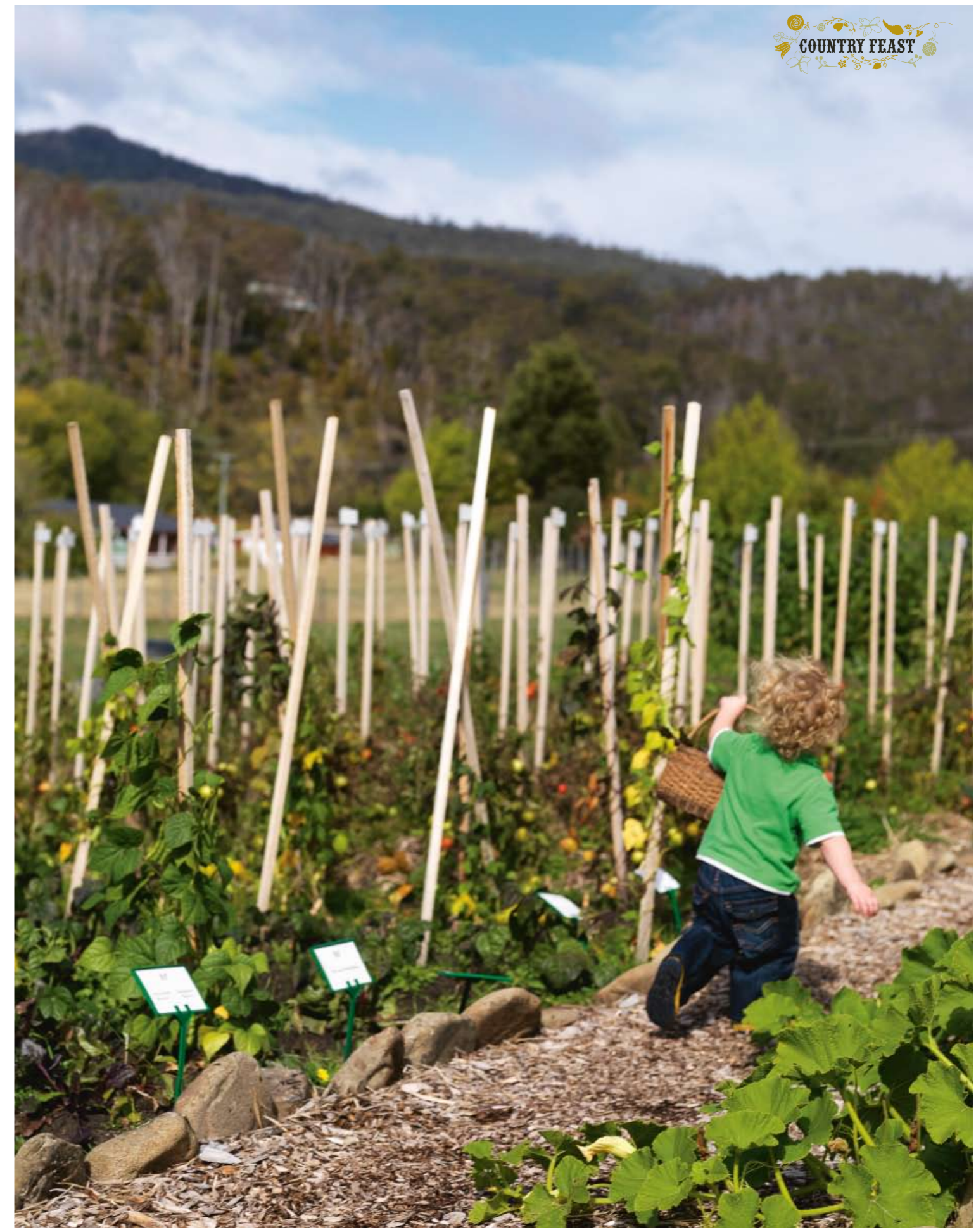


LAND of PLENTY

Australian chef and food writer Rodney Dunn left Sydney in search of an idyll, the good life in a little slice of foodie heaven. In Tasmania, he and his family found rich soil, abundant produce and a strong community

Words Paul Dring Recipes Rodney Dunn Photography William Meppem



It's selfish really," says Rodney Dunn, as he takes his knife and removes an artichoke from the centre of one of several big, spiky plants in his kitchen garden. "I wanted to be able to cook and eat good food. There's so much wonderful produce coming out of this island. I also had it in my mind that Tasmania was this pure, unspoilt wilderness and I wanted something idyllic."

