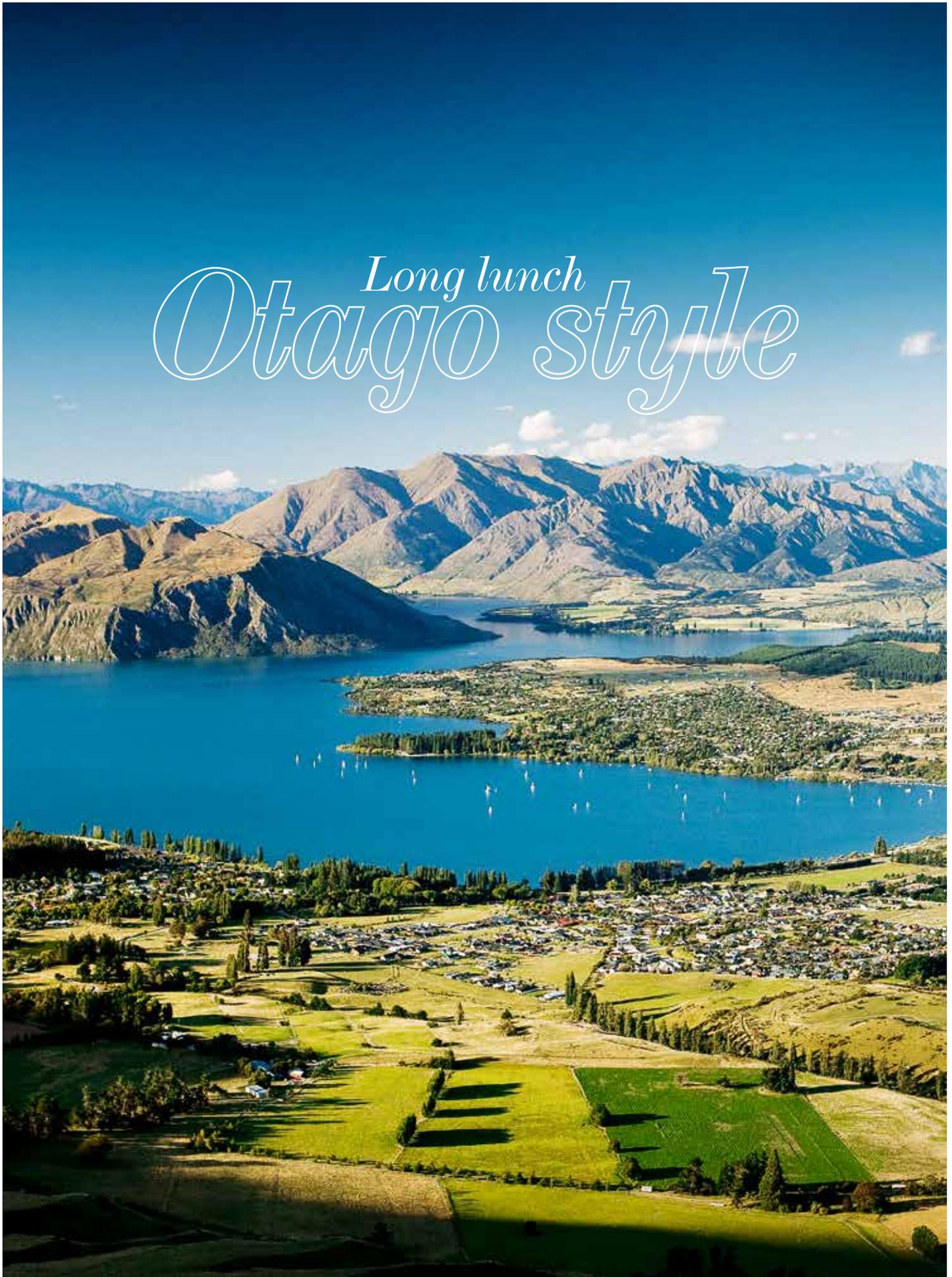
