

New Zealand Culinary Challenge

My name is Luke Fouracre and last November I was lucky enough to win the NZ/UK Link Foundation's UK Culinary Challenge. My prize was a work experience trip to New Zealand for 4 weeks. Hopefully I can capture just how amazing both the country and the food really are.

Week 1 – Auckland

I started my trip in Auckland in the North Island. After landing early in the morning I spent my first day sightseeing. I wandered the streets on a hot autumn day, taking in the amazing Sky Tower and Sky City complex, as well as the Viaduct Harbour - international stage built for the Americas Cup. After a lunch at a riverside restaurant called Soul accompanied by Angela from NZ's Hospitality Institute (HIS) and an afternoon tour of Auckland, jet lag kicked in and I called it a night.

The next day I met with Bernard Bernabe, Head Chef at Peter Gordon's restaurant, Dine. The restaurant is located in the heart of Auckland's Sky City hotel complex. After a quick tour of the kitchen and the hotel itself I put on 'whites' to work alongside the chefs getting ready for evening service. The chefs took me through the menu, sliding me dishes to taste all night. I was lucky enough to get a plate of the famous braised Wagyu short rib with miso and cucumber! I was very fortunate that this was my base for the week!

I also got the opportunity to work at Orbit, a revolving restaurant at the top of the Sky Tower. The guests literally get a 360 degree look at the Auckland skyline. As the sun went down and the buildings lit up the views were unrivalled. No wonder that the restaurant serves over 200 customers a night.

My next day was spent in the hotel kitchens and patisserie - a huge operation catering for the both hotels. I got real hands on experience in making huge batches of breads, cakes, and other items for the restaurants. This was a great insight into a large scale operation.

After a few more services at Dine and my introduction to Hokey Pokey ice cream (crunchy honeycomb flavour), feijoas (fruit) and kumara (root veg), among other things it was my final night. After a lunch service and night on the town, I had the morning to walk round Albert Park as well as (thanks to Mark Wylie, Exec Chef of Sky City) doing the base jump from the Sky Tower. After

the adrenalin rush of falling 630ft, I sat down to dinner at Dine, with a range of amazing dishes in front of me. It was a perfect end to my week in Auckland.

Week 2 – Hawke's Bay

As the plane came into land at Hawke's Bay I couldn't take my eyes off the beautiful landscape. Although this area to the south east of Auckland is only a 50 minute flight from Auckland I felt like I was in another country. As I stepped off the plane and looked around (nothing except for mountains and vast landscapes) I felt this week would be a different experience completely.

I took a taxi to Havelock, a small town close to where I would be working and was taken out in the evening by Glenn from the HSI where I met a few local chefs and we chatted about food over a beer.

The next morning I was met by Jared Maloney and Robbie Greene from Firstlight foods. Firstlight specialise in high quality New Zealand venison and Wagyu beef. The company prides itself on only accepting the highest quality meat from selected farmers in the country. Firstlight owns 50% of their farmers' businesses and aids them with everything they need from vets to technology support.

I visited my first farm, Forest Gate, where farmer Duncan breeds Red deer and Wagyu beef on his 1,500 acre farm. As we drove through the paddocks (NZ for fields) we discussed the problems arising from a lack of rain and how this affects the animals' food supply. Duncan keeps one paddock untouched to allow the grass to grow whilst the animals are in others. We watched as they were rounded up and put into a shed to be weighed, sprayed and re-tagged. Then we made our way up the hill to visit his herd of Wagyu cows. A large herd was separated into one year olds, two year olds and breeders. The breeders are kept as they have a near perfect rating in the science of Wagyu genetics, all with the intention of breeding better animals in the future.

I was then met by Executive Chef Leighton Ashley of Craggy Range and Terroir Restaurant. We drove through the mountains to reach the entrance to the winery. Craggy Range estate is in a really picturesque setting carved into the mountains of Hawke's Bay. It has vineyards, a winery, restaurant, and vegetable gardens all within the grounds.

