

INSIDE the agrarian kitchen

A visit to Tasmania's new Agrarian Kitchen uncovers a great rural location to learn some of the tricks of the cooking trade

BRodney Dunn is leading his first class of cooking students through the garden when he sees something he likes: "We'll put some of these in the salad. Have you ever had chive flowers?"

The chef and food editor is showing a handful of guests through his bountiful herb, vegetable and fruit garden as part of a bold new tourism venture, The Agrarian Kitchen, near New Norfolk in southern Tasmania.

We've already met the milking cows, two beautiful Jerseys called Jemima and Josephine, fed the Wessex pigs and come face-to-beak with a regally feathered chicken, the Barnevelder. ➤

Preparing and cooking is a central element of the Agrarian Kitchen experience



Aprons donned and all set for the veg

We've donned gumboots and are gradually filling baskets from the two hectares around the former schoolhouse at the tiny Derwent

Valley hamlet of Lachlan. As Rodney talks us through his garden we sneak raspberries and gather the produce for a three-course meal that we will prepare ourselves.

We learn that there are 52 heirloom varieties of tomato in the ground before seeking out Dutch cream potatoes and baby carrots, and picking pod after pod of peas.

With the foraging complete we retire to the kitchen, slip on souvenir aprons and line up in front of big wooden chopping boards: it's preparation time.

Five members of an extended family from South Australia have come along for the Agrarian experience. Rosemary washes carrots with her 16-year-old granddaughter, Madeleine, while her daughter Frances and daughter-in-law Allison infuse milk with sage and boil rice for vanilla rice gelato. I score belly pork while another of Rosemary's daughters, Anna, crushes fennel seeds in a pestle and mortar and my wife, Sallie, pods the peas. It's a busy kitchen.

The venue is superb. The kitchen classroom is so big that a dozen people can toil industriously without getting under each other's feet. Dunn, who did his chef training in Sydney under the renowned Tetsuya Wakuda, was working with *Gourmet Traveller* when he saw the Lachlan property for sale and quickly organised a visit.

As well as food journalism, Dunn was active in the slow food movement in Sydney but found he was yearning for a more hands-on approach to food-sourcing and cooking. The 1887 Lachlan schoolhouse and surrounding land looked ideal: "I stood here, looked out of the window, and thought, 'Can I imagine people cooking here?' And obviously the answer was yes," he says.

Just as Dunn finishes his sentence, the kitchen is pleasantly distracted by the sight of Jemima, the Jersey, pushing past her gate and raiding bluebells in the herb garden. Dunn's young son Tristan toddles over to say hello and complete a romantic cliché.

Meanwhile, the belly pork is slowly cooking in a masonry wood oven fired up the night before. The oven was designed by Tasmanian Alan Scott, whose standing in oven-craft has grown exponentially since his first brick version was built as a favour for a Californian friend in 1982. Dunn will use the one firing – from one wheelbarrow of wood – to cook and dry for three days.



Dunn's wife, Séverine, and Jemima, the Jersey



Preparation (above) and a freshly made salad (right)



We rice potatoes for gnocchi, turn on the electric ice-cream maker, sip iced tea and marvel at the pleasures of communal cooking. The word 'therapeutic' crops up in conversation several times.

Dunn calls us away from our stations: the first course is ready and we head to the dining room. The gnocchi has been kneaded, rolled, cut, lightly dusted with flour and boiled for a few minutes until each nugget bobs to the surface. Now it's on our plates after being combined with the freshly podded peas and a burnt butter sauce. Our entrée is rewarding indeed, enhanced by a 2005 Tasmanian Pinot Gris from d'meure in Birch Bay.

The troupe heads for the kitchen again and completes a chick-pea and char-grilled zucchini salad, and a roast carrot and lettuce combination while the salt-and-fennel-smearred belly pork emerges to fill the air with wondrous aromas.

Again we sit: the pork and two salads are complemented by the Pinot Gris, a delightful Pinot Noir from the same vineyard and an elderflower sparkling soft drink from Ashbolt in the appropriately named nearby village of Plenty.

With most of the work done the main course is leisurely. We talk about the slow food movement and Dunn reveals his admiration for British foodie Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, who wrote *The River Cottage Cookbook*, one of hundreds of agrarian tomes on the dining room bookshelves.

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He also tells us why he and his wife, Séverine, started The Agrarian Kitchen: "I'm a true Piscean, very romantic by nature, and there's something romantic and nostalgic about growing vegetables and cooking with them," Dunn explains. "And there's the flavour. Even though these days it's trendy to grow your own veg, I must say, for me, it's always been about the flavour; what it's like to taste a freshly picked strawberry that has been ripened to the point where it is beautifully sweet."

The Agrarian Kitchen, with its old-fashioned approach, is in for the long haul. "Being backwards is actually being quite forward," Dunn comments, and his classroom murmurs agreement between mouthfuls of exquisite gelato with sweet poached rhubarb, the final fruits of our labours.

David Scott

Hands-on in the herb garden



Crispy belly pork



The superb kitchen classroom



The source: home-reared

hens and pigs