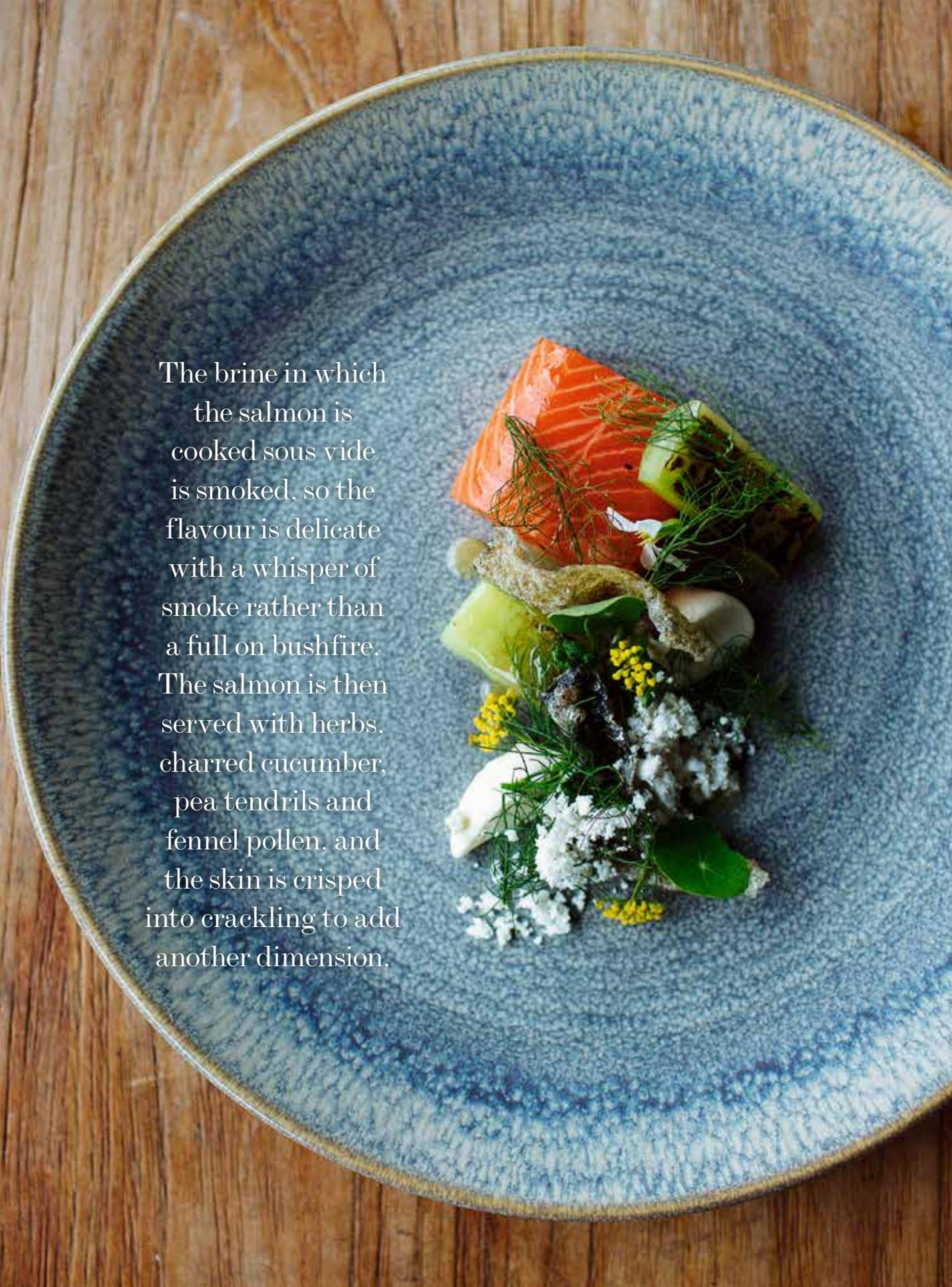


