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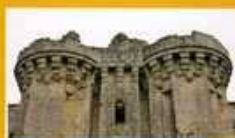
## Languedoc-Roussillon

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**A** cooking school is like a theatrical production, says New Zealand celebrity chef, Peta Mathias.

To ensure the performance is a success, and the audience satisfied, an enormous amount of preparation is required, says Peta, who founded the Fête Accomplie Cooking School in southern France last year.

She has established the school in a seventeenth-century country house, 33km northwest of Nîmes, near the medieval market town of Uzès.

A self-proclaimed gastro-nomad, Peta worked as a chef in Paris for more than a decade, spending three of those years running her own restaurant. She has written eight gastronomic travel books and presented two prime-time television food programmes in New Zealand for the past eleven years.

Her undeniable culinary skills, combined with a flamboyant dress sense (she loves clothes by designer Issey Miyake) and sense of humour have made her a firm favourite with food-lovers down under.

Like all great chefs, Peta has an eye for detail which she has successfully

# Life's rich recipe

With first class ingredients and an internationally acclaimed chef, students can't fail to be inspired at the Fête Accomplie Cooking School, as **Adrienne Bourgeon** discovers



## LIVINGFACT

The Romans built an aqueduct from Uzès in the first century BC to supply water to the local town of Nîmes, 50km away

applied to her French cooking school.

'Knowing that things are well organised means that each course runs smoothly, leaving me free to concentrate on teaching the recipes.'

Although she has been based in Auckland, New Zealand since 1999, her love affair with food is inextricably linked to France.

'Opening my Rive Gauche restaurant, Rose Blues, was the highlight of 10 years' gastronomic exploration in Paris. Ever since then, I've dreamed of making a base in the south of France where all the great ingredients are available.'

Take the market in Uzès for instance. 'It overflows with live prawns and trout, great baskets of oysters, mussels, hare, partridge, lamb, 30 types of olives, smoked

duck's breast and gorgeous truffles.'

The school is also a way for her to spend more time in France and she is optimistic it will eventually fill the gap when her television presenting work comes to an end.

With this in mind, she spent three months staying with friends near Uzès in the Languedoc-Roussillon area in 2005, initially researching recipes and making contacts.

The Languedoc, so named because the people used to speak the *langue d'Oc* rather than French, has always attracted her more than glamorous, fertile Provence to the east.

'It is dry, old, staunch, influenced by its closeness to Spain and so far not completely inundated by tourism. There are bullfights and *abrivados* when bulls

run in the streets and the people are friendly and reflective.'

At a party one evening she met fellow New Zealander David Horsman, who has spent years renovating the Mas Bonnafoux farmhouse with his English wife, Celia Lindsell. Both artists and sculptors, they were looking for a project to complement their existing luxury bed and breakfast business. Set on a two-hectare site with a large swimming pool, the historic building's spacious, well-equipped kitchen proved to be an ideal setting for an upmarket cooking school.

## GENEROUS LUNCH

The trio began planning the school's first two-week courses scheduled for May and June the following year. David designed an attractive brochure and Peta gives him credit for helping her to be more practical about the logistics – from where the guests would stay to what they would find in their hotel rooms on arrival.

'It was David who made me think about what would be happening every minute of their time with us. If we planned to go somewhere he would ask me, 'Do they need their swimsuits? Who will be driving them?'

Early on they nominated one pick-up and drop-off place and time in Nîmes at the beginning and end of each course.

## Peta's advice for living in France...

- Immerse yourself in the culture. Learn the language as fast as possible and mix with French people.
- Don't complain. Of course there are plenty of annoying things about France, but you must remember that you are in France because you want to be there. It's your choice.
- Show respect. France is one of the most beautiful countries in the world and is blessed with the most extraordinary culture that everybody wants to share.
- Don't expect the French to work or behave like you. People may not turn up on time for example, but that's the way it is. Rather than get frustrated, try to adapt.
- Don't be uptight. You may come from a country where everyone appears active and efficient. Drop all that when you come to France, especially the south. Relax.
- Calculate your budget and stick to it.
- Be thrifty. Keep costs down and avoid waste. Buy fresh produce when it is in season – choose cherries in May for example, rather than figs which ripen in September.
- Work with the locals. Cultivate friendly relations with local suppliers to obtain the best quality products at good prices.
- Update your website. A modern, user-friendly website is good advertising and can attract customers.
- Don't keep making work for yourself. The cooking school's first two classes went so well, that Peta is not planning any major changes. If it works the first time, leave it.



