

Travel

## Akaroa: Escape into a foodie's fantasy

By Alexia Santamaria

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**A hands-on cooking school is a delight from paddock to plate, writes Alexia Santamaria.**



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Home-made pasta in Akaroa. Photo / Alex Santamaria

For someone as obsessed with food as I am, it doesn't get any more exciting than four days in the Banks Peninsula on a gourmet road trip.

I was keen to see whether this culinary journey, hosted by Akaroa Cooking School and Vangionis Trattoria, would live up to my foodie fantasies. Turns out it did.

Lou and Ant Bentley run a cook school in Akaroa, recently named by Lonely Planet as the fourth best place in the world to learn to cook local cuisine. Last month, in conjunction with local restaurant owner and chef Steve Bradley, they took their show on the road, leading guests on a tour of the picturesque region and buying (or in some cases foraging and harvesting) produce at source and then cooking it.

From gathering shellfish to milking goats, it was all there, hands on, paddock to plate.

Things got off to a sumptuous start. A breakfast of freshly laid scrambled eggs and Steve's hand-cured speck on toasted home-made bread. Outstanding.

Fuelled up, it was off to Akaroa Salmon to see the fish come off the boat. Because of the currents these fish are fit, giving them a low fat content.

I see why some declare them the best in the world.

Lou and Steve have very different styles. Steve is intuitive, unmeasured and doesn't look like he has ever seen the inside of a recipe book. Lou is professional and immaculate, producing stunning plates that look and taste like they've come straight out of *Vogue Entertaining*. The combination is magical and provides a good dose of fun as they cook, bickering like an old married couple.

Culinary delights included hand-made paua ravioli with a luscious beurre blanc sauce, Steve's cold-smoked salmon with cream cheese on fresh home-made bread and a divine lemon cream dessert with fresh local berries. We also cooked the salmon from the boat, as well as produce we harvested ourselves from Vangioni's restaurant garden.

We ended the day with a boat ride, seeing salmon and mussel farms (and Hector's dolphins) and then had dinner at Vangionis. Unsurprisingly, after seeing Steve cook, it was fabulous food.

The next day, after visiting a sheep farm for meat and Kingfisher Salmon to see the curing process, we went to beautiful Le Bons Bay where we ate fresh paddle crabs straight off the boat and foraged for mussels, clams, paua and pipis.

Lou and Steve barbecued hapuku and vegetables and made a beautiful basil aioli, and Ant taught us how to hot smoke salmon. I felt a bit like an extra on a Jamie Oliver show – in the bit where all his friends come round, drink wine, eat amazing-looking food and laugh a lot.

Wednesday saw us at Gruff Junction early, milking goats and sampling their exquisite cheese – try the Fendalton if you ever get a chance – followed by a trip to Kaituna orchards and then Kaituna Valley Wines for one of the best chardonnays I've ever tasted.

One of the highlights of the trip was meeting the producers. All were obsessively passionate about their wares, and many were eccentric characters (Ev at Gruff Junction had named his top milker Pamela, and if you saw her udders you'd know why).

The discussion on the way home turned to Asian food and by the time we got back, all anyone could think of was Thai curry. Steve and Lou whipped up a fantastic dish with the fresh shellfish. This relaxed spontaneity was possible with a small group.

The last day – yes I could still fit my clothes – involved a visit to Folly Farm Berries, for the sweetest, juiciest berries ever. We followed this with a visit to Robinson's Bay Olives to taste their award-winning oils.

Then it was back to the cook school for a lesson on hand-making merguez sausages and curing speck, chorizo and bresola, which was on par with anything I had ever tasted in Europe.

Then it was on to the final dinner. As if the other meals hadn't been outstanding enough, this one was the piece de resistance. Sadly, after a lot of wine and laughter, the trip came to an end.

All my foodie fantasies came true on this holiday, with some bonuses: a renewed passion for local produce and a reminder that in my busy life, taking time out for good food with great company is the best cure for modern stress.

### CHECKLIST

**Further information:** Akaroa Gourmet Road Trips run several times a year, varying in length from 3–4 days, with seasonal food. For more details contact [Akaroa Cooking School](#), phone 021 166 3737.

*Alex Santamaria was guest of Akaroa Cooking School.*

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