*Long lunch*  
*Otago style*





The brine in which the salmon is cooked sous vide is smoked, so the flavour is delicate with a whisper of smoke rather than a full on bushfire. The salmon is then served with herbs, charred cucumber, pea tendrils and fennel pollen, and the skin is crisped into crackling to add another dimension.



THE CENTRAL OTAGO DISTRICT IN NEW ZEALAND'S SOUTH ISLAND IS FILLED WITH GREAT FOOD AND WINE DISCOVERIES INCLUDING A VERY TALENTED ENGLISH CHEF WHO HAS MADE LAKE WANAKA HIS HOME. SELECTOR'S REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR MAEVE O'MEARA VISITS EVERY YEAR. THIS YEAR WAS EXTRA SPECIAL.

Words **Maeve O'Meara** Photography **Simon Darby**

It was the chicken liver parfait cigars that were the tipping point. There in a heavy glass ashtray were golden cigars with what looked like ash – we found out later it was bread and butter that had been cleverly roasted and blended to look just like what falls off the end of a cigar – it tasted wonderful – and the cigars themselves were pure genius – a spring roll wrapper with chicken liver parfait piped in. They were amusing, delicious

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and unique and the work of talented chef James Stapley. They were just the start of one of the great lunches of my life.

James Stapley seems to have a guardian angel. He keeps getting world class jobs – this one heading the kitchen at Bistro Gentil overlooking the incredible Lake Wanaka is everything he would have dreamed of when he started work at the age of 16 in the kitchens of London's Park Lane Hilton. Set in extensive grounds, Bistro Gentil is filled with bold collectable sculptures gathered by owner Luc Bohyn, fruit trees, and a huge vegetable and herb garden, all of which feed the restaurant.

#### A CHANCE ENCOUNTER

It's funny how this lunch came about. For the past four years I've been leading Gorgeous Safaris in the Central Otago region of New Zealand – girls-only tours exploring exceptional food, wine, art and designers, surrounded by the jagged peaks of the Remarkables and mountains with lovely old fashioned names like Walter Peak and Cecil Peak...all with that clean fresh air as crisp as new season apples.

As a food journalist and presenter I get a lot of press releases and announcements that I speed read or kill...and I nearly spiked one that came in last year headed "NZ Lodge", but I opened it to read: "We would love you to spend an evening with us at Whare Kea Lodge set on Lake Wanaka." One look at the website was enough. This was heaven on earth.



With my friend and fellow guide Kate, I booked in to the \$2000-a-night lodge owned by the Myer family of retail fame. (Whare Kea is now open for 5-night minimum stays). Set on the tussocky shores of Lake Wanaka, the lodge looks over the lake and out to the craggy peaks of the Southern Alps, including the awesome Mt Aspiring. From the huge windows of the dining room there is not another house in sight – it’s all wild, breath-taking country.

Dinner was at a huge communal table with a charming group from all over the world and the chef was James Stapley. His five-course menu using exceptional fresh local produce was light and clever and inspired, singing with flavour and all made with ingredients sourced or foraged locally. Here was a chef to watch.

#### FORAGING THE FARE

This year, it was me sending an email – asking James if he’d consider cooking for a group of 20 women on a Gorgeous Safari to show off the local food and wine, creating a perfect autumn menu, a celebration of Central Otago. He agreed.

By this time, James had taken on the role of Executive Chef at Bistro Gentil and we were to be his first lunch.

On our visit in April, the trees on the estate were heavy with quince and apples, and seven different varieties of plums – from greengage to Damson. “To be able to walk into the sunshine at the back of the restaurant and plan a menu, to be

able to gather and serve something on the same day – there’s nothing that will taste as good as that,” says James. “We also have local growers who come to the back door, people I’ve worked with over eight years at Whare Kea. Our salmon comes from Mt Cook and it’s exceptional – they swim against that cold glacial water so they’re lean and sleek and have a good distribution of fat, nothing like the often flabby salmon that’s everywhere now; our buffalo milk comes from a small herd in the North Island and it’s incredibly silky.”

James has also enjoyed foraging for some of the best wild herbs and mushrooms, wild garlic and watercress, wood sorrel and a New Zealand favourite – rosehips. The day before he had gathered a basket of cepes to create the silky mushroom soup as a starter served with a white truffle and thyme foam on a serving platter strewn with wild ferns. His determination is always to source the best and weave a menu full of fresh flavour.

Luckily we arrived during the Bluff oyster season. Named for the location from which they are sourced, Bluff oysters grow slowly in the deep, cold channels of the Foveaux Strait, at the bottom of the South Island, and the season is short. Prized for their delicate blend of creamy plump texture and briny mineral flavour, the Bluff oyster is in huge demand from locals and those visitors in the know. “They have a full, luscious mouth feel” says James, who has them shucked in front of us and served



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with a squeeze of lemon or light eschallot vinaigrette. This was teamed with a 2014 Gibbston Pinot Gris from Valli Wines and we were lucky to have founder and winemaker, the charming Grant Taylor, introducing us to his wines.

among the tussock grass and is a cross of Merino and black face, which means both flavour and tenderness. It was served two ways – a plump juicy rump and as a slow-cooked shoulder formed into croquettes. With cauliflower puree, braised fennel, and an unctuous lamb jus, it was inspired. Add the Pinot and its flavour dialed to 11.

It's lunch and a show as James demonstrates the art behind his "unsmoked

The golden afternoon finishes with a walk through the garden where the fruit trees so heavy with apples are like something from a fairy story.



#### SUBLIME PAIRINGS

Taylor is a pioneering winemaker of the Gibbston Valley, an area famed for its rich, spicy Pinot Noir, a wine that thrives in the warm dry weather and cold nights.

"We're on the same latitude as Burgundy and on limestone soils", he explains. I came to the area after 15 years making wine in the Napa Valley. It was a clean slate – grapes had never been planted in the glacial valleys surrounded by mountains. In 1998 when I planted the first vines there were 40 acres of grapes, now there are 4000 acres. We were considered crazy, but I guess we've shown them what we can do."