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Although the *mas* has several comfortable bedrooms, more space was needed to accommodate everyone. To avoid unfair comparisons between facilities, they decided that all the guests would stay together in a larger *hôtel de charme* nearby.

As for course content, they agreed on a balance between the cooking sessions and visits to local places of interest, such as vineyards, markets, a truffle farm and a snail farm. A day out to the Camargue was added, along with a generous lunch at a *manade* or bull ranch.

Adamant that classes reflect the robust, rustic cuisine of the region, Peta spent weeks selecting the best, most evocative recipes she could find, including firm-favourite *aïoli*, which is eaten with fingers and washed down with local *rosé*, *brandade de morue* (salt cod purée) and *méchoui* (a traditional Moroccan lamb dish). Lemon and almond tart, chocolate and almond cake, strawberries and cherries in Pernod would feature as desserts.

As an advocate of the Slow Food movement which encourages small-scale producers, she wanted to work with the best local suppliers she could find – from the woman who makes fabulous Pélardon goat cheeses in Uzès to a butcher in the nearest village of St-Maurice-de-Cazeville who sells beautiful, succulent quarters of lamb and rabbits.

'It's important to get the local people on your side as they can give you quality produce and good prices as well.'

In August, she returned to New Zealand where she continued to oversee

arrangements from a distance, while working on the *Taste New Zealand* television show and publishing her latest book at the time, *A Cook's Tour of New Zealand*.

To avoid the complications of French bureaucracy, Peta runs the Fête Accomplie Cooking School company from New Zealand. Because people come from all over the world, she is unable to organise their travel arrangements to France, but steps in once they arrive in Nîmes.

Tableware or *l'art de la table* is important in food-obsessed France, and Celia set to work designing stylish cotton tablecloths, serviettes and embroidered linen aprons for each participant. More than qualified for the task, she grew up in London where she was a window-dresser for 15 years at the luxury goods company, Tiffany & Co., later counting Chanel, Yves Saint-Laurent and Rolls Royce amongst her clients.

Two French staff members, Claire and Jeremy, were recruited in advance to help in the kitchen and ensure each day unfolded as planned. As an incentive, Peta says they were paid above the average rates which was worth every euro.

When she returned to the *mas* ten days before the first course, she wrote out long food prep lists for every recipe and trained her assistants to leave nothing to chance – right down to the last courgette flower or teaspoon of lemon juice.

Thanks to all their hard work beforehand, Peta says both courses went off with smiles and laughter and were a great success. In her website newsletter

she writes:

'The students spent six days around the kitchen workbench stuffing courgette flowers, making bread dough, rolling *oriolletes* (deep fried pastries), putting together colourful Moroccan salads and beating a *brandade de morue* into shape.

'They ate more anchovies and olive oil than they thought possible, enjoyed the picnic at the Pont du Gard of the *pissaladière* we had all made, along with *saucisson*, cured ham and lots of cheeses.'

Despite all the food, frivolity and southern tradition for siestas, Peta says she slept little at the time. 'Several times I woke up in the middle of the night, panicking, thinking, 'Oh my God, now where did I put those anchovies?'

But as all good directors know, there's no harm in a few first night nerves on the eve of a great performance and plans are already under way to make sure this year's courses get the same rave reviews as last. ■

**Opening page, top: Fresh local ingredients in convivial surroundings Opening page, bottom: New Zealand celebrity chef, Peta Mathias Opposite page: The mas inside and out This page, above: The floodlit terrace Below: Learning to stuff courgette flowers**



## Fact File

The Fête Accomplie Cooking School will run six week-long cooking classes in 2007, from May to October. The first begins on May 30. There is a maximum of ten students for each course. The school is based at the Mas Bonnafoux, 33 km north west of Nîmes: [www.masbonnafoux.com](http://www.masbonnafoux.com). Classes cost €2,500 (£1,642) each. This includes accommodation, tuition, food, wine, meals, beverages, transport, scheduled excursions and organised restaurant meals. Travel to/from France is not included.

Website: [www.petamathias.com](http://www.petamathias.com) or email [peta@petamathias.com](mailto:peta@petamathias.com)

**Like all great chefs, Peta has an eye for detail which she has successfully applied to her French cooking school**