Gourmet getaway

Temporarily abandoning her “why bother” and “that’ll do” approach to cooking, **Liz Porter** comes over all French at a culinary retreat on the Mornington Peninsula.

Once a month, the management of George’s B&B invites house guests to “feel free to bring your favourite knives”. The offer is not part of the brief for a murder weekend. It only applies when the luxury Arthurs Seat B&B hosts one of its “culinary retreats”. A three-day live-in cooking class, the George’s retreat is modelled on French and Italian residential cooking courses. It

caters for a maximum of eight students, and offers a different cuisine every time.

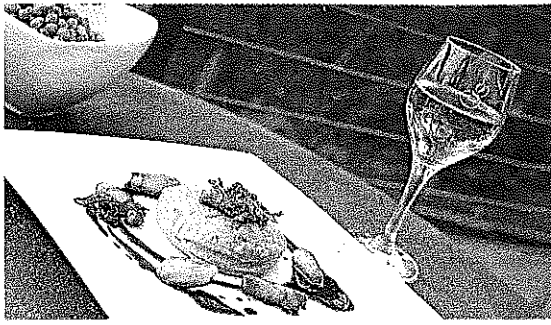
It is a sunny Wednesday afternoon when seven of us arrive for our classic French course and are greeted with an appetiser of fruit, perfect roquefort and champagne, served in a dining area with a view over the sparkling blue waters of Port Phillip Bay. I note, with relief, that my fellow students have not taken up the “knives” offer. Either they are as ill-equipped and inexperienced as I am, or

they’re incredibly modest — a beautiful thing, given that the foodie community has been accused of attracting its share of food and wine bores, show-offs and know-alls. Or perhaps they’ve already checked out George’s state of the art kitchen and spotted the large collection of Frederick Dick knives (a boutique German brand that, of course, I’ve never heard of) and have decided their own knives don’t measure up.

We have a brief chat with our chef

and instructor, Duncan White-Robertson, a lecturer at Holmesglen TAFE and a regular on television chat shows. Then, leaving him to spend the afternoon preparing a four-course feast for us, we are carted off for a wine tasting at the nearby T’Gallant winery, followed by a light mid-afternoon snack at the Red Hill Estate.

Here Max Paganoni, of the in-house restaurant Max’s, has prepared a tiny menu of perfect snacks, including a



Facing page: Liz Porter takes a hint from Duncan White-Robertson. This page: After a day's fine dining, bed beckons.

plump Tasmanian oyster served with a splotch of salmon mousse and caviar, a tiny cup of sauteed mushrooms on polenta and a shot glass of beetroot gazpacho. "Welcome to planet foodie" is the message.

Later, White-Robertson cooks us a dinner that lets us know where he'll be setting the bar for our efforts tomorrow. It begins with an entree of tapas including home-smoked lamb with minted yoghurt, herb-battered oysters with caviar, seared marinated scallops with salsa verde, and prawn vol-au-vents with chive cream. A palate cleanser of champagne and lime sorbet makes way for a main course of filet mignon with a caramelised shallot and tarragon glaze, served with sauteed broad beans, white asparagus and pureed potato.

By the end of the night each diner has six wine glasses lined up in front of their plate — all Red Hill Estate vintages that have been matched to each course and poured for us and explained by our dinner companion, Red Hill Estate's winemaker Michael Kyberd. By 10pm, most of us are ready to collapse — especially the few who wimp out and fail to get through the dessert of honey bavarois.

By 8.30 the next morning, White-Robertson is in the kitchen making thick banana pancakes and omelettes with asparagus for our breakfast. Sliding the pancake pans into the oven, he begins on the omelettes. "Three eggs, no milk or cream," he says. "The oil gets hot and soufles the egg. So only add the salt at the last minute or it will collapse."

After breakfast we tie on our George's aprons and, feeling like the clumsiest of new apprentices, follow the chef's instructions about tucking in the true

kitchen professional's regulation three tea towels.

We have a full day ahead of us, with eight different dishes to prepare, two for lunch and six for dinner — and we have to figure out which ones to start first. We pay attention to the knife-sharpening and knife-cutting lessons and listen as White-Robertson runs through the work to be done.

Over dinner the previous evening the chef had explained that he wanted each of us to "take ownership" of one dish. But there is no pressure, he says. If at any time, we feel like taking a break, we can just head out to the deck and watch from a safe distance. "You don't have to cook," he says.

As if! As they say in the AFL, every member of this group has "come to play".

A female student volunteers to make the mousseline mixture that will be piped into the cleaned calamari tubes, closed with a toothpick, sauted in butter, and then braised, in white wine and stock, in a moderate oven.