Valli Wines' Pinot Noir is perfumed and complex, dusty and earthy with a length of flavour made to go with food. For our safari menu, James, Grant and owner Luc met and tasted and matched flavours a week before so each wine was somehow even better with food.

James' sensational lamb was a perfect match for the 2013 Waitaki Pinot Noir – the lamb is grazed on the high steep slopes

salmon", an eye opener for a food loving group who marvel that the brine in which the salmon is cooked sous vide is smoked, so the flavour is delicate with a whisper of smoke rather than a full on bushfire. The salmon is then served with herbs, charred cucumber, pea tendrils and fennel pollen, and the skin is crisped into crackling to add another dimension.

Dessert is a symphony of textures and flavours, in shades of red and white with the delicate buffalo yoghurt bavaois and local raspberries served with new season rhubarb from the garden and wild rosehips with a generous shard of raspberry meringue. Matched with the 2014 Waitaki Late Harvest Riesling, this is a grand finale – the mix of sugar and acidity works perfectly with dessert.

The golden afternoon finishes with a walk through the garden where those fruit trees so heavy with apples are like something from a fairy story. We pick the ultimate palate cleanser – one of the heritage apples chilled and crisp, simple and perfect.



### James Stapley's chicken liver pâté cigar with bread and butter ash

Makes 20

#### Paté

- 200g chicken livers
- 100g duck livers
- 6g gelatine leaf
- 50g unsalted butter
- 80g shallots, finely chopped
- 10g garlic, finely chopped
- 20ml marsala
- 30ml red wine
- 20ml port
- 60g soft white toast bread, no crusts
- 60g egg whites
- 200ml cream
- 12g table salt
- 1g freshly milled white pepper
- 2 rashers streaky bacon

1. Clean the chicken and duck livers.
2. Dice the white bread. Chop the shallots and sauté in the butter with the garlic, bacon, chicken and duck livers for no more than a minute. Add the thyme and then add the marsala, red wine and port and deglaze for a few seconds, keeping the livers very pink. Put onto a tray or plate and allow to cool to room temperature.
3. Once the livers are cool, soak the gelatine in warm water for about 5 minutes. Squeeze out the excess water. Warm 50ml of the cream and add the gelatine and stir until dissolved.
4. In a large bowl, add the remaining cream,

- egg whites, the diced bread, salt and pepper, the cooked chicken and duck livers mix and the gelatine mix. Combine well with a spoon.
5. Add mix to a Paco Jet beaker. Put on the lid and freeze for 24 hours at -22°C.
  6. Remove from the freezer and Pacotise the beaker twice.

#### To make the cigars

- 1 packet Spring roll wrappers
- 150ml clarified butter
- Thin copper piping

1. Pre-heat the oven to 180°C.
2. Cut the spring roll wrappers into four rectangles. Put them in a vacuum bag, add the clarified butter and vacuum pack for 30 seconds on high pressure.
3. Remove from the bag and lay four rectangles next to each other on a piece of baking paper. Put the copper pipe over the wrappers and roll the wrappers around the pipe so that they form a cigar shape.
4. Bake at 180°C for 8 minutes. Carefully remove the wrappers from the piping and allow to cool.

#### Bread and Butter Ash

- 150g salted butter
- 4 slices of brioche
- 5 fresh sage leaves
- 50g Maltodextrin
- ½ tsp charcoal powder

1. Pre-heat the oven to 180°C.
2. Put the butter in a pan with the sage

leaves. Cook until the sage goes crisp and the butter goes nutty. Allow to cool.

3. Bake the brioche in the oven until a deep golden brown. Allow to cool on a wire rack.
4. Blend the nut brown butter and sage, the brioche and the Maltodextrin until it forms a powder. When you serve sprinkle a tiny amount of the charcoal powder over the chicken liver cigars to make it look like ash.
5. To serve: You will need good quality quince paste and some ashtrays to serve the dish in.
6. Put the chicken liver pâté into a piping bag with a small nozzle. Pipe the mix into each cigar leaving a little bit of space at each end. Add the quince paste to another piping bag with a small nozzle. Pipe some quince paste into each end space and level off with your finger.
7. Put a heaped tablespoon of the ash in the bottom of the ashtray. Sprinkle over some charcoal powder and sit the cigars on top.

## + Wine

### + Chicken liver pâté cigar with bread and butter ash

Depending on your mood, the cigars would be enjoyable with a botrytis-style wine, fortified tawny or silken Pinot Noir. Inspired by the key varieties of Otago, we'd stick with a Pinot Noir and the Tomich Vineyards Duck & Weave Pinot Noir 2013 is delicious. Aromatic and lifted with a lovely velvety mouthfeel and satiny red fruits, it partners perfectly with the rich, creamy pâté texture.