

Cutting a dash

THE CURIOUS COOK: Briar Jensen | September 15, 2007

IT'S hard to imagine culinary delights at New Zealand's Woodend Beach, with its sleepy 1950s holiday feel. Thirty km north of Christchurch, Woodend Beach, with its towering pine trees and dramatic shoreline, is at the end of a country lane. There's a caravan park on the left, a reserve on the right and an old kiosk where I find the Teppanyaki Queens, sisters Cat Scott-Hewitt and Anna Scott, who descended like a whirlwind on Woodend Beach, much to the bemusement of holidaymakers.



I'm here with friends for one of the sisters' regular teppanyaki classes. While we're rugged up in winter woollies, Cat and Anna welcome us to their cheery purple and turquoise brunch eatery, Wild Earth, sporting skimpy strapless tops.

"Teppanyaki is all about technique and preparation," Cat tells us over the sound of clashing steel as she sharpens a wicked-looking knife whipped from a holster on her turquoise-studded belt. Cat trained in Japan when she was 18 and is one of very few female teppanyaki chefs.

We watch as she slices sashimi from a large, fresh Akaroa salmon. "It's about angulation and minimal handling," she says, laying perfectly even slices on a plate before turning some into rosettes. We could try this ourselves, but we're thawing our hands with warm bowls of herbal tea.

While preparing prawns, scallops, calamari and venison, Cat tells us how Wild Earth evolved from their catering business, which offers gluten and dairy-free food, with fire-poi performances by Anna.

Outside at the barbecues, the morning sun gives a honeyed glow to the huge Atlantic pine tables fashioned by the sisters. Flames leap from the 350C hotplates (hence their skimpy tops). When I ask, why Woodend Beach, Anna tells me everything is just up the road: their families, organic vegetables, free-range eggs.

Proximity to fresh ingredients is also critical for Dianna Hawkins of Karikaas Natural Dairy Products at nearby Loburn. Being close to her milk supply, Hawkins says, is essential to the production of her award-winning cheeses. The fresher the milk, the better the cheese.

Karikaas was established by a couple from The Netherlands who combined Canterbury dairy produce with traditional European techniques to create preservative-free cheeses. Hawkins, a food technologist, bought the business in 2004.

She leads us into the rind room where wooden shelves hold wheels of cheese in differing shades of yellow. The colour strengthens over time and the flora of a storeroom contributes flavour. Apart from fetta, the cheeses are Dutch styles; the gouda and leyden sold as young, mature, aged or vintage. Slicing a wheel with wire (knives cause cheese to fracture), Hawkins tells us of the three gold medals she won at the recent New Zealand Cheese Awards.

As I compare the creamy taste of a two-month-old gouda with a slice of vintage at least 15 months old, Hawkins explains that her vintage cheeses are made using spring milk, which has just the right balance of minerals, proteins and fat for perfect ageing. I also learn that hard cheeses should never be served straight from the fridge, but at room temperature, and that her maasdam, a holey cheese, tastes delicious with bananas.

Lunching next day, cheese captures our attention again; this time it's cauliflower cheese at the Wineshed Vineyard Restaurant in Tai Tapu, 20 minutes from Christchurch en route to Akaroa.

Looking as if it has been plucked straight out of Brittany, the French provincial-style restaurant features a limestone courtyard, vine-covered pergolas and free-range peacocks and chooks. Beds of fragrant lavender surround weathered outdoor tables; rusty tools are fashioned into quirky sculptures and local produce is displayed for sale.

Eating inside on this blustery day, we've ordered a large side dish of cauliflower cheese to accompany our mains, and we're on our third helping. How has the chef lifted a humble dish to such culinary heights? Use of really good cheeses is the answer.

Executive chef Julie Sokolsky, puts three cheeses in her bechamel sauce, along with cream, onions, leeks, cloves and nutmeg, all topped with Japanese panko breadcrumbs.

Sokolsky's previous job was cordon bleu director at the California School of Culinary Arts in Pasadena. So what's she doing in Tai Tapu? It turns out her mother, married to a Kiwi, bought the restaurant in 2002; Sokolsky flew out to offer advice and fell in love with the place. She has a Kiwi man now, too, and will soon introduce cooking classes. It looks as if she's here to stay.

Briar Jensen was a guest of Christchurch & Canterbury Tourism.

www.teppanyakiqueens.co.nz

www.karikaas.co.nz

www.thewineshed.co.nz

www.christchurchnz.net