

A Marriage made in *heaven*

A Michelin restaurant chef, who's been bouncing back and forth from UK to New Zealand for the past 33 years, has finally found the challenge, excitement and life-balance he's been seeking – in the peaceful heart of Hawke's Bay farm country. And it was the curious ad, seeking a 'concierger/chef extraordinaire' that drew him back around the world for the umpteenth time.

BY KATHY OMBLER

"After all, I am a dab hand with the iron," says the somewhat self-deprecating Nigel Marriage from luxury Glen Aros Country Lodge, where he now chefs (mainly), but also irons, answers the door, tends the pot plants, perhaps cleans the pool if need be and spends his weekends haranguing stall holders at the local farmers' market.

After the heady heights of British Michelin cuisine and edgy Auckland restaurants is it really enough challenge, cooking for leisure travellers or corporate retreat guests in a lodge that accommodates up to twelve, maximum?

"Yes. It is extremely stimulating and I'll show you why."

He beams with excitement, and rushes off to extract a fresh artichoke from the massive fridge in the beautifully appointed lodge kitchen.

"This artichoke just came out of the garden. In the UK you'd have to order that from Brittany."

Nigel enthuses further about the providence of the homestead gardens and orchards, established by esteemed landscaper Alfred Buxton when Glen Aros was built back in 1914.

"To see a pomegranate actually growing, and almond trees, is so exciting. I've used almonds for 40 years and had never seen an almond tree until coming here. We make our own olive oil from our olive grove. There's an amazingly fruitful green gage plum tree, plus we have apricots, walnuts (good for the daily bake of bread rolls), guavas, persimmons, figs, feijoas – the list goes on."

There's also a vegetable garden, herb garden and greenhouse for Nigel to harvest. The seasonal, prolific crop of sorrel is a current favourite.

"The sorrel is great to use, I make a soup,

I've also done a canapé with small sorrel leaves, seasoned cream cheese and smoked mackerel, rolled up like a little cigar – you get that smoky flavour then the sharp taste of the sorrel."

Making chutneys, jams and preserves from fruit tree overflows is also very satisfying.

Interaction with the guests is another bonus, compared with restaurant work that involved plating up dishes for invisible diners out front. There is a formal dining room at Glen Aros but guests often ask to eat in the 'family room' where they can chat with chef Nigel as he creates his next course in the adjacent open plan kitchen.

One morning he recalls getting up early to pick gooseberries and whip up a gooseberry curd for breakfast. He was watched by a guest sipping coffee at the breakfast bar, and expressing her amazement to see gooseberries in place of the expected lemon curd.

Nigel devises his menus from day to day; four-course table d'hôte is the norm although guests will sometimes request a more casual affair, and regularly decide last minute they'd prefer to stay in for a dinner created by Nigel and cancel bookings made for prestigious Hawke's Bay winery restaurants.

When their stay extends more than a few days the challenge is to maintain variety and to surprise. For a fourth breakfast, Nigel produces a 'chef's surprise' – an example one recent morning being crumpets with blueberries and maple syrup. He had to make more.

"When I plan my menu I see what's coming off the garden and ring Tangaroa (Port of Napier fish supplier. They will send a list of what's available and we'll pop in and get what we want."

They have been known to fish to order, at Nigel's request. The local Hastings supermarket also has very good fish, he adds.



Nigel Marriage heads to the kitchen after a harvesting foray in the Glen Aros Lodge garden. He says the property's prolific fruit trees, herb gardens, greenhouse and vegetable plots provide a constant source of seasonal inspiration.

Stall holders at the Hawke's Bay Farmers' Market are used to trading produce, and earnest discussion, with Nigel each week.

"I do two circuits, one as I have my breakfast to see where I need to go, then I go around again and buy what I like. I talk to the stall holders about their products, well maybe I interrogate them! It's one of New Zealand's oldest farmers' markets and the quality and innovation you can find is just amazing."

Lifestyle is another plus – as summer arrived he was off to buy a bike to join the biking craze that is taking off Hawke's Bay, with its new cycle ways, quiet country roads and agreeable climate. In contrast, Nigel recalls the stress and exhaustion of previous roles,

including head chef at Raymond Blanc's two-Michelin-star Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons, then cheffing with John Burton-Race at his The New Angel in Dartmouth, also a two Michelin star.

Before and in between he visited New Zealand. At one point he opened his own delicatessen in Auckland.

"I wanted to avoid the exhausting restaurant kitchen but realised it wasn't an easier option after all, open at 7am, doing the books on Sundays. So I sold that and returned to the UK."

From the frying pan to the fire he returned to the kitchen; reunited for a time with John Burton-Race, then it was back to his other-love New Zealand for a stint in the

Birkenhead kitchen of Eight.Two until 2009, when family reasons sent him on yet another global spin.

Late last year he was in Wales, searching uninspiring job lists in the UK, when Glen Aros manager Meg Bremner's ad caught his eye. The resulting 'marriage' (excuse the pun) with Glen Aros is mutually popular.

Having a Michelin standard chef is really helping our business, says Bremner, who previously contracted a Hasting catering company to cook for guests.

"Nigel is really helping to put us on the map. We can offer something different here. Our Michelin standard cuisine gives a strong foodie focus that guests are talking about with their friends, and that's growing the

business. We have guests staying for four nights and refusing to go out for dinner because they want Nigel to cook for them. One guest from Japan was so impressed she is returning with her family for Christmas."

And for Nigel, happily away from the drama and stress of a restaurant kitchen, what's his advice for young chefs starting out?

"It's never easy, but it does become easier. If you can overcome the shock to the system of working 80 hour weeks while your mates are at the pub, while you're mopping floors and scrubbing spuds, you can start to enjoy it. And you learn good skills.

"When you're old and creaky like me, it's a difficult life. Working here is a really happy experience." **1**