I got changed and was introduced to the chefs of the restaurant. After a chat we went out to the vegetable patches to pick some artichokes, cabbages and herbs for the kitchen. Looking around at the landscape it made it very difficult to imagine doing this in the centre of London! After lunch service we went out to the stream to pick watercress for the evening service.

I was taken to the wine room for my first experience of wine tasting. As the glasses were lined up we discussed wine tasting and different matches and ideas. I looked at a long list of grape varieties and started tasting from a light white wine all the way through to a deep rich red. Sipping the wines gave me a real taste of Craggy Range and what it aims to do. The wines were incredible and I was very lucky to have a taste of some really good vintage wines.

After learning the dishes and working the wood fire section of the kitchen I got to work a busy Saturday night watching and tasting what the chefs produced. Earlier in the day I had been taken out to Te Mata Peak to see the views of the area. What can I say? As each week went by I desperately tried to find some more adjectives to describe the beauty of the countryside but I will have to stick with 'amazing', 'beautiful', 'stunning' etc!!). Looking at the beauty of the area - rolling green hills with the sun peaking through the mountains - I really didn't want to leave.

Week 3 – Wellington

On my arrival at Wellington Airport I was picked up by Mark Horton, the Chairman of the NZ end of the NZ/UK Link Foundation. I was to stay with him and his wife Gill at their house in Oriental Bay, Wellington. Wellington is the capital city and its suburbs look quaint and homely and there is real community feel around. Mark gave me a tour and pointed out a few places to go and see later.

The next morning I started at Martin Bosley's restaurant at the Yacht Club. It's a contemporary style restaurant that pushes the boundaries of food and flavours in a classical setting overlooking the historic harbour in Wellington. As I arrived Martin was getting his stuff together ready for a television appearance. I was greeted by him and Steve, the Head Chef, and shown around.

Over the next week this would be my base and I am shown numerous styles and techniques as well as some great flavour combinations and ideas. As the

week progressed I was given the opportunity to create an amuse bouche for the restaurant and had the chance to play with such great ingredients as the native NZ Bluff oysters.

Whilst in Wellington I also got the chance to explore the City, its cultures and some of the lovely waterside views as well as the botanical gardens. I was invited to meet Manfred, the Executive Chef at the New Zealand Houses of Parliament, where I was shown around the banqueting kitchens and the fine dining restaurants, as well as having a tour of the building itself.

On Saturday morning I met up with Philippa Falloon of the NZ/UK Link Foundation, who had been my key contact in NZ - as well as my saving grace on many an occasion. We went to look around the local market - a huge collection of stalls selling everything from cheese and sausages to fresh everyday groceries. We stopped at the harbour front and walked down to a fishing boat where three men were busily gutting and filleting fish before a crowd of people. The boat had just arrived and a hoard of customers had already descended to get the produce caught that morning: fish straight off the boat, fresh from the water and prepared however you wanted it. It seemed so simple yet it was completely new to me and something that made me happy.

We walked into the indoor market with stalls of people selling artisan products. This part of the market is also run by my Chef/mentor for the week Martin Bosley. There was fresh breads, olive oils, jams/chutneys and fruit presses all being sold by individual and proud retailers. It seemed like a foodie heaven and the people of Wellington really were passionate about their food.

Before I move on to my fourth and final destination, I was invited to observe the judging at the Wellington food show held at the Westpac Stadium. I was introduced to the panel of judges and Anita (Executive of the NZ Chefs Association). We discussed judging criteria and also why I was there before heading to the judging areas. This gave me a new insight into how dishes are looked at by other people, especially the critical eyes of yet another NZ chef. After a long day judging and a walk round the show I was invited out by the chefs for some food and a few beers at the Green Parrot – a Wellington institution. After dinner we headed to a few bars talking food, wine and New Zealand/UK comparisons. It was a great night to end a great week.

As the week drew to a close, I'd found another place I really didn't want to leave behind.