In the meantime, I have been covertly counting the number of ingredients in the buttermilk pannacotta with rhubarb and strawberry soup dish (10) and comparing it to venison pithivier (17). "Pithivier" is just a fancy word for a round, enclosed pie made with puff pastry — something

I'd love to make. But the venison filling looks like seriously hard work. Even the pannacotta recipe has a few steps — and contains a few items — that, if I were at home, would have me closing the cookbook and reaching for my "kids can cook" pavlova recipe.

For a start, it requires "dactole moulds" (whatever they are). And, this being fancy-pants classic French cuisine, both the pannacotta mixture and the fruit soup will have to be strained through muslin! To quote my late and beloved mum, who got home from work at 5.30 and had dinner for four on the table by 6.15: "Who could be bothered doing that?"

But what the hell? If I don't make up my mind quickly I'll end up spending hours slicing a kilo of potatoes into thin wafers for the gratin dauphinois. I put my hand up for the pannacotta which, because it needs time to set, needs to be started now.

"OK," says the chef. And (gulp) I'm left with the recipe. He's already showed us where everything is kept. It's our job now just to get on with it. As we cook he moves between us, offering hints and answering questions.

I find rhubarb and strawberries in one of the stainless steel fridge drawers, chop the rhubarb, hull the strawberries,

add sugar, peppercorns and water, and bring the mixture to the boil. A super high-tech kitchen scale nearly brings me unstuck as I measure the sugar, and find the scale continuing to register zero. (It's too smart for me because it is designed to weigh a sequence of ingredients, coming back to zero after each ingredient is added.) Too embarrassed to admit I can't work the scale, I do what I'd do at home and guesstimate 300 grams out of a one-kilogram pack of castor sugar. If I was a junior working for someone like the famously volcanic-tempered TV chef Gordon Ramsay, I'd have lost my job already.

Within an hour or so we're all feeling like apprentices in a busy restaurant kitchen. There's so much heat — and noise. The chopping of knives on boards. The roar of the exhaust fan. The chugging of the ice-cream maker (for the sorbet). The zoom of the food processor (whizzing ingredients including fish, prawns, shallots, dill and cream, butter and wine for the mousseline to go in to the baby calamari tubes).

The cook tops are going full blast. One student sears tuna and another browns venison, removes the meat and adds mirepoix — a mixture of diced celery, carrot and onion that, White-Robertson tells us, is a basic of French cooking and often used as a "base" for a roasting chicken. I occupy another burner for my saucepan filled with 600 millilitres of cream and 225 grams of castor sugar (weighed with the scale, now I know how to use it). I bring it almost to the boil before removing it and adding five leaves of gelatine (softened in cold water).

When my fruit soup has simmered for 20 minutes and sat for an hour, I strain it through a giant conical strainer lined with

By the end of the night each diner has six wine glasses lined up in front of them.

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a fresh Chux (the modern alternative to muslin). I then add the buttermilk to my cream, sugar and gelatine mixture, sieve that to remove any microscopic gritty bits and set the bowl in a larger bowl of ice to cool. Then the mixture goes into the dariole moulds (little plastic cups) and into the fridge to set. Later I laboriously chiffonade (cut into extremely fine long shreds) six basil leaves. The pannacotta, decanted from its moulds, will be served in the strained fruit soup, spiced and decorated with these shreds and some finely sliced strawberries.

Meanwhile, I join a fellow apprentice who is making the pithivier entree, using a set of different-sized circular pastry cutters. A small disc of puff pastry makes the base. We then place a small amount of the venison ragout mixture in the middle of it, brush some beaten egg around the edge, cover it with a larger disc of pastry and seal the mixture in the middle by pressing down on it with the non-cutting side of a medium-sized ring.

After glazing the outside with mixture, we recut the edges to make a perfect circle. It's then ready for baking.

By 4pm, we have finished our preparation. This is an hour earlier than planned, White-Robertson tells us, because he had allowed time for redoing dishes that had been burned or ruined. But we hadn't had a single disaster.

That night we sit down to eat calamari, pithiviers and the tuna nicoise, followed by a main course of duck breast, and then my pannacotta dessert, all complimenting each other furiously and feeling enormously pleased with ourselves.

The next morning, we bounce into the kitchen with renewed confidence. Our lunch dishes will include a duck liver pate and a dish of mussels with white wine, chilli and shallot. White-Robertson shows us how to debeard the mussels which, at this stage, will be closed if they are still alive, but will open if you tap them.

