

Life on a
PLATE

Lessons by the sea



Lou Bentley: "There's something about the sea air. It makes you happy, relaxed and inspired to cook and relax."

It's probably not a coincidence that Lou Bentley looks out to sea each day she cooks in the Akaroa Cooking School, given the most memorable meals of her life were eaten by the ocean.

Lou and husband Ant Bentley, who together juggle the demands of their business with the needs of their young children, were mulling the idea of a cooking school in July last year when they came upon the newly vacated premises on the Akaroa waterfront, right across the road from the wharf.

"We looked at it and we thought 'wow, wouldn't this make an amazing cooking school' and that was the start of it," she says.

Three-and-a-half busy months later the school opened its doors, ready to share the skills Lou had learned during her training at the New Zealand School of Food and Wine and the passion for food they both shared.

The couple travelled extensively around the world

during a decade spent based in London and Lou says many of their travels were food driven and on occasion a desire to visit a restaurant was a good enough reason to go to a town.

One of the meals etched into her memory almost didn't happen. The couple turned up at Rio Maggiore restaurant on the Italian coast only to find it closed for a private function for the owner's family. Their disappointment obviously showed on their faces and they were invite to join in.

What followed was one of the best meals of their lives.

"We had a bowl of spaghetti with garlic, chilli and beautiful olive oil and fresh bread. It was the most simple food but it was just phenomenal. Sometimes they are the best meals," she says. "I think when you are by the sea it has a very calming influence and there's something about the sea air. It makes you happy, relaxed and inspired to cook and relax."

A cooking school is well suited

to the Akaroa township, Lou says, because of the foods produced or collected locally – fish, honey, nuts, berries, cheese and olive oil. "It's perfect."

Earliest food memory?

I grew up in Oxford on a farm so we ate home-killed beef and lamb and vegetables from the garden. I have heaps of happy memories of sitting around the table with Mum and Dad eating big roast meals, which is probably the enduring memory.

How does a typical day at work go?

If we have a lesson on then we're down in the school pretty early and putting on a pot of very strong coffee. We get everything prepared and make sure the recipes are printed out and other details and then the class starts at 10am which is when the day really begins. I teach from about 10am to 1.30pm and it's quite intense as I try to make it as interesting as I can, but it is

informal – we stop every hour and have a glass of bubbly or a chat. We have lunch together at about 2-ish and that lasts until anywhere from 3.30 to 6.30 depending on the class and how much wine they can drink.

You're on dinner duty at home tonight, so what is the family going to get?

Probably pasta or a nice salad. Actually, probably pasta with some fresh chorizo and some really nice olive oil and fresh herbs.

Do you have a food hero?

Rick Stein is probably my food hero because he cooks in the same way that I do. His food is fresh, he likes to shop at markets and so do I. His food isn't too pretty, it's all about flavour.

We definitely eat with our eyes first but it's very trendy at the moment to have foams, smears and dots on the plate whereas I'd rather have a great big plate of mussels than mussel-flavoured foam.

If you could eat anything,

anywhere tonight, what would you have and where?

It would probably be down at the beach on Le Bons Bay with some friends. We'd put a crab pot down and get some fresh crabs, collect some mussels and pipis. We'd maybe bring the hot smoker and smoke some fresh fish, have a few glasses of wine and share some great stories.

Any cooking disasters worth sharing?

One time I was cooking for some friends at home in London and I was making pasta with tuna and I put rather a lot of chilli in without meaning to. It was totally inedible. That was in the days before I was trained and knew to taste food before serving it. Plan B was KFC from across the road.

What kitchen kit can't you live without?

My lemon squeezer, my zester and my microplane.

Favourite cook book?

My favourite, my absolute bible at the moment is *Go Fish* by Al Brown. COLLEEN SIMPSON

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