Week 4 – Queenstown/Glenorchy and Christchurch

Queenstown was my first experience of the South Island and it started with a drive across the country. Brendon Downer, Executive Chef at Blanket Bay Lodge picked me up in a 4x4 and within the hour we were driving across rocky terrain and steep hills to get to a few of the many stunning views I was to experience this week. We looked over at the mountain streams and waterfalls and the whole place seemed surreal, like a photo, an almost eerie reflection of some “paradise” postcard. I was in awe, and that was just the start.

Queenstown is a quaint area, filled with narrow streets and stores and a must destination for anyone into extreme sports. Skiing, sky diving and bungee jumping –and more - can all be done here. We walked the streets and stopped at a local store to collect some ingredients for the restaurant. Afterwards we headed to the supermarket to get “supplies” as I was told I wouldn’t get many more opportunities to. After a 50km drive through the middle of nowhere and seeing not a single other car on the road we arrived in Glenorchy, the town I would be staying in with a few of the chefs. This was a totally new experience with no street lights and just one shop open to the 300 or so locals. It was a beautiful area, set in a valley that was flanked by huge mountains either side. We dropped off the supplies and headed for Blanket Bay.

Blanket Bay is a luxury lodge for visitors wanting an exclusive experience in the South Island. The resort itself is secluded from view and as we drive up to the gates (I would have easily driven past them) they opened to let us in. We drove down a road and I’m lean out the window, eager to see the place. It’s cleverly tucked away down the hill right on the waterfront and as it finally comes in to view (after the 1km driveway!) I’m gobsmacked. An absolutely stunning building comes into view with big wooden beams and large stone walls. We walk in and the decor is stunning: big oak floors, brick work fireplaces and floor-to-ceiling glass windows giving a view of the river and mountains opposite. I was shown around the rooms, the gym, sauna, games room and the private and a la carte dining rooms.

Next I was greeted by the chefs and Brendon explained to me the food side of the operation. The menu changes everyday here to prevent diners and guests getting bored with the same options. I could overhear two chefs discussing menu ideas for the evening and working out whether some of the guests have

already had similar dishes. The attention to detail was incredible and as the night went on the food they served was equally so.

A few more shifts went by before Steve (Head Chef) took me for a drive into the woodlands and showed me some of the most beautiful, untouched areas I have seen. As we head back we also took his power boat out for a spin.

Cooking in this kitchen was exciting, utilising what was in season as well as what was available. Being so remote daily deliveries were very difficult. The chefs were constantly bouncing ideas off each other and the food really reflected the setting: earthy, natural, yet refined. As my final day approached I quickly grabbed the opportunity to spend another night in the kitchen listening to the chefs' imaginations at work.

I left for Christchurch early the next morning leaving behind one of the most amazing places I have ever seen.

My stay in Christchurch was short and sweet and more of a stop-over and walk round than an actual visit. The heart of the town was busy. It has a lovely square with an old Church and modern sculptures, something not too dissimilar to that of Europe's grand cities. The suburbs were pretty and the houses individual and quaint. I loved the different styles of shops, houses, cafes and bars all next to each other but all so different. Seeing the trams pass through one of the shopping centres and streets onto a network of tracks was intriguing and something I'd love to see again. I visited the church which paid homage to servicemen and people of the past who had helped to build it. I was getting ready to leave for Auckland and home, and this seemed like a great place to tie up an incredible four weeks.

Over the four weeks I spent in New Zealand, I got a taste of everything. I saw modern inner city style and Pacific Rim fusion as well as some real home cooked style food. I travelled to five key parts of the country for food, history, views and experiences. This has opened my eyes to a world of food and flavours and people. It's made me realise that there are millions of combinations of textures, flavours, colours and presentation styles available to the modern chef. I got to meet some incredible people, do some incredible things and most of all I got to eat, taste and smell the food of New Zealand. I even got to try real Hokey Pokey ice-cream!

I also just want to say thank-you to everyone on both sides of the world who made this a reality for me. All the hard work you did into making this trip for me will never be forgotten.