

Seafood gem

ENTERPRISING CHEF SUE PEARSON IS HOOKED ON THE BOUNTY OF KANGAROO ISLAND.

STORY **THERESE HALL** PHOTOS **PETER NASH**

ARRIVING ON Kangaroo Island by car ferry, visitors could be forgiven for failing to notice a tiny fish and chips shop on the Penneshaw esplanade. From the outside, this unassuming bolthole, called simply Fish, gives little indication of the fare within. Only the long queue out the front hints at something special.

Behind the counter, the island's foremost chef, Sue Pearson, toils over a vat of hot oil. Formerly a chef at London's upmarket Ivy Restaurant, Sue has transformed the culinary landscape on this producer's paradise, starting with the humble 'chippy'. "When I arrived here 12 years ago there wasn't a chef on the island – or a fish and chips shop," Sue says. "Now everybody's passionate about food."

Sue pulls fresh local seafood out of the fryer and into the hands of hungry travellers eager to sample the bounty of the Southern Ocean at a take-away price. "I use quality canola oil, homemade Coopers Sparkling Ale batter and the best salt on the planet – Murray River salt," she says. And for patrons with an aversion to grease, she'll grill a fillet of salmon with a side of risotto in lieu of the chips. "You can have dinner at Fish and not have anything deep fried," Sue says.

Sue fell in love with Kangaroo Island, or 'KI' as it's fondly known, after being recruited to run a restaurant on the island's remote east end in 2000. The restaurant soon folded, but her romance with island life persisted. KI abounds in exceptional honey, cheese, seafood, lamb, eggs and wine and Sue saw the possibility of working with fresh fare plucked from the source, which her jet-setting culinary career had convinced her was the best way to guarantee good eating. She now unofficially leads the island's version of the 'local food' movement, with a trifecta of food businesses tailor-made for her location.

Her core enterprise is Two Birds and a Squid, a gourmet catering company aimed at tourists staying in the island's many beach houses. "It's restaurant-quality food using the best of KI produce that diners can assemble themselves," Sue says. When she launched it 10 years ago, no one was

specialising in island produce. "I didn't want people leaving the island without tasting what we had to offer," she says. As there are significant distances between settlements on KI, and abundant wildlife makes driving after dark perilous, a fine-food restaurant was not the solution. Rather, Sue recognised a business opportunity in preparing up-market takeaways. Guests can order from an on-line menu before they leave home and, when they arrive at their holiday house, a ready-to-cook, simple-to-assemble gourmet meal is waiting in the fridge. Sue offers this service across the island as well as special occasion catering and what she describes as fantasy meals, which are 'dream dinners' in sublime locations – usually on one of the island's world-famous beaches.

Once the catering business got off the ground, Sue seized another culinary opportunity when she opened Fish. Surrounded by a profusion of seafood, Sue was surprised that there wasn't a fish shop to be found. Being Liverpool-born, she has a soft spot for fish and chips, a Friday evening ritual throughout her childhood. She also prepared fish and chips as one of a team of 45 chefs at London's Ivy Restaurant. So she turned an old laundromat into what has been described as the "best fish and chips shop in the world". Designed as a one-woman show – there are no more than four paces in any direction – customers choose fish by variety (King George whiting, garfish, salmon or flathead) and preparation (beer-battered, grilled or crumbed) from a blackboard menu. Or order a paper-wrapped parcel of scallops, salt and pepper prawns, stuffed lobster, baby abalone or oysters shucked to order.

These can be teamed up with Sue's signature chips and salads of cubed cucumber in wholegrain mustard dressing or Black Russian tomatoes and island fetta with sticky balsamic, depending upon what's in season. Or maybe an island pea and samphire risotto. If this doesn't sound like the run-of-the-mill fish and chips joint, that's because it's not. "It's not too hard for me to look good," Sue laughs. "Not many fish shops are run by a chef."



Sue Pearson's humble 'chippy', in a converted Kangaroo Island laundromat, is lauded by foodies.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Sue Pearson mixes her famous batter, serves up a fantasy meal on Brown Beach and is a proud fish shop chef. **OPPOSITE (FROM ABOVE):** Stuffed lobster; Sue trains with Coco, her sheep, and Fynn, her dog; neighbour Mick Munday grows all her vegies.

