

Mt Difficulty, Central Otago

LAST IN A SERIES ON WINERY RESTAURANTS



Werner Hecht-Wendt, head chef at Mt Difficulty restaurant.
Photos: John Cosgrove

WITH ITS flat blue skies and dusty, boney hills, Central Otago has long been a place where people come to find their dreams. Those dreams used to consist of gold, wrestled out of the land with brutalising effort. Today, the landscape is no less rugged, but the new generation of fortune-hunters work with the land, rather than against it, valuing the area's clays and gravels that have turned out to be ideal for viticulture. Liquid gold – and rubies – in other words.

Perched halfway between Queenstown and Alexandra, Bannockburn – population 126 – is “roughly the middle of nowhere”, says the head chef of the Mt Difficulty restaurant, Werner Hecht-Wendt. But the trick is always to make somewhere out of nowhere, and that's what's happening in this area as vineyards have sprung up, both helping create, and benefiting from, the tourism that's blossoming throughout the Central Otago region.

Mt Difficulty was one of the first in Bannockburn, establishing its first vines back in 1992, and the balance of them planted between nine and 13 years ago. It's a natural progression to also establish on site a wonderful restaurant – as the Mt Difficulty winemaker Matt Dicey says: “A wine is to complement not to compete with food. They are living partners.”

In the stories we tell ourselves in this jigsaw nation of ours, Werner's is a recognisable one: he grew up in and trained in South Africa, moved to London, travelled and worked in Europe, met a Kiwi girl from Invercargill and came to check out her homeland. He loved it and they've stayed.

Two years ago he came to Mt Difficulty to help turn what had been a cafe into a bistro restaurant. He lives in Queenstown and commutes to Bannockburn each week day, relishing the 40-minute drive. “I arrive at work relaxed, and I'm relaxed again by the time I get home,” he says.

“It's a beautiful drive. It's never the same – always different. The sun is different, the colours are always changing. There's always something.”

Then, when he steps out of his car, the heavy smell of wild thyme fills the air. These influences have found their way into his cooking. His recipe for duck, for instance, involves cooking the bird slowly for two hours in pinot noir and wild thyme, until the breast is almost separating from the bone. He then pan-fries the meat in duck fat and serves with raspberry and cassis sauce. “That's my bestseller,” he comments.

Being conscious of the colours in his local environment has made Werner more interested in adding colourful touches to his dishes. The rolled pork loin on the current menu is reflective of the Central Otago seasonal tones, for example – the brown/orange crackling is like the surrounding hills; the red and yellow pears replicate the warm autumnal hues.

The wild foods of the region take their turns on his ever-changing menu: wild boar terrine, wild venison from Fiordland and Milford, local rabbit and hare. “I find that New Zealanders are interested in these foods and willing to try something different,” Werner says.

A significant proportion of his clientele are tourists and, with his open-plan kitchen giving them a literal window into his world, Werner often finds himself in conversations with tourists who love to make links between the places they've visited and the food being cooked for them.

“Fresh fish is something that is a bit difficult where we are,” he says. “We can get fish within 24 hours from Christchurch, but we tend to use more salmon – either sea-run salmon from Milford, or farmed salmon from Aoraki Mt Cook. Most tourists know Mt Cook, so they know just where

the salmon have come from, and so I get the story of their journey. Or, if they're heading that way, I like to think they'll remember their meal when they pass Mt Cook.”

Werner uses Central Otago olive oils to work in harmony with overseas oils. “Olive oil is pretty new to the market in New Zealand. It has a very intense flavour and so I use it sparingly. For everyday use I think it's slightly too expensive.” But with its often dark colour, it looks good drizzled in combination with another, lighter olive oil from his suppliers Mercato and Mediterranean Market, both from Christchurch.

In London, he says, he often worked in kitchens where you couldn't even see outside and where most ingredients were sourced from throughout Europe. He loves the environment here, and customers' interest in where their food comes from, and their enthusiasm for eating local produce.

A talking point in summer with customers is Werner's herb and vegetable garden on the terrace of the restaurant. Werner has expanded what was a simple herb garden to include many fresh herbs and vegetables, which he incorporates into his dishes.

Werner's local fruit and vegetable grower is David White from Goodies from the Gorge. “I can go in the morning and watch them pick the greens out of the ground. Two hours later, I'm serving them. You can't beat that,” he says.

– Margie Thomson

Next week: pies and pasties for Father's Day

DUCK WITH RASPBERRY AND CASSIS SAUCE

Serves 2

INGREDIENTS

1 whole duck
500ml Mt Difficulty Pinot Noir
1 star anise
1 cinnamon stick
500ml water
couple of bay leaves
handful of wild Otago thyme
4 peppercorns

METHOD

Place all of the above into a casserole/roasting dish and cook covered at 180deg for 2 hours. Turn the duck over after one hour. While the duck is cooking, prepare the sauce.

Remove duck from the pan and set aside to cool. When cool enough to handle, cut with scissors down the backbone, between the breast bones. Debone by pulling the bones gently without tearing the skin.

Place duck back in a frying pan with a little duck fat or oil. Place duck skin-side down and place in a preheated oven for 10 to 15 minutes at 180deg. Remove from oven and rest for 5 minutes. Cut duck into 4 pieces. Place onto plate with sauce over the top, and sprinkle with fresh raspberries if available.

Place vegetables alongside – at Mt Difficulty we use flat mushrooms, griddled courgettes and steamed broccolini. Top with salad leaves and at the last minute grate over parmesan cheese. Enjoy!



RASPBERRY AND CASSIS SAUCE

INGREDIENTS

100g fresh or frozen raspberries
400ml water
¼ cup caster sugar
100ml Prenzels
Cassis Concentrate (theprenzels.co.nz)
cornflour

METHOD

Bring all ingredients (except the cornflour) to the boil, and simmer for 15 minutes. Puree with a blender and then strain through a sieve, pushing the pulp through with the back of a ladle. Return to the heat and thicken with cornflour to desired thickness.

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