



Rod Dunn shows Emil Kolbe how to prepare fresh rhubarb.

The Agrarian kitchen Discover the chef within

Deep inside you there may be a skilful chef struggling to get out. The perfect place to unleash your culinary talents lies just beyond New Norfolk in the Derwent Valley, near the village of Lachlan. The place is somewhat like an enchanted garden for food lovers: lush vegetation, a peaceful pond, fruit trees, doe-eyed cows and fresh country air.

The Agrarian Kitchen, a farm-based cookery school, is both business and home to Rodney Dunn, his wife Séverine Demanet, and their 20-month-old son, Tristan. Rod offers his students the unusual opportunity to learn cooking skills from the roots up. Before you touch a saucepan, you'll be shown the beautiful garden and given the opportunity to hand-pick your vegetables, herbs and fruit to prepare.

"Since everything is fresh off the land, and because we plant many heirloom varieties, people are just blown away by the taste," explains Rod. The menu of the day may include anything that happens to be in season and ripe for the pot or the mixing bowl. A recent class prepared a prosciutto, ricotta and silverbeet rotolo, pork neck braised in

milk and forager's salad (which includes ten different lettuces and chive flowers), among other delights.

The garden, which was designed by local gardener and journalist, Paul Healy, includes a 500 square metre vegetable garden, large berry patch and an orchard with heritage apples, pears, cherries, quinces and several other fruit trees.

True to its name, the Agrarian Kitchen gives visitors a rare opportunity to reconnect with the land and to incorporate its rich, natural flavours in a seasonal feast. The best introduction to this is the Agrarian Experience, a day that begins with guests carrying baskets and collecting fresh produce, including Barnevelder chicken eggs. Other ingredients, such as wagyu beef, black truffles, lamb and wild trout, are sometimes sourced from local farmers and producers.

Once the harvesting is done, students are introduced to the large, modern kitchen with its tall windows, enormous stainless steel-topped workbench and beautiful views of the

garden. The wood-fired oven, designed by the world-renowned Alan Scott and built by his son Nick, is central to the cooking experience. "One wheelbarrow-load of wood keeps the oven going for days, allowing different types of food to be cooked long after the bread is done," says Rod.

After the work, students can look forward to a scrumptious lunch, served with the finest Tasmanian wines and local ales, or even a delicious home-made wild elderflower cordial.

Ambitious students can advance to the Agrarian Masterclass, which uncovers the secrets of successful cheese and butter-making, or teaches skills such as how to preserve fruit, bake bread and make pasta, confectionery or ice cream. In some cases, classes are taught by experts in their respective fields.

"A special masterclass is 'the whole hog', where students learn to cut up a pig carcass, and then, over two days, prepare different dishes, using all the parts of the animal, from the loins to the trotters," says Rod. The Wessex saddleback pigs, once plentiful, are now a



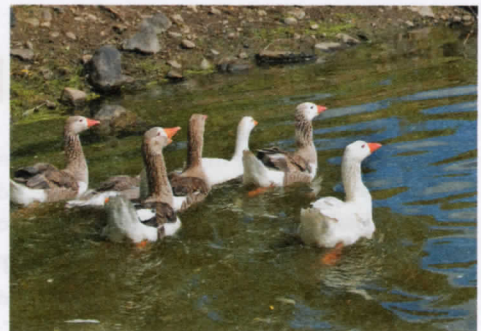
"The secret to great home cooking is simply picking the best and most natural ingredients"

Rodney Dunn

Rod and Sev



Tristan feeds the chooks.



rare breed, prized for their flavour. The meat adds a unique quality to prepared meals.

Then there is the Bespoke Agrarian, a class tailored for individual interests, which may involve excursions into the countryside.

The Agrarian Kitchen is located in a charming 19th century schoolhouse. In those early days, planting and harvesting was an important part of community life, and school holidays were sometimes arranged around hop-picking times so children could help with the harvest. The school closed at the end of the 1960s and Rod and Séverine have met some of the former students, some of whom still live in the area. Lachlan has a rich agricultural heritage, and the area is known for its berry fruits and orchards.

"Industrialisation has robbed us of many of the wonderful flavours in food," says Rod, "We feel it's time to claim back what has been freely available to past generations."

Those who have attended classes at the Agrarian Kitchen have adopted their new-found knowledge in different ways, he says.

"Whether it is starting a vegetable garden, having regular chats with the local butcher or simply paying more attention to the ingredients they use, people have found the classes give them a new perspective on cooking."

Rod's own love of food and cooking started early. "I loved eating and I was always hungry," he says with a grin.

Rod grew up on a farm in rural New South Wales. A chef apprenticeship eventually led



him to Sydney, where he worked under the celebrated chef Tetsuya Wakuda. He later developed recipes for several Australian food magazines and worked as food researcher on the Better Homes and Gardens program on television. More recently, he was food editor for Australian Gourmet Traveller magazine and he still plays a role as contributing editor:

The Agrarian Kitchen, which received a development grant from Tourism Tasmania, was officially opened in November 2008 by Tasmania's Minister for Tourism, Michelle O'Byrne. Rod's mentor, Tetsuya Wakuda, attended the ceremony. ■

For further information about the courses, phone (03) 6261 1099 or visit the Agrarian Kitchen on the web at www.theagrariankitchen.com