So it was that two years ago, Rodney moved his family - wife Séverine and newly born son Tristan - from Sydney, where he worked as a chef and food writer, to rural Tasmania in search of a simpler life. Here, in the island's peaceful Derwent Valley, he bought a Victorian former schoolhouse in the small community of



"It's about community, bartering, sharing and the way things grow"

Lachlan, planted a kitchen garden, started rearing his own livestock and poultry, and installed a state-of-the-art kitchen with a brick-built wood-fired oven where, in December last year, he held the Agrarian Kitchen's first cookery course.

Today, Rodney is preparing dinner for his friend Luke Burgess, a chef and restaurateur who joined the Duns in relocating from the city, and Luke's girlfriend, Katrina. "Luke and I used to watch Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's *River Cottage* series and be blown away by that sort of lifestyle. He was a real inspiration for this. It's surreal now to be here and actually living the life ourselves."

Rodney is still to decide what he will cook. In addition to the artichokes, the pink-eye peas look ready to eat, so they're on the menu. As are courgettes and some of the beetroots. Many of Rodney's tomatoes are reaching ripeness, so they're also picked. Young Tristan helps, though it becomes evident that most of his harvest is being consumed long before it gets near the kitchen. It's a good job that Rodney has 60 heirloom tomato varieties to fall back on, in all sizes and colours, with evocative names such

as purple calabash, green zebra and, what I presume to be a local hybrid, Ned Kelly.

"Eight months ago, this was bare paddock," says Rodney. "We started work on it as a family. Sev, Tris and I would go up there and spend two or three hours weeding every night." There was a lot to learn. "I had a few herbs on my balcony in the city but they didn't do very well." Rodney hit the books and internet, and also received a bit of help from his new neighbours. "I've found that people who are passionate about gardening freely give up their information and advice, whether you've asked for it or not.

"It's a bit like cooking," he says of his newly acquired skills. "If you've got all the good ingredients and if you do things at the right time, a dish will come together at the end. So it is with gardening, where you prepare the soil right, you make sure there's plenty of compost, you look after your plant and take the weeds out. It's pretty simple, really. It's just about creating the right environment for it to thrive."

It seems that it's also the right environment for his family to thrive. "He loves it," says Rodney of his son. "I can't imagine him living in the city." As he speaks, Tristan is feeding the



Rodney has transformed a once-bare paddock into a kitchen garden, yielding everything he needs for his sustainable cooking school, from 60 varieties of tomato to all manner of squash.



“We have the best water in the world and this translates straight to the oysters”



King of the oyster beds, James Calvert tends to his juicy bivalves. Above right: Luke Burgess fillets a bastard trumpeter.



chickens, with such exuberant arm-swinging that most of the feed goes straight up then rains down on his head. “A few years ago, mind, I couldn’t imagine not living in the city. But you get on, you have kids, and you start thinking about more than just yourself. I wanted him to grow up and not only have space to run around but also be part of a community.”

For Rodney, notions of community, family, respect for the land and love of good food coalesce into what he describes as an agrarian philosophy. “For me, it is linked to the land,” he says. “It’s linked to producing, it’s linked to the subsistence life, it’s about community, it’s bartering, it’s about sharing, it’s being aware of seasons and seasonality and the way things grow. Eating is a big part of that.”

To British eyes, Tasmania is at once alien and familiar. There are the gum trees and red earth expected of Australia, but there’s also something greener, more temperate, altogether more European about the place (not that this would have been much consolation to the 74,000 mostly petty criminals shipped here between 1812 and 1853 when, under its previous name of Van Diemen’s Land, the island served as Britain’s most notoriously severe prison colony).

