

home james

Chef James Stapley has found a new base, cooking beautiful food at Wanaka's Bistro Gentil, writes **SIMON FARRELL-GREEN**.

Photography **Aaron McLean**



OPPOSITE James Stapley gathers onion weed in Station Park near Bistro Gentil
THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE A bowl of foraged flowers; Bistro Gentil's terrace area; the restaurant's lemon cremeux with elderflower jelly & elderflower & lemon sponge ; Stapley finds a treasure



FROM THE SOURCE

THIS PAGE Stapley in the grounds at Bistro Gentil
OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP LEFT Stapley enjoys playing around with plating – here he's added raspberries to the lemon cremeux dessert from the previous page; a handful of foraged elderflowers; the restaurant's interior; Stapley & head chef Mario Rodrigues in the kitchen garden

Until recently, if you wanted to eat James Stapley's food you had to book in to Whare Kea, the luxury lodge on Lake Wanaka where he cooked for eight years. While this was a very pleasant experience – blonde wood, steel, glass, classic modernist furniture and an extensive wine cellar, with dinner served at a big long table each evening – it wasn't exactly accessible to the general public. (Take a crowd: Whare Kea sleeps 12 and costs \$14,500 for a minimum of five nights.)

So it comes as some relief to advise you that these days, you can also find Stapley cooking at the no less pleasant but rather more accessible Bistro Gentil, in a former house on the outskirts of Wanaka overlooking the golf course, the mountains and the lake. There is a huge vegetable garden and fruit trees – including nine different types of plum – that has him very excited, along with a berry house and a greenhouse that's designed to supply the restaurant year-round with herbs and salad greens. "The other day we were cutting asparagus at 4.55pm," he enthuses, "and at half five people were eating it."

JASON CREAGHAN





The key with James Stapley and Bistro Gentil's food is that while it's cerebral, it's rooted in real ingredients

The restaurant itself is beautiful, with high ceilings, big timber beams, tables made by Queenstown's Ed Cruickshank and a seriously impressive art collection. Outside, there's an enclosed terrace overlooking the lake, with modern wicker chairs and sheepskins, two big couches and a coffee table covered with art books, along with some very large heaters.

Just don't be fooled by the name: the food is only loosely French, and it's not a bistro. Stapley was a consultant to owner Luc Bohyn when the restaurant opened a couple of years ago, but at that time the food was very different; more classically French. In May, when Whare Kea's owners rejigged the lodge as a private luxury rental – guests can still get him in to cook if they want – Stapley came on board at Bistro Gentil full-time.

The dream at Bistro Gentil is to make it more than a restaurant – indeed, in many ways they have to, since running a fine-diner in Wanaka is a tough gig, especially in the off-season.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE
Comfortable couches are arranged on the restaurant's terrace; sculptures dot the grounds, including this work by Zadok Ben-David; a dish of 40°C salmon, squid cracker, smoked avocado, candied chilli & squid ink mayonnaise

In coming months, the ground floor of the house Stapley lives in behind the restaurant will be converted into a cooking school, and he is involved with owner Bohyn's Bois Gentil brand of olive oil and vinegars, which are based in France: using these, Stapley is developing food products for export to China and Japan. "A small fine-dining restaurant like this, it's very difficult to make any money," he says. "My goal is to get the bistro on the map a bit more – in this area there are very few restaurants like this, where you get an international experience. And that's what we're trying to do."

But the stuff on your plate? It hasn't changed from his days at Whare Kea, or rather it changes constantly, and that's kind of the point. Recently, he served a "cigar" of pastry holding chicken liver parfait, the ends dabbled with house-made quince paste, served in a glass ashtray with a black-and-white, bread and butter "ash". An exquisite dish, deftly done, so clever it could have been gimmicky but saved





by the perfect lightness of the parfait; the crisp crunch of the pastry. Your food hasn't changed, I said as he put it down in front of me and explained the dish. "No," he said, and laughed.

Stapley trained as a chef in London, then came to New Zealand in 2003, initially to work as the head chef at Waipara Valley's Pegasus Bay. But it was at Whare Kea, where he became head chef in 2007, that he really defined the way he approached food, cooking for a dozen well-heeled guests a night. "The thing I learned was about just being flexible to what's good," he says. "Suddenly, you just do nicer food. You know, rather than say this is the menu and then try to get all those things for it... Forget that. Just say, we've got these things and then try to make a menu around that."

The key with Stapley and the restaurant's food is that, while it's cerebral, it's rooted in real ingredients: the other day, he served a dessert using frozen Black Boy peaches from the property's orchard, with a granita made from this year's blossoms. "So it's kind of a year from the tree," he says. "Stuff like that I really like. It's your tree that grows in the garden, and when do you get to try blossoms with the fruit?"

The menu at Bistro Gentil changes every day (and is an artwork in itself, thanks to the leather cases and paper insets made by local artist Renee Hadlow). There's a seven-course degustation for dinner and a three-course menu for lunch; Stapley and his head chef Mario Rodrigues use the lunch service to trial things for dinner.

The garden is big and getting bigger. Once it's at full production over

summer, the restaurant's gardener, Ian Dench, will harvest whatever is good each morning and leave it for Stapley and his team to work out what they'll do with it. Meanwhile, the chefs go foraging for the likes of onion weed, edible flowers and wild passionfruit, which they augment with local ingredients including Cardrona Merino lamb and Wanaka Organics beef.

Everything is made fresh each day, and prepared as late as humanly possible: they cut the beef for the tartare almost as it's ordered, then cook the egg to order. "When you work in a restaurant you get used to things not being at their best, whereas working at the lodge everything had just been made, and it's a different dish," he says. "I think a lot of restaurant dishes can be a bit fridgy."



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE A Shane Cotton work graces a wall inside the restaurant; a waiter takes drinks to the terrace; beef tartare with sous vide crumbed egg yolk; the on-site gallery/printmaking studio; handmade paper insets for the menus; printmaker Renee Hadlow



A Zhu Wei sculpture in the grounds of the restaurant looks towards Lake Wanaka



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT chefs Romy Khaiba (far left) & Mario Rodrigues grab a bite to eat before service; Rodrigues and Stapley in the garden; the Bistro Gentil team, from left: Anissa Mameche, James Stapley, Mario Rodrigues, Lucy Thompson, Romy Khaiba, Sarah Hardy & Kenny Vaugh



At lunch recently, as well as the cigar, there was a dish served on a rock: a squid-ink cracker with squid mayo, cured butterfish, onion weed and flowers, which was sublime – sweet and sour and acid and squid and salt, with a hint of chilli. And then there was the “unsmoked” salmon, which was a piece of salmon cooked at 40°C for about half an hour, then served with charred cucumber, smoked horseradish cream and puffed salmon skin. All the elements – except the salmon – were lightly smoky.

That beef tartare used eye fillet from a local organic farmer and came with a crumbed sous vide egg yolk, served with miso mayo with soy chilli, leaves and salad from the garden. It was almost Japanese, Marmitey from the miso and warmed slightly by the egg. “It’s a kind of French dish, but it’s just a bit more fancy,” said Stapley. There was a dish of Cardrona lamb three ways, meaty with rump, cheek and a shoulder croquette, followed by raspberry jelly for dessert – fresh raspberries, flowers, an exquisite jelly.

It was one of the best – and prettiest – lunches I’ve eaten in a very long time, the more so for the fleeting nature of it. Visit again soon, and the menu will have changed completely. There’s a kind of genius in that. bistrogentil.co.nz *