I make pate, sauteeing bacon, onion and butter in a pan before browning the duck livers with a bay leaf and thyme. After pureeing the result, I add cream

then sieve it through an amazingly fine strainer. Once again, no room here for my personal home kitchen motto of "near enough is good enough".

This is fine dining. Textures are smooth and perfect, and the presentation is immaculate. This means making quenelles of poached salmon mousse by rolling portions of the mixture between two dessertspoons to create the classic mini rugby-ball shape (or in my case, creating unsightly round splodges).

I had laughed when I had first looked at the schedule for the course and noticed that it finished with a "wind-down" trip to the Peninsula hot springs at Rye. In fact, after a day-and-a-half of standing in a hot kitchen and concentrating hard, we are all quite tired.

An hour or two "taking the waters" is the perfect finish to a unique and delightful three days. I leave, vowing to buy dariole moulds and round pastry cutters so I can make spicy mince pithiviers to eat at half-time at the footy. I haven't kept either of those resolutions yet. But I will.

A FEW HINTS FROM CHEF DUNCAN WHITE-ROBERTSON
 • Put salt with garlic before crushing it, to draw out the water and create a paste.
 • When making beurre noisette (butter sauce), the lemon juice you add stops the butter going any browner.
 • Beetroots take three times as long to cook as potatoes of the same size.
 • Start cooking root vegetables in cold water — it helps them lose the earth flavour. Start green vegetables in hot water.

George's, 776 Arthurs Seat Rd, Arthurs Seat
 Cost \$1300 (twin share) for two nights/three days.
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Liz Porter was a guest of George's.

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UNDER \$2000

Get a bird's-eye view of the Harbour City and the Hunter Valley with a fly-dine package from Sydney Seaplanes. Taking

off from Rose Bay, the company's new 12-passenger Cessna Caravan flies over the Opera House and Harbour Bridge, past the city's northern beaches and the Central Coast before landing at Cessnock. Packages on offer include: a day visit including flights, lunch and 18 holes of golf for \$715 per person; flights and a treatment at the Golden Door Spa for \$980 per person; or an overnight stay with flights and luxury accommodation from \$680 per person. Contact Sydney Seaplanes on 1300 732 752 or visit seaplanes.com.au

UNDER \$3000

If the thought of Switzerland conjures up no more than images of Heidi and chocolates, perhaps it's time you took a closer look. Tempo Holidays has a grand alpine coach tour of the land-locked neutral nation, with an eight-day package visiting Lake Lucerne, Mount Titlis, Berne, Geneva, Zermatt and St. Moritz. Priced from \$2418 per person twin share, the tour includes coach transport, hotel accommodation, breakfasts and two dinners, as well as sightseeing and entrance fees. Nine-day versions of the tour, which can include a trip on the Glacier Express train, are also available. Tours operate until October 7.

Contact Tempo Holidays on 1300 558 987 or visit tempoholidays.com

UNDER \$5000

Escape the crowds and head to Machu Picchu via the new Inca Trail. World Expeditions is offering a 17-day trip which includes time in the Incan city of Cusco in the Andes mountains, as well as a trek along the Inca Trail route to Machu Picchu and a chance to spend time in the Tambopata Reserve. Priced from \$4990 per person twin share, the deal includes return flights to Lima from Melbourne, accommodation in hotels and campsites, internal flights in Peru, all site and park fees and most meals. Only 16 people per trip. Departs on September 23 and 30. Phone World Expeditions on 1300 720 000 or visit worldexpeditions.com

BLOW THE BUDGET

Step back into an ancient past and see some spectacular mountain scenery in one of the world's oldest nations. Icon Adventures is offering a two-week trip to Ethiopia which takes in the capital of Addis Ababa, the castles of Gondar and rock-hewn medieval churches of Lalibela, and the Simien Highlands. There's also the option of a trek to the

nation's highest mountain (for a small additional fee). Priced at \$5500 per person double or twin share, the deal includes return flights from Melbourne, accommodation, breakfasts and some meals and sightseeing fees. Departing on November 2, the trip will include a maximum of 16 people. Call Chris Ramsey on 0439 208 303 or visit iconadventures.com

SPECIAL

Come face-to-face with some of the Apple Isle's artisans and craftspeople in an eight-day tour from The Group Travel Company. The tour includes visits to art galleries, wood design centres, woollen hand-weavers, gourmet cheese producers, the School of Wooden Boat Building and to heritage gardens. There's also an early colonial pub tour of Hobart and a full day at the largest working craft fair in the southern hemisphere. Departing on October 31, the tour is priced at \$1595 per person with a single supplement of \$595. Phone The Group Travel Company on 1800 839 337 or visit grouptravelcompany.com.au

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