The island’s climate nurtures a wealth of fresh produce. The beef cattle of King Island, off Tassie’s northern coast, grow fat and flavoursome on the island’s rich grass, while

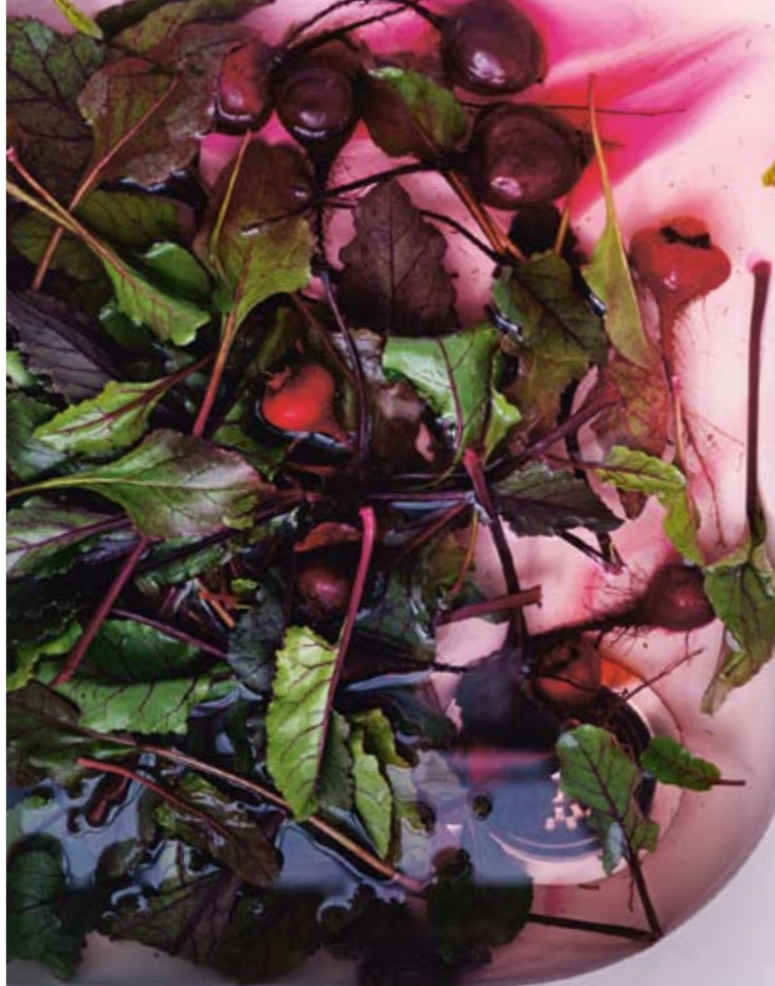
the growing wine industry turns out acclaimed cool-climate rieslings and chardonnays.

Seafood, too, benefits from the cooler climate and the island’s oysters are no exception.

Rodney took me to meet oyster farmer James Calvert the previous morning. “In summer this is the best job in the world and in winter it’s the worst,” said James, as, wearing a pair of yellow waders, he stood chest-deep in the estuary. Happily, it being more summer than winter, the Pitt Water Estuary was a scene of tranquillity. We journeyed out on James’s little boat to the oyster beds where he has a small matter of 5 million bivalves under cultivation.

“We have the best water in the world,” said James, “and this translates straight to the oysters. They’re the canaries of the sea – if anything’s wrong with the water, you see it in the oysters first. Each one filters nine litres of water every hour.” He shucks a few and hands them to us. They’re indecently plump, chewy, with an assault of brine.

The freshness of the island’s water also benefits Ashley Huntington who, with his wife Jane, brews beer on his Derwent Valley farm. The water is drawn from the Derwent River, which fringes the farm, and Ashley grows his own barley and hops, which he then brews in



Tasmania's food culture is in rude health with food heroes such as honey man Yves Cinat (above left), rare-breed wessex saddleback pigs and gorgeous fruit and vegetables.

Small-scale is big enough for Swiss couple Hans and Esther, who produce fresh and washed rind cheese with milk from their herd of 44 personable goats.



