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Lifestyle Story

## Private dining at Heron Hill

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By Leigh Bramwell

A few years ago the most spectacular way to have a celebration was to take over an entire restaurant and throw a private party.

These days, though, that rather ostentatious 1980s concept has been overtaken by a new model known as private dining.

Simply, comprise your guest list, find your chef, consult on the menu, the wine and the decorations, and present yourselves for an evening of food, wine and music designed to your specifications.

Keith and Miranda Pasley of Kerikeri have been offering such a service at their upmarket lodge, Heron Hill, and it's proving a winner both with overseas guests who are staying at the lodge, and with locals looking for a different way to celebrate a special occasion.

Dinner takes place in the Lodge's elegant dining room with its twin glass-topped tables. There is access to the terrace, gardens and the lounge area with its open fire.

The family came to Kerikeri because Keith and Miranda wanted to use their skills in the food and wine area, but 'without Keith having to work in a restaurant, because they are rather family unfriendly', Miranda says.

Heron Hill falls somewhere between a classy B&B and a hotel, and its point of difference is its fine dining. 'I guess it's like a very small restaurant attached to a very small hotel,' Miranda says.

The idea has proved the perfect way for Keith to use his skills – having spent most of his career in small restaurants, he was totally accustomed to a small kitchen and small staff. 'In that situation you have to be able to do everything well,' he says.

His career began in the 1970s at the ATI cooking school, and he later worked in hotels and restaurants in the UK and Australia. Interspersed with cooking were stints as a landscaper and gardener, and those skills have been combined to provide food which is largely grown and prepared on the property.

Heron Hill has an orchard which supplies citrus including limes, lemons and mandarins, as well as figs, quinces, plums, grapes, nectarines, apples and a whole range of herbs and vegetables.

'We make everything we can – our own breads, jams, chutneys, fruit pastes, pickles, pastry and syrups, and we cure own sausages and bacon.'

What can't be found in the garden is almost always sourced locally, and Keith considers it fortuitous that they arrived in Kerikeri on the crest of a wave of interest in locally grown food.

That's exactly what diners are looking for – simple, locally grown seasonal food, prepared and served with passion, and excellent New Zealand wines which Miranda sources and matches with the menus.

The process of private dining involves discussing the occasion, preferences in food, drinks, music



Individual croquembouche from the kitchen at Heron Hill - recipe at end of this article.  
Photo / Leigh Bramwell

and decorations, and then designing a menu which suits everyone's needs. Just about anything is possible – even a menu for several meat eaters, three vegetarians and a wheat and lactose intolerant guest. At this time of year, clients' preferences are for warming foods, so Keith favours braises, rich meats, gratins, stews, and full, flavoursome desserts that are 'all richness and warmth'.

Recently, Heron Hill hosted a private birthday dinner for 11 people. The menu started with duck confit toasts, risotto cakes with smoked marlin and smoked eel remoulade and parmesan cups with goat cheese, followed at the table by crayfish bisque, venison chop, potato and turnip gratin, pinot and venison jus, and croquembouche.

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#### INDIVIDUAL CROQUEMBOUCHE

This may seem daunting but it's worth the effort. The elements can all be made three days beforehand leaving the final assembly to be done up to an hour before you serve.

##### **Choux puffs**

120g butter  
240ml water  
Pinch of salt  
130g flour, sifted  
3 eggs, lightly beaten

Preheat oven to 200c.

Put the water, butter and salt in a saucepan and heat gently till the butter melts.

Bring to the boil, add the flour, and beat vigorously with a wooden spoon.

Keep beating over the heat till it comes away cleanly from the side of the pan. Tip into a bowl to cool slightly for five minutes.

Using a hand-held mixer on low speed, beat in a third of the eggs at a time. Continue till you have a smooth mix.

Line a baking sheet with paper and half-fill a piping bag with the mix and pipe walnut-sized balls on to it, with spaces between to allow for expansion.

Bake until they are evenly brown – about 20 minutes.

##### **Pastry cream**

375ml milk  
150ml cream  
75g caster sugar  
vanilla pod split in half  
1 large egg, room temperature  
3 large yolks, room temperature  
40g cornflour

Put the milk, cream, split vanilla pod and half the sugar in a pan and bring to the boil, stirring often. Meanwhile, mix together the remaining sugar, corn flour, eggs and yolks.

When the milk has almost reached boiling point pour half into the egg mixture, beating well.

Put this mixture back into the pot with the remaining milk and, whisking vigorously, bring back to the boil and simmer gently till it is smooth and thick.

Strain into a clean bowl, cover and cool, then refrigerate till required (or for up to three days).

##### **Chocolate Sauce**

200ml milk  
2 tbsps cream  
40g caster sugar  
200g bitter chocolate (70%) cut into pieces  
30g unsalted butter at room temperature

Melt the chocolate in a bowl over a pan of hot water, stirring till smooth.

Put the milk, cream and sugar into another pan and, stirring, bring almost to the boil.

Strain the mixture then slowly pour it into the chocolate while whisking, till smooth.

Whisk in the butter, a small piece at a time, to make it smooth and glossy.

Cool, cover and refrigerate till required (or up to three days). Up to an hour before serving it's time to glaze the puffs. If frozen, take these from the freezer 30 minutes prior.

### **Glazing Syrup**

240g sugar  
30g water  
30g liquid glucose  
1 tsp lemon juice  
A couple of handfuls of toasted sliced almonds

Slowly heat the sugar, water and liquid glucose till the sugar is dissolved, then turn up the heat to a gentle simmer.

Just as the syrup begins to change colour (154C to 157C on a sugar thermometer) remove from heat, add the lemon juice and shake into the mixture.

Next, holding the base of each choux puff, dip each into the glaze, quickly sprinkle the tops with the toasted almond slices and place on a lightly greased plate or baking sheet.

### **Assembly:**

Take the pastry cream and whisk it for a minute or two. Half fill a piping bag that has been fitted with a small plain nozzle. Use the tip of the nozzle to pierce a hole in the base of each choux puff and fill each with the cream. Sprinkle toasted almonds over the top and pour chocolate sauce into saucers on each plate beside the puffs.

- Detours, HoS