



a cook's feast

Lucinda Dean takes a cooking class at Mango Hill Farm

Words and photos: Lucinda Dean

When Brisbane barrister Elenne Ford set foot on an overgrown property in Peachester on Christmas day 2002 it would have taken extraordinary vision to see the business potential of a cluster of mango trees and a rundown cottage with garish 70s décor.

Six years on, Mango Hill Farm near the Glasshouse Mountains is a certified organic ginger, mango and turmeric farm with accommodation, a conference centre and a cooking school. The renovated four-bedroom farmhouse bears no trace of its hippie past and, sitting squatly on top of a hill at the end of a long gravel driveway is Dovecote Cottage, a two-bedroom, 100-year-old Queenslander that was shipped

in from Maryborough. The conference centre and cooking school is at the rear of the stately, whitewashed main house.

The cooking school has been running since June this year and classes are conducted by a convivial German-born chef Oskar Schlapa. You certainly won't encounter any Gordon Ramsey-style attitude in this industrial kitchen, which has room to tutor six amateur cooks.

The women in the class I attend outnumber the men five-to-one but Elenne said there had been strong interest from men in the cooking classes.

She said some of the corporations using the conference facilities would also

book a cooking class as a team-building exercise. On arrival we are offered a refreshing drink and Oskar runs through the five-course menu we have been set as our cooking task.

The next port of call is the potage garden where Oskar harvests the greens and veggies we are to use in the dishes. It's a real cook's garden with chives, bok choy, nasturtiums, snow peas, shallots, red cabbage, broccoli, silverbeet, dandelion, dill and coriander all in season. There are also paw paw and kaffir lime trees and a thriving native lemon myrtle bush whose crushed leaves we use to season the barrumundi later on. You can tell the produce is organic because we have to



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Carefully wash it to ensure no grubs make their way on to the plates.

The food we cook has some European and Asian influences but it is the inclusion of Australian native spices, seeds and nuts and Aboriginal cooking methods that makes it quintessentially Oz.

"We have ethnic foods in Australia, Greek and Italian, but with the addition of native foods we can transform it into Australian cuisine," Oskar enthused. "In Italy, who would have thought of making gnocchi with paperbark-roasted kumara?"

Oskar began his apprenticeship in classical European cuisine in 1965 and worked in kitchens in Germany, Switzerland and the UK. He first visited Australia in 1971 and stayed five years during which time he met his Tasmanian-born wife, Sue.

When the couple returned to Germany in 1976, Oskar changed career tracks and studied to become a business consultant to the hospitality industry. They now live near Beerwah and run a successful trattoria-style deli in town, Pasta Divine.

Oskar conducted a lot of training in his consultancy work and, with his foodie background, the step to becoming a cooking teacher was almost a natural progression. We do all the preparation for the dishes with Oskar sharing tips only a chef would know.

Everything is made from scratch from the fish stock for the Thai-style Tom Yum Goong to the "rainforest" linguini and the gnocchi. The rainforest ingredient in the linguini is a native Australian spice. Oskar confesses he got the idea from the supplier's website, Vic Cherikoff rare spices.

I also discovered you don't need bush tucker know-how to cook with paperbark when a convection oven will do.

To my surprise, the gnocchi was infused with a campfire smokiness that lingered on the palate long after it was consumed. We ate each dish as we made it, enjoying the fruits of our labour, fine wine and good company.

As a person who cooks for one, my cooking repertoire is quite limited but what the class showed me is that you can cook good, fresh food with minimum fuss. The class was fun, educational and hands-on. I don't think anyone left the kitchen with a clean apron – or an empty tummy.

For more information phone: 5494 9329 or visit www.mangohillfarm.com



menu

Salade folle (literally 'crazy salad') with caramelised avocado

Tom Yum Goong (Thai-style prawn soup in clear broth)

Pan-fried barramundi on rainforest linguini

King Island beef with ricotta and silverbeet filled mushrooms, rocket and smoked kumara gnocchi

Fresh strawberries with Oz lemon sabayaon and organic ginger icecream

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