Just the one kind. Beer, singular, with no variation or distinctiveness." The handmade, unfiltered, bottle-fermented ales Ashley brews and sells under his Two-Metre Tall brand (he's a tall fella) are far-removed from VB and Foster's.

For Rodney, producers like James and Ashley are evidence of the vitality of the food culture in his adopted home state. "Tasmania has got a huge future in terms of food and, provided it doesn't do anything stupid like allow GM, it will just get better and attract more producers and more people with interesting ideas."

People like Yves Cinat, a French apiarist who moves his beehives around Tasmania to produce distinctive honeys flavoured with different plants that are in flower at different times

"The joy of working with goats is that they all have character"

a converted shearing shed before using the spent grain to feed his cattle. This version of vertical integration is not common - Ashley believes he is one of only two brewers in the world to grow his own primary ingredients. "We thought we were unique, but then we had an email from a guy in Denmark," he said, slightly ruefully.

A winemaker by trade, Ashley spent seven years in France before he and Jane succumbed to the lure of this valley. Standing on top of the hill on his property, the views stretch away for miles, over fields of hops and cherries and the broad river, languid in the late-afternoon sun. The stillness of this scene was interrupted by the raucous squawks of a flock of cockatoos. There must have been hundreds of them, which, while doubtless a concern for a grain farmer, was a special moment for a pasty European.

Four years ago, the pair bought some land with a view to making their own wine. But while vines take seven years to establish, grain crops in just one. So wine was out and beer was in. The choice was motivated not only by expediency but by a kind of patriotic shame.

"Have you tasted Australian beer?" Ashley asked. "It's a disgrace! Mono-dimensional.

throughout the island. Currently, his Miellerie brand encompasses naturally cloudy, unheated honey flavoured with nectar from the blue gum tree, the leatherwood tree, prickly box, manuka (tea tree) and wild flowers.

Or people like Terry and Nicky Noonan, whose Tas-Saff business produces saffron, from the crocuses grown on their hillside property overlooking the Huon River, that's been independently verified as Extra 1 Category saffron, which means it's top-grade for flavour and colour. Or Hans Stutz and Esther Haeusermann, a Swiss couple who farm a herd of alpine toggenburg goats to produce fresh cheeses under their Tongola brand. Like many of Tasmania's producers, they could expand their operation but choose not to.

"Having it small keeps it more personal," said Hans. "We have 44 goats and we know all of their names," added Esther,



The evening light
illuminates the garden
and diners in a rich,
golden glow

Dinner is served, and a few glasses of Tassie wine set the seal on a late-summer alfresco meal for Rodney, Séverine, Luke and Katrina.

introducing me to Veronica, who is sporting a rather fetching red neckerchief. “That’s the joy of working with goats. They all have character.”

Then there’s Lee Christmas, who supplies Rodney with the wessex saddleback pigs he rears on his land, and that Lee has helped to bring back from the brink of extinction. “There are only about 120 wessex breeding sows left in the world,” he said, when Rodney took me to meet him at the Farmgate Café, the little eaterie he runs in the pretty fishing hamlet of Kettering. “These old breeds are important. Unless there are breeds like the wessex, like berkshires, to put the hybrid vigour back into our breeding stock, the pork industry will be in big trouble.”

As Lee will tell you, the best way to preserve a rare breed is by eating it. They’re doing their bit at the Farmgate Café, as the flyers on each table announcing the forthcoming suckling pig roast demonstrate. So is Rodney, who runs a two-day course called the Whole Hog, for which one of his pigs is slaughtered, butchered and turned into salami, sausages, bacon and so on. He also runs a day course called Tomato Gluttony and general classes in which guests spend the day cooking a seven-course meal made with whatever’s good from the garden.

“People love the experience,” says Rodney. “It’s really rewarding, but I don’t consider that I’ve persuaded people to change their ways or improve their life. It’s more about it being their right as humans to be able to enjoy good food.”

Rodney’s harvest is now complete, the dinner menu is settled and huge raspberries, sourced up the road, are being baked in a tart. Luke arrives – and promptly alters all Rodney’s plans. He has brought with him not only Katrina, but a bastard trumpeter. This fish, similar to bream,



SAFFRON-POACHED PEARS

was given to him this afternoon. After a quick conference, it’s decided the fish would be best cooked *en papillote* (in paper) with heirloom tomatoes. Luke sets about filleting the bastard.

