

LOCAL BOUNTY

Wild about the catch

Justine Costigan joins five city chefs on a rare foraging mission on Flinders Island.

IT'S almost 6am and the fishing boat waiting to take us to the northern coast of Flinders Island is moored at the river mouth. The sun has only just begun to rise and the water is still and silvery grey. A dinghy ferries us to the boat and we share the journey with a dead wallaby whose paws emerge stiffly in a final salute from the large plastic bucket he's been unceremoniously dumped in.

We're not sure why the wallaby is joining us to catch crayfish but, like all our adventures on Flinders Island so far, it's bound to be interesting.

If five chefs (and a few extras) getting up at dawn to catch some of the best crayfish any of us have ever eaten seems a touch excessive when a simple call to a decent fishmonger with good connections would do the trick, you're missing the point. Understanding and experiencing the relationship between the product and its source is the chefs' holy grail.

And on Flinders Island, a place

many mainland Australians would have trouble finding on a map (north-east of the Tasmanian mainland), the chance of experiencing an extraordinary food moment is greater than most.

Wild, pristine, sparsely populated by people but bursting with fish, seafood, seals, mutton birds, wallaby, lamb, beef, possum and Cape Barren geese, Flinders Island is a source of produce unlike any other. And what's most amazing is that so few people seem to know anything about it.

One man who does is publican Peter Moore. A qualified pilot, Moore has been flying to Flinders Island to source fresh produce for decades. Now co-owner of Melbourne's Royal Mail on Spencer, he's been introducing mutton bird, wallaby and Cape Barren geese to curious customers at regular "roadkill" dinners for four years.

When Danny Neate did a stint as head chef at Moore's pub, he was introduced to the island's produce.

The experience of those flights across Bass Strait stayed with him, and since moving to head up the kitchen at Brown Brothers' Epicurean Centre in Milawa, Neate has been keen to host a dinner based around the island's wild seafood and game and the produce of his new home town.

The prospect became a reality when three mates from apprenticeship days — along with Phil Gaby, Neate's successor at the Royal Mail — agreed to help find and cook the food.

Neate met Frank Camorra, Martin Beck and Matthew Germanchis at Guy Grossi's Cafe Grossi in South Yarra in the mid-1990s. Beck and Germanchis later joined Camorra at MoVida, though Germanchis has since moved on to head the kitchen at Prahran's Pandora's Box.

Despite their hectic schedules, Neate says all four chefs leapt at the chance to see wild produce in its natural environment and to create a one-off menu.

Squeezed into three tiny, single-engine aircraft, the journey to Flinders Island is heart-stopping and not just because of our pilot's idea of humour (What's a second engine for? To take you to the crash site). Leave mainland Victoria and suddenly the emptiness of the open sea is startling. Uninhabited outcrop-

Wallabies lounge . . . unaware we're eyeing them for a pie.

pings and islands dot Bass Strait and it's easy to see why the rocky islands around here have been responsible for many a shipwreck since Europeans first sighted them in 1773.

Flinders Island is just 62 kilometres from north to south, dominated by mountains sharply falling to scrubby bush, empty white

sand beaches and turquoise sea. Buildings are scarce, housing fewer than 700 residents. It is one of 52 islands that form the Furneaux group, and there are more plant species than people. And even more animals. Wallabies cockily lounge on the grass near our accommodation, unaware that we're eyeing them off for a wallaby pie. Locals say you can't drive safely at night without hitting one or two — and we believe them.

But on our first night it's the island's Cape Barren geese we're most interested in. After a magnificent dinner cooked by local chef Ken Stockton, including just-caught local flathead, garfish and scallops followed by Flinders Island beef, we meet Chris Rhodes, a professional guide who shoots Cape Barren geese as part of the island's goose management program. A John Wayne type, with big hands, weatherbeaten skin and a laconic conversational style, he looks a little askance at this group of inner-city chefs and their entourage.



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The Wild Harvest dinner menu

Salpicon de Marisco (chilled seafood salad)
Crayfish, prawns, scallop, tuna with almond skordalia and green almonds
Martin Beck

Slow-cooked wallaby
Wallaby with broad beans, olives, wild fennel, semi-dried tomatoes, young garlic and fennel pollen
Danny Neate

Salt-crusted lamb rump
Lamb rump with scotch broth, organic pearl barley, green almonds and mache
Matthew Germanchis

May y Montana (ocean to mountain), above
Cape Barren Goose, surf clams, white asparagus, cannellini beans, young garlic and verjus
Frank Camorra

Tomme, Aged Milawa Blue and King River Gold
Apple and pear ravioli with walnut salad
Phil Gaby



Flinders Island (top) and the crayfish that didn't get away with (from left) Mathew Germanchis, Frank Camorra, Danny Neate, Phil Gaby and Martin Beck. PICTURES: SIMON PYNT

many minutes. The noise is a rude blast to the ears but the geese are killed instantly and retrieved without fuss. In our sanitised supermarket world it's a stark reminder that the living creatures we eat have to be killed first. Back at Rhodes's home base, he takes out his knife and fillets the geese on the spot. Expert, fast and pragmatic, Rhodes reveals a dark and bloody goose breast.

For Camorra, whose job it is to create a main course of geese for more than 100 guests the following night, it's especially fascinating. Not only has he never seen a Cape Barren goose, he's also never tasted one. The following morning he'll have to improvise — and hope the Spanish-style, slow-cooked beans he plans for an accompaniment work.

Next day, we're out on the ocean with our dead wallaby (he's eventually butchered and refrigerated to be used as bait, to everyone's relief) and watching professional fisherman Jack Wheatley and his son

Chase raise crayfish baskets from the clearest, most pristine waters I've seen. Beck will turn the crays into a salpicon de marisco, a cold Spanish-style salad served with a cool, almond gazpacho. But first they're loaded live into foam containers and bundled on to the planes.

Two hours later in Milawa, one makes a dash for freedom on the airstrip but is quickly captured before it makes it to the vines.

Also on the plane is the rest of our Flinders Island bounty: lamb, lightly touched with a salty flavour from the seawater that soaks the pasture; fresh wallaby (not from the boat!); a couple of mutton birds frozen from this year's season; and those geese.

The next day, the five chefs will create an extraordinary menu from their wild produce, a meal their guests won't forget.

Justine Costigan travelled to Flinders Island courtesy of Brown Brothers.

No wonder. To his dismay none of us has a shooting licence. I suspect most of us feel relieved that we only have to watch, but we're fascinated and slightly intimidated by Rhodes's expertise nevertheless.

After a 20-minute drive over rocky

and bumpy paddocks, we reach the wetlands where the geese come home to roost each night. Flying in flocks of half a dozen or more, they sweep in at dusk over the horizon from the beach. Rhodes pulls out his shotgun and nabs half a dozen in as



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