

Get high on cuisine

CARON DANN discovers the fun to be had in French cooking

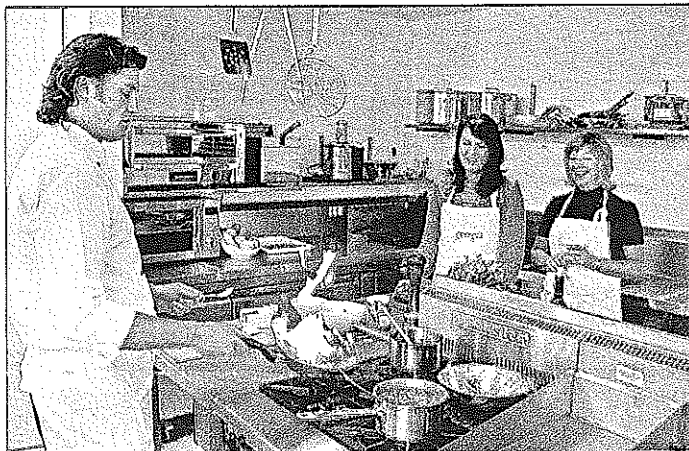
WE'RE a knowledgeable lot in Australia when it comes to international cuisines. We know Thai cooking relies on its spicy, salty, sour, hot and sweet flavours, while Indian excels with its aromatic curries and Italian is famous for its al dente pastas, thin crispy pizzas and its slow-cooked meat.

French cooking, however, is scary to the uninitiated: all those fancy sauces, the chopping that is the hallmark of fine dining and the hours spent on concocting what, in the end, will be merely a garnish.

But the results, for those who know how, are impressive and it's no wonder restaurants have to charge so much for the labour-intensive style of cuisine.

But you wouldn't try it at home, would you? Well, after doing a three-day cooking course at George's Culinary Retreat, at picturesque Arthurs Seat on the Mornington Peninsula, you might feel confident enough to do just that.

George's is a new B&B that, as well as having superb accommodation, some of it with views across the bay,



Recipe for pleasure (clockwise from top left): The Arthurs Seat retreat; sitting and eating areas; a French-style pie; and Duncan White-Robertson reveals his theatrical skills over a flame.

conducts monthly cooking schools.

Each month has a different theme or nationality: patisserie (June 20-22), ocean produce (July 18-20), health-conscious (August 22-24), Mediterranean (September 19-21) and the Americas (October 17-19) are a few of the courses planned.

With a maximum of eight participants, each course is hands-on and there is lots of personal attention from resident chef Duncan White-Robertson.

White-Robertson, 36, is known for his theatrical cooking skills and has appeared on former Channel 10 show *Good Morning Australia*, Seven's *Coxie's Big Break* and has worked with people such as Jamie Oliver.

Our classic French course started with a relaxing glass of wine and a big slab of superb Roquefort cheese — the real thing, unpasteurised and from France, that costs \$70 a kilogram.

Before the serious cooking started on day two, we were

lulled into a false sense of foodie confidence with an Italian-influenced lunch at Max's Restaurant at Red Hill Estate, including a superb soup made with local mushrooms, marscapone cheese and soft polenta. The food was accompanied by a generous selection of excellent wines, of course.

The meal was completed with a tasting of handmade cheeses from Red Hill Cheese and a talk by owner Jan Brandon.

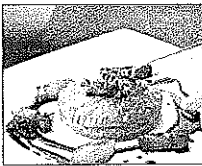
With tour guide Rob Wal-

LOWDOWN

WHERE: George's B&B and Culinary Retreat, 776 Arthurs Seat Rd, Arthurs Seat.

WHAT YOU GET: Courses cost \$1300 a person, including two nights' accommodation, all meals, drinks, lessons, sommelier, local producer and winery tour, spa at Peninsula Hot Springs.

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rants is routinely cooked this way: Seared in a pan with oil early in the day, then wrapped and refrigerated until needed. When ordered, the meat is finished off in an oven to the required level.

Day two and three were different stories and we all became chefs — or kitchenhands, depending on our experience and preference.

White-Robertson gave us a lesson in knife skills and we all donned chefs' aprons (which you take home at the end of the course).

We learned to cook and cut calamari, to make a prawn mousseline and to cook duck, venison and many other dishes in a French style.

Next day is a lunch lesson and by 1.30pm participants are sitting down to duck liver pate, salmon rilette, steamed mussels, pasta filled with scallop mousse and chicken goujon with dijonnaise.

The weekend finishes with an excursion to the relaxing Peninsula Hot Springs at Rye.

Best of all, you also get to keep White-Robertson's detailed recipes and, surprisingly, not all French cooking is hard.

The tuna niceise, for example, which I flamboyantly flamed in a pan for a few seconds, is a piece of cake... or should that be salad?

Anyway, bon appetit.



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