Meanwhile, Rodney gets to work on a dish of grilled courgettes with chickpeas, pumpkin flowers, marjoram and goat’s cheese. He will braise the artichokes in olive oil and serve them with freshly podded beans. The beetroots and their tops will be sautéed with toasted cumin and coriander seeds. Then there will be a salad of warm new potatoes and fresh mint.

Good food is eaten and conversation flows. The evening light is amazing and illuminates the garden, pigs, chickens and diners in a rich, golden glow. “I’d never go back to Sydney to live,” says Rodney, looking contentedly at his lot. “I don’t know anywhere else I’d want to be.”

MORE INFO

Boutique tour operator and Tasmanian specialist Turquoise Holidays can organise a two-week trip to Tasmania including a day at the Agrarian Kitchen. Ten days’ accommodation at various boutique hotels, including Henry

Jones Art Hotel in Hobart and Woodbridge-on-the-Derwent, and car hire costs from £1,850 per person, based on two adults sharing a twin or double room (includes return international flights to Melbourne with Qantas and domestic flights to and from

Hobart). Call 01494 678400 or visit turquoiseholidays.co.uk. Details of the class schedule at the Agrarian Kitchen can be found on theagrariankitchen.com. For information on Tasmania, visit discovertasmania.com. To win a Tasmanian holiday, see page 26.



BAKED BEANS AS PART OF A FRY-UP

SAFFRON-POACHED PEARS from Terry Noonan Serves 4

- 4 medium pears, peeled
- 1 litre water
- 320g caster sugar
- ½ vanilla bean
- 10 cardamom pods, crushed
- 100mg saffron (Terry, naturally, recommends Tas-Saff saffron)
- 1 small cinnamon stick
- Ice cream or cream, to serve

1 Combine all the ingredients in a saucepan, bring to a simmer and gently poach the pears for about 2 hours or until tender. Remove from the heat, let cool, then refrigerate overnight to steep.
2 Before serving, remove the pears and set aside to bring to room temperature. Boil the syrup until reduced to a sticky glaze, about 250ml. Drizzle about 2 tbsp of saffron glaze over the pears, then serve with ice cream or cream.

Per serving 339 cals, 0.4g fat (0.0g saturated), 1.1g protein, 82.5g carbs, 82.2g sugars



CRUSHED NEW POTATOES, BRAISED ARTICHOKE & PODDED BEANS, ROAST BABY BEETROOT

BAKED BEANS from Lee Christmas Serves 4, or 8 as part of a fry-up

- 250g dried white beans, soaked overnight (or 250g tinned haricot beans, drained)
- 50ml olive oil
- 1 medium onion, finely chopped
- 4 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- ½ tsp ground white pepper
- 1 tbsp tomato purée
- 200ml red wine
- 1 x 400g tin tomatoes
- 1 bay leaf
- 2 tbsp brown sugar
- Sweet or hot paprika (optional)

1 Place dried beans in a large saucepan, cover with cold water and bring to the boil. Simmer for 30–40 minutes or till cooked. Drain and reserve. (If using tinned beans, begin with step 2.)
2 Preheat the oven to 180C/gas 4. Heat the olive oil in a heavy-based, ovenproof saucepan or casserole. Add the onion, garlic, white pepper and 2 tsp sea salt. Cook gently for about 10 minutes or until soft.

3 Add the tomato purée and cook for 2 minutes, then add the wine and cook until reduced by two-thirds. Add the tomatoes, bay leaf, sugar and beans. Fill the tomato tin with water and pour into the pan. Bring to the boil, cover, then bake in the oven for 1½ hours, stirring every 30 minutes and adding water as needed. When tender, season to taste, adding paprika, if desired.

Per serving 689 cals, 27.1g fat (3.9g saturated), 26.1g protein, 72.7g carbs, 25.8g sugars

CRUSHED NEW POTATOES WITH SALAD CREAM

If you have an abundance of mint, increase the amount and use it like a salad leaf, as Rodney does.

