



# Lashings of indulgence

## Akaroa Cooking School

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As an avid admirer of Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, I could just imagine him bristling with delight at the activity taking place inside The Akaroa Cooking School. Curious passers-by peer into the beach-front windows of the school, where inside, there is a meeting of food lovers, local produce, sumptuous ideas, community spirit, resourcefulness - and - indulgently, me.

PROPRIETORS, ANT AND LOU Bentley, have been embraced into the close-knit Akaroa community by adding value to the popular destination with the establishment of the school. "It's a small community and you have to be careful not to tread on toes," says Lou. But the couple have launched a business concept in the town that is entirely unique. Visitors have a whole new reason to make a trip to historic Akaroa, which is synonymous with fine local produce and freshly caught seafood. Now, by partaking in a cooking class, you can fully immerse yourself in this culture by watching the fresh, seasonal ingredients become gourmet delights.

Ingredients are gathered from around the area to use in the school and the menus change with the seasons and availability. Both private and commercial growers supply produce to the school. "During summer, people would just leave boxes of fruit and vegetables at our door. Half the time we didn't even know who they were from," says Lou; a gesture which is telling of how they have been welcomed by the Akaroa residents. A fellow student confirmed; "The locals are thrilled that they've done this. Introducing something really upmarket into the area and bringing in different crowds and plenty of business through winter."

Murray, the local fisherman, supplies them with fish

as the conditions allow. Otherwise, they source it from Christchurch and are keen to let students know the best places to find fresh ingredients from knowledgeable suppliers. In the Akaroa area, the main species of fish caught include: Gurnard, Flat Fish, Crayfish, Warehou and Groper. Ant and Lou focus on incorporating lesser-known species into their teachings, insisting that it's not necessary to pay thirty dollars a kilo to enjoy good seafood. "You don't need to be buying really expensive fish to do interesting things with it," says Lou.

Ant Bentley found his passion for New Zealand food on Waiheke Island where he spent his childhood summers. Ant combines his love of seafood and the outdoors by operating the hot smoker and teaching this cooking method to his students. I was astounded by what a simple process this was, and what delicious results it produced. Admittedly, I am now a total convert. In went Warehou and Herring fillets and a mere fifteen minutes later, out came succulent and smoky fish to be added to our Kedgeree brunch.

There is an emphasis on eating seasonably and sustainably. Overwhelmingly though, their message and philosophy is clear: "It's all about having fun, and getting together with your family and friends to share good food



Top: Ant and Lou Bentley get class underway at The Akaroa Cooking School.

Bottom (L to R): Beautifully designed; dining room, kitchen and specialist shop at the school. Fish stock made from scratch with the heads of Blue Cod. The fresh, local ingredients provide vibrant colours for the Kedgeree brunch.

“It’s all about having fun, and getting together with your family and friends to share good food and a bottle of wine.”



a friend’s kitchen, swapping tips and ideas of where to source the best of what, and punctuating our time with the most delightfully flavoursome nibbles.

Several locals joined the class and I hope they won’t mind my saying that they completed the whole sensory Akaroa experience. I was overwhelmed by their knowledge of how to grow and process different things. I was in awe of the resourcefulness and combined knowledge of the group. Traditionally being quite an isolated environment, Akaroa has clearly retained this spirit of ‘grow your own’. My two meagre but successful tomato plants paled in the light of a wealth of knowledge on all things including; watercress, Peking ducks, cold smoking, basil-mint and pigeon pie. There was even talk of the pros and cons of eating Pukeko breasts. I don’t know what the legal stance is on this, but either way, they’re not threatened by my culinary adventures.

Hearing the story of how the cooking school venture came to be, you imagine that the hand of fate played a part. As a child, Lou spent a great deal of time in Akaroa. “I’ve always had a real affinity with the place, I loved being here, and every time I left, I felt really sad.” she says. Reflecting on her childhood, she remembers first being inspired by the woman who previously owned The Herb Farm. “She grew all her own herbs, made



and a bottle of wine.” The atmosphere of the day certainly lends itself to this. Even though I’d never met these people before, I felt as if I was sitting in

bread and took classes of school children to teach them about it.” Lou says. It is fitting that Ant and Lou opened the school in the place that is responsible for Lou’s passion for food.

As it happened, on a visit to Akaroa, the couple were going for a coffee and found the café closed. After enquiring next door, they discovered the café had shut its doors the previous day and was for sale. On the 21st of November 2009, The Akaroa Cooking School opened for business; just one week after the Bentleys’ relocated there. Since that time, the business has grown and continues to evolve.

The class I attended; ‘Fresh from the Wharf’ is just one element of the overall activity. In addition, Ant and Lou host corporate events for companies looking to do something a little different than just a dinner out. Corporate parties start their evening with a cook-off. Two teams are given a ‘goodie’ bag of ingredients and compete to produce the best entrée before sitting down to dine at their own private venue. Amongst other things, they offer specialty courses including; the Ultimate BBQ, pasta making, bread making, preserves, cake decorating, chutneys and jams and cheese making.

This winter, Akaroa found itself wrapped up in the Masterchef craze as the cooking school hosted a competition with 16 contestants. The competition nights hummed with unexpectedly large audiences of locals gathering to watch the contestants fight it out to be named Akaroa’s Masterchef.

The school is quickly becoming a place for residents and visitors alike to get together and enjoy good food and good company. Wednesday nights are dedicated to ‘Food in a Flash’ where a 20 minute delectable meal is whipped up from scratch and devoured by the participants who bring their own wine and a good deal of chat. For those who really want to dine



out on the social advantages of the school, they host ‘Single and Starving’ nights and demonstrate dishes with aphrodisiac qualities, followed by some great breakfast ideas.

Ant and Lou work hard to provide a huge variety of classes to interest all budding food enthusiasts. They have even managed to rope in the renowned Al Brown, to take classes. This is an enormously popular addition.

I left the class in the afternoon sated by a steady stream of culinary pleasures, absolutely inspired to become more knowledgeable about the food in my immediate environment, and committed to the integrity of sourcing it. Lou and Ant demonstrated how to create divine dishes that were simplicity itself, and recipes which I fully intend to pass off as my own for impressed guests. More though, was the realisation that many of us take for granted the wild food and quality local offerings that are overlooked for the sake of convenience. It is the message that we need to hear and we no longer have to hear it from a furry Devonshire man. Ant and Lou Bentley are spreading the good word that is long overdue and yet doing so in the most pleasurable of means.

For more information about The Akaroa Cooking School, visit [www.akaroacooking.co.nz](http://www.akaroacooking.co.nz). To see what we enjoyed during our class, see the menu to the right. ■

Clockwise from far Left: Ant demonstrates using the hot smoker with fillets of Warehouse and Herring; The students settle down for a long lunch; Right on the waterfront with a stunning outlook resides The Akaroa Cooking School; Lou demonstrates how to stretch out the ciabatta dough; The spectacular Seafood Chowder entrée; Lou and Ant take the class through making the Smoked Warehouse Kedgerec.



### Menu – ‘Fresh from the Wharf’ Class

#### BRUNCH

Smoked Warehouse Kedgerec

#### CANAPES

Gurnard Bites in Panko Crumbs with Tartare Sauce  
Smoked Akaroa Salmon and Horseradish Crostini

#### ENTRÉE

No Knead Ciabatta  
Seafood Chowder

#### MAIN

Pan-Seared Warehouse with Salsa Verde, Lemon Roasted Potatoes & Baby Fennel and Green Beans

#### DESSERT

Lemon Set Cream with Mixed Berry Compote