

FIFTEENTH SYMPOSIUM OF AUSTRALIAN GASTRONOMY

Crayfever season

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Potted crayfish and toasts
Photo: *Marina Oliphant*

Truly fresh seafood is one of the simplest and greatest luxuries.

THE 15th Symposium of Australian Gastronomy was held in the Huon Valley in Tasmania. It was the end of autumn. Mist hung over the valleys, the hills were green and the fields were a glorious landscape of laden apple trees - crimson, scarlet and gold. Wood smoke curled from the chimneys of the house. Imagine a village called Snug. Says it all really.

The theme was "Beyond the Supermarket - learning to overcome gastronomic poverty". Big questions were debated: "How is it that we are divorced from the joys of growing our own food and the rhythm of the seasons?" and: "How can all people be educated gastronomically, to help

banish food poverty, so that they feel they have real food choices and are not just slaves to the global commoditised food economy?"

We all had opinions, no one claiming to have the one solution.

The food at the symposium was interesting, delicious and from the immediate locale, including fresh seafood.

In 1792, French explorer Bruni D'Entrecasteaux arrived in Recherche Bay and planted a vegetable garden that, journals record, grew sorrel, cress, chervil, samphire, celery and cabbage. One of our lunches sought to include as many of these ingredients as possible. We mused on what might have happened had the French, rather than Matthew Flinders, circumnavigated the mainland first.

Every food writer goes on about fresh seafood. So do the supermarkets. There seems to be fresh and then there is fresh. One day we had a crayfish sandwich for lunch. More than 50 foodies gathered on a jetty looking onto lapping water, pleasure boats and fishing craft. The crayfish was the finest I have tasted. When I asked about this miracle, the answer was a shrug and the explanation that it had been caught that morning.

The chunks of soft, sweet meat, beautifully and discreetly seasoned with herbs and a touch of proper mayonnaise (I think), were bursting from thick slices of freshly baked bread. What we all know as crayfish is correctly known these days by the marketing name of rock lobster.

I don't think I can reproduce that sandwich without the help of an obliging crayfish fisherman. But it did remind me that many years ago I had tasted a delicious potted crayfish, also in Tasmania, at the Woodbridge Hotel.

Potted shellfish seems to be a very English treat, rarely seen here, yet it makes a simple and luxurious starter.

We also had a scallop pie. Tasmania is famous for its scallop pies. Some taste like rubber balls in glue. This baby pie was in a silky veloute sauce and the crust was buttery and crisp. Delicious.

I stayed in a beach shack where the owner had left us a gift of home-smoked salmon. Apparently, whenever one of the salmon farm enclosures is breached, either by a storm, a seal or some other hazard, the result is a fine catch of salmon for the locals. There is a man who will clean, fillet and smoke these escapees as required.

We enjoyed this fine Tasmanian hospitality and the salmon on toast in front of a log fire looking over Little Roaring Beach.

Potted crayfish and toasts

(As prepared at the Woodbridge Hotel many years ago.)

INGREDIENTS

1.2 kg living rock lobster (to yield about 500g meat)
100g unsalted butter, melted
1 tsp mace, finely chopped*
pinch freshly ground white pepper
salt to taste
clarified butter to seal

METHOD

Put the rock lobster in the freezer for an hour or ask your fishmonger to oblige (it will deteriorate quickly, hurry home and have all the other ingredients ready).

Drop lobster into well-salted boiling water - or, better still, sea water - and simmer for 12 minutes.

Remove and cool in fresh water for five minutes.

Drain away liquid and tear tail away from head.

Pick off all the meat, including the yellow mustard and the leg and claw meat.

Extract the intestinal thread that runs down the centre of the tail and chop the tail meat into medium-sized chunks.

Stir in all the other bits of meat and mustard, cover and refrigerate.

Chop the mace very finely.

Add it to the pan with the unsalted butter and salt and pepper.

Heat until just melted and stir through the chopped crayfish meat.

Pulse in batches in a food processor for half a minute to achieve a coarse texture.

Mix everything well and taste for seasoning; cold food can take a bit more seasoning.

Pack into a china pot or pots, pressing down very well to expel air.

Pour over a half-centimetre layer of clarified butter to seal, and then refrigerate. Serve with plenty of hot toast.

To clarify butter: Heat butter in a heavy pan until the milk solids separate from the oil, the butter should bubble for a few minutes.

Ladle through a folded piece of damp muslin lining a fine sieve that is resting on a bowl.

Makes appetisers for 10-12

*Mace is the scarlet, lacy fibre between the outer husk and the hard inner shell containing the kernel of nutmeg.

Small scallop party pie

INGREDIENTS

For the shortcrust pastry:

120g plain flour

pinch salt

90g butter, chopped

2 tbsp cold water

For the filling:

12 scallops, with or without roe

1 cup fish stock

juice of half a lemon

3 tbsp cream

2 egg yolks

2 tbsp butter

2 tbsp flour

salt

pepper

2 tbsp freshly chopped parsley

1 tsp lemon zest

1 tbsp extra virgin olive oil

1 sheet ready-made all-butter puff pastry for lids (optional)

1 egg yolk and a little salt, for egg wash

METHOD

For the shortcrust pastry: Combine flour and salt in a food processor.

Add chopped butter and process briefly until broken up and just coated with dry ingredients.

Add water and pulse until pastry comes together.

Turn on to workbench, gather and flatten into a disc. Dust with flour and chill at least one hour.

For the filling: Preheat oven to 220?degrees.

Wipe scallops, remove any wisps and the black intestinal thread and return to refrigerator until needed.

Heat fish stock and pour into a jug.

Whisk lemon juice, cream and egg yolk together in a small bowl.

Melt butter, and when foaming stir in the flour.

Cook one minute, then gradually whisk in the hot stock. Stir, bring to the boil and simmer for two minutes.

Add 1/3 of the hot sauce to the egg-yolk mixture.

Stir well, take off the heat and add the rest of the sauce. It will thicken quickly.

Taste for salt and pepper and add the parsley and zest.

Heat a small non-stick pan with the olive oil. Sear the scallops well on both sides (about two minutes).

Lift scallops into a bowl. When they have cooled, spoon over enough of the sauce to make a thick mixture.

Chill scallop filling while you deal with the pastry.

Cut circles of shortcrust to fit muffin pans. (Cut puff pastry for the lids if using and keep refrigerated until needed.)

Fill lined muffin tins with cold scallop mixture. Pack it in well.

Brush edges with egg wash. Settle lids on top. Pinch edges to seal well. Paint with egg wash.

Bake 10 minutes and lower the temperature to 180C.

Cook 20 minutes more. Allow to settle before serving.

Serves 4