- Serves 4**
- 1kg new or baby potatoes
 - 30g mint leaves, coarsely torn
- Garlic salad cream**
- 2 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
 - 1 tsp caster sugar
 - 2 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
 - 1 tbsp lemon juice
 - 2 tbsp pouring cream

1 Place the potatoes in a large saucepan and cover with water. Add a pinch of salt and bring to a simmer over a medium-high heat. Cook for 15 minutes or until tender, then remove, drain and set potatoes aside to cool to room temperature.
2 For the garlic salad cream, place the garlic in a mortar with ½ tsp sea salt and the sugar, then crush to a paste with a pestle. Whisk in the olive oil and lemon juice, then stir in the cream. Season to taste with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper.
3 Crush or coarsely break the potatoes with your fingers, then mix with the mint leaves. Season to taste and drizzle with the garlic salad cream.
Per serving 285 cals, 11.9g fat (3.6g saturated), 5.2g protein, 39.2g carbs, 4.5g sugars

BRAISED ARTICHOKE & PODDED BEANS

“When scarlet runner bean seeds are podded and cooked, the seeds are beautifully creamy - and they look brilliant,” says Rodney.

- Serves 4**
- 6 large globe artichokes
 - 2 tsp lemon juice or vinegar
 - 200ml extra-virgin olive oil
 - 1 onion, thinly sliced lengthways
 - 3 garlic cloves
 - 150g fresh podded bean seeds, such as scarlet runner, cannellini or borlotti
 - 2 tsp savory or thyme leaves
 - Lemon wedges, to serve (optional)

1 Peel the artichokes back to their pale leaves, halve them and remove the hairy chokes with a teaspoon. Immerse the artichokes in water with lemon juice or vinegar to prevent browning.
2 Heat the olive oil in a deep saucepan over a medium heat. Add onion and garlic and sauté gently for 8 minutes, until the onion is soft and translucent. Season with sea salt, then add the beans and prepared artichokes. Cover and simmer gently for 15–20 minutes, until the beans and artichokes are very tender. Add herbs, adjust seasoning with salt and black pepper, then serve with lemon wedges, if desired.
Per serving 595 cals, 51.2g fat (7.7g saturated), 15.3g protein, 18.2g carbs, 9.8g sugars



FISH & TOMATOES EN PAPILOTTE

ROAST BABY BEETROOT & SAUTEED TOPS

“If you can lay your hands on beetroot leaves they are magnificent as a sautéed green,” says Rodney.

- Serves 4**
- 400g baby beetroots, with fresh leaves
 - 2 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
 - 1 onion, thinly sliced
 - 2 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
 - 1 tsp cumin seeds
 - 1 tsp coriander seeds
 - 3 tsp sherry vinegar

1 Preheat the oven to 180C/gas 4. Remove the beetroot tops, wash and set aside. Wash the beetroots and divide among three pieces of aluminium foil. Drizzle with a little olive oil, season with salt and pepper and tightly wrap. Roast for 30–50 minutes, depending on the size of the beetroots, or until tender. Remove and allow to cool enough to handle. Peel beetroots and set aside.
2 Sauté the onion, garlic and a pinch of salt in extra-virgin olive oil in a large frying pan over a medium heat for 8–10 minutes or until beginning to caramelize. Add the spices and cook until fragrant, then add the reserved



GRILLED COURGETTES WITH CHICKPEAS & MARJORAM

beetroot tops and sauté until wilted. Add the beetroots, season to taste, then add the sherry vinegar. Simmer until reduced by half. Serve immediately.
Per serving 128 cals, 7.9g fat (1.1g saturated), 2.7g protein, 11.0g carbs, 8.8g sugars

FISH & HEIRLOOM TOMATOES EN PAPILOTTE

- Serves 4**
- 4 x 200g fillets firm white-fleshed fish, such as bream or bastard trumpeter
 - 400g heirloom tomatoes, cut into 2cm pieces
 - 2 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
 - 4 bay leaves
 - 3 spring onions, thinly sliced
 - 2 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
 - 8 basil leaves, torn or sliced

1 Preheat the oven to 180C/gas 4. Place a piece of fish in the centre of a large piece of non-stick baking paper. Scatter with tomatoes, garlic, bay leaves and spring onion. Season to taste with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper. Drizzle with olive oil and scatter with basil. Fold up sides and fold in or tie with string to seal.
2 Repeat with remaining ingredients and place the four parcels on a baking

RHUBARB & ROSE FIZZ



tray. Roast for 15-18 minutes or until fish is just cooked through. Place parcels on plates to be opened at the table and serve immediately.