Sue's third occupation is her role as food-tour guide for Gourmet Safaris, a company run by author, broadcaster and presenter Maeva O'Meara. Sue not only cooks for the groups of mostly city gourmards twice a year, she also take them samphire collecting and oyster tasting and even brings them home for lunch. "That's when they really understand what the attraction of KI is for me," she says.

Sue's home is a timber and corrugated iron chalet-style house on a beachfront block of 80 hectares. "From my kitchen table I look out over the Southern Ocean," she says. "I can see mobs of kangaroos grazing on the grass and the sun shining off the cliff tops in the distance."

Her neighbour Mick Munday grows all the herbs and vegetables she needs for her businesses, with annual crops of pumpkin, peas, corn, kale, spinach, asparagus, beetroot, rocket, cos and 12 varieties of potato including purple congo. "He's even built a hothouse that replicates an Asian climate so I can have fresh ginger, coriander, Vietnamese mint, chillies and lemongrass," she says. "I ride over every morning on my quad bike, choose all the vegies I need, he then harvests them and I prepare them during the day and put them on the table for dinner that night. Whatever I chose will be my evening special. This is a beautiful way to work and eat – I know what I'm giving people is so good."

In what may seem to be an oxymoron for a fish and chips shop proprietor, Sue is deadly serious about healthy eating. She is determined to prepare tasty food without relying on fat for flavour. "Anyone can make things taste fantastic with piles of fat," she says. "I'm trying not to use too much fat, and I tend to use the good stuff like avocado and KI olive oil to

cook with, but I also incorporate loads of herbs for flavour."

For just over half the year, from mid-October to the end of April, Sue is kept busy cooking on her island home. But once KI's blustery winter weather sets in she clocks off. She spends five months in the northern hemisphere, visiting family, cooking at friends' restaurants and running in marathons. It was while training for a marathon in the UK last year that she recognised the full value of KI's fresh produce. "I realised the fresher the produce, prepared and cooked in the most simple way, the better my body performed," she says. "This makes perfect sense and is so in tune with what we feel on KI – it was funny that I was in the UK when I figured it out."

Sue is planning a five-day tour of her own in February next year to propagate her healthy lifestyle vision, called Soul2Sole. "It'll be all about exercise, nutrition and lifestyle," she says. "We'll go on runs, have talks about nutrition and then learn how to prepare healthy meals. And when we need a surge of magnesium, we'll pop into Fish for a serve of freshly shucked KI oysters."

FISH

Fish and chips: \$12.50-\$18, Salads: \$5-\$14
 Wheelchair accessible and BYO.
 Open mid-October to late April every day 4.30 till 8pm.
 43 North Terrace, Penneshaw
 Kangaroo Island SA 5222
 Phone: 0439 803 843
www.2birds1squid.com



STUFFED LOBSTER

Serves 4

INGREDIENTS

- 2 live Ferguson lobster (850g-1kg each)*
- 200g butter, melted
- 2/3 cup plain digestive biscuits
- 4 tsp fresh tarragon leaves, chopped
- Juice of 2 lemons
- 2 tsp lemon zest, fine chopped
- 2 pinches of quality sea salt (Murray River or Maldon)
- 1 tsp Ferguson lobster oil*

METHOD

Freeze the Using a large chef's knife split the lobster in two lengthwise. Remove the waste shoot that runs down the side of the flesh. Then using a sharp paring knife cut and release the flesh by inserting the knife between the shell and the flesh. Once this has been done you can pull out all the flesh with your fingers. Chop roughly.

Blend the biscuits in a food processor until finely crumbed. Combine with remaining ingredients and lobster flesh in a mixing bowl.

Stuff the empty cavity of the lobster with the mixture. Place onto a tray flesh side up and bake at 200 C for 15-25 minutes or a gas Weber barbecue for about 20 minutes (check after 8 minutes). You will know the lobster is cooked as the flesh will be white and the shell will be the most vibrant red.

Remove from oven and cover with foil. Allow to sit for 5 minutes then platter up. Drizzle with the lobster oil before serving.

* Lobster and lobster oil are available from Ferguson Australia www.fergusonaustralia.com