Per serving 286 cals, 13.7g fat (1.2g saturated), 36.4g protein, 4.3g carbs, 3.6g sugars

GRILLED COURGETTES WITH CHICKPEAS & MARJORAM

Serves 4

- 120g dried chickpeas, soaked in cold water overnight
- 3 courgettes, thinly sliced lengthways
- 3-4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- 50g goat's cheese, crumbled
- 1 tbsp marjoram leaves
- Lemon wedges, to serve

1 Drain the chickpeas and place in a saucepan. Cover with cold water and bring to the boil over a high heat for about 45 minutes or until tender. Drain and set aside to cool.

2 Preheat a heavy frying pan or griddle pan over a high heat. Brush the courgettes with olive oil and char-grill

for 1-2 minutes each side, until tender. **3** Arrange the courgettes on a serving plate, scatter over the chickpeas, goat's cheese and marjoram. Season to taste, drizzle with the remaining olive oil and serve immediately, with lemon wedges for squeezing over.

Per serving 281 cals, 18.0g fat (4.3g saturated), 12.4g protein, 17.1g carbs, 4.0g sugars

RHUBARB & ROSE FIZZ

"This recipe was given to me by a neighbour," says Rodney. "My own touch was to add the rose and it's been a big hit as a refreshing drink or as a non-alcoholic champagne."

Makes about 5 litres

- 800g rhubarb, chopped
- 800g sugar
- 1 lemon, sliced
- 125ml cider vinegar
- 50g unsprayed rose petals
- 5 litres water

1 Combine all the ingredients in a clean pot and leave, covered with a tea towel, overnight.

2 Strain through a sieve and bottle. (Using clean plastic bottles will ensure there are no explosions, but Rodney prefers to use crown-sealed glass bottles.) Leave somewhere coolish for five days, then chill before serving. Serve in a tall glass with lots of ice, topped up with soda water.

Per serving 49 cals, 0g fat, 0.1g protein, 12.1g carbs, 12.1g sugars

RASPBERRY TART

You'll use just half the amount of pastry this recipe makes. Wrap the rest in clingfilm and freeze until you make this again.

Serves 8

- 200g raspberries
- 2 tbsp icing sugar, plus extra to serve
- Cream, to serve

Pastry

- 125g unsalted butter
- 100g sugar
- 1 egg
- 250g plain flour

Frangipane

- 100g ground almonds
- 100g sugar
- 100g unsalted butter

- ½ tbsp Cointreau
- 1 large egg
- 1 tbsp milk

1 For pastry, use an electric mixer to beat the butter, sugar and a pinch of salt together until smooth. Add the egg and beat till combined. Stop the mixer, scrape down the sides, then add the flour and mix on low speed. Wrap the dough in clingfilm and refrigerate for at least 2 hours or overnight.

2 For frangipane, combine the ground almonds and 5g sugar and set aside. Using an electric mixer, beat the butter until creamy, add the remaining sugar and mix until incorporated. Add almond mixture and blitz to combine. Whizz in Cointreau, egg, milk and a pinch of salt.

3 Roll out the pastry and press into a 17cm x 25cm x 1.5cm tray. Don't worry if it breaks up, just gently press it together. Refrigerate for 1 hour.

4 Preheat oven to 180C/gas 4. Spread the frangipane over the pastry base, place over raspberries and dust with icing sugar. Bake for 25-30 minutes or until golden brown and set. Remove and let cool. Dust with icing sugar and serve with a dollop of cream. ●

Per serving 467 cals, 28.9g fat (13.7g saturated), 7.6g protein, 43.8g carbs, 27.1g sugars



RASPBERRY TART