



KEI TE TAIAO

BACK ROADS

*Wild. Natural
and Down to Earth*

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Fiona Read of Hāpuku Kitchen and Justine Schroder of Mt Fyffe Distillery share with *Shepherdess* a taste of Kaikōura and what they suggest visitors should savour.



When Fiona Read, 53, and husband Chris Sturgeon (Ngāi Tahu), 54, decided to open a home-cooking school, they knew Kaikōura would be the perfect location. Hāpuku Kitchen offers culinary adventures that connect visitors to the region with the land and sea.

What was the inspiration for Hāpuku Kitchen? I've always loved food. Mum is a really great cook and Dad is a great baker, and I grew up trying lots of different things. As a family, we'd go fishing and foraging – not that we'd call it that back then. We'd just go out and pick something. I think those things have always been part of our DNA as a family. I always thought that one day I'd love to run a cafe, or make a food product, or do something related to food. Whenever Chris and I travelled overseas, we found ourselves drawn to home-cooking experiences and eventually we realised that was something we wanted to do – to welcome people into our home and our lifestyle for a day, and connect over food.

We had talked about it for years, but it wasn't until I competed in MasterChef that I started really putting some energy into developing the concept of Hāpuku Kitchen.

Previous spread. Top left. "This is quite a special property, and a lot of locals have some sort of connection to it," Fiona says. "Back when we first bought it, even before we'd started working on the garden and the house, we'd have people dropping in and saying they used to stay here during school holidays, or their aunty lived here, or something like that." Top middle. Seasonality and sustainability are at the heart of Hāpuku Kitchen. Top right. "When I'm cooking for myself, I keep it pretty simple. I love a poached egg, I really do. Eggs from our own chooks, which are absolutely delicious, with some homemade sourdough and a bit of rocket from the polytunnel. That's heaven for me." Bottom. Kaikōura's unique environment is integral to what Justine and Fiona produce, and fosters collaboration. This page. Left. Fiona and her husband, Chris. Right. "Food and connection – it breaks down so many barriers," Fiona says. "I just love that aspect of bringing people together. On the first and third Friday of every month we host supper clubs here, with up to twelve people around our table. People buy a ticket, come along and we produce a seasonal meal based on what's pumping in the garden." Right page. "We wanted to keep the integrity of the outside of the house, while also creating a kind of reveal when you walk in through the front door. We kept the original footprint, but we added on and changed the roofline to take advantage of the beautiful view towards the mountains."



We'd already bought this property and begun work on the garden and renovation, and that's when preparations began in earnest. We opened in 2020 – it was ten years of planning, gardening and dreaming.

What drew you to Kaikōura? There is amazing food potential in the region, from the ocean and the wild game to the foraging opportunities everywhere. It's fertile land with a pretty great climate for growing a lot of things. We've got access to incredible suppliers, like Karaka Lobster for seafood and Middlehurst Station for beef and lamb, and we serve beer from Emporium Brewery, Mt Fyffe Distillery gin and Esses sparkling wine.

We also saw the untapped potential here. The population has grown a little bit since we arrived, but it's still small and there's so

much you can do. It's really easy to work with people in small communities. You can just pick up the phone and say, "I've got an idea, what do you think?" And in next to no time, a couple of chats and a meeting, you've got an event planned. That's how we developed our Catch and Cook product with Top Catch Charters. Guests go out on the boat with Malcolm and catch their own fish, and I meet them down at the dock, pack the fish on ice, and then we all come back here and they learn how to fillet and scale a fish, break down a cray and that kind of thing.

What is the ethos behind your work? The whole concept of Hāpuku Kitchen is seasonality: being in tune with the natural rhythms of land and sea and planning around availability of ingredients. It means no two menus are the same, just as no two classes are ever the same. What does stay



constant is that connection back to the land and sea, and the fact that we want our classes to be a place for people to relax into the learning experience. We've created our own little sanctuary here and we want to let people in so that they can enjoy it too.

For our full- and half-day classes, we welcome guests into our home and spend some time chatting and getting to know one another. Then we embark on a forage and harvest around the property, before we come back into the kitchen and divide up the tasks and start cooking. At the end of the day we sit down and enjoy sharing the meal that we've created together.

What do you love most about what you do? I love seeing the sense of pride and satisfaction in people when they create something from scratch, the joy of going out to the garden and picking ingredients and turning them into a meal to be enjoyed together. Sustainability is also very important to what we do here, and I love helping people broaden their minds by showing them what they could do with stalks that they'd usually throw out, or making a dressing out of the brine from a packet of feta.

Wild, natural, down to earth – that's Kaikōura, and at Hāpuku Kitchen we take that and add the 'people' element. My hope is that all of our guests feel like they've had a taste of our culture and can take a little bit of Kaikōura home with them, whether they're from just down the road or visiting from the other side of the world.

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Above. Justine with her husband, Barry, and children Jack and Toby. "I like that I'm still able to help on the farm, when we're shearing and lambing or there's other things going on," Justine says. "The gin side of things is a little bit slower during winter and that's when I can concentrate on being a mother, wife and farmer, as the gin consumes me a lot over spring and summer. I take the kids out picking botanicals whenever I can. The three of us down the creek with our ice cream containers, picking borage – all the individual little blue flowers." Right page. Top left. "There were only twenty-odd distilleries in New Zealand when I first started out, and now there's around two hundred. I'm not one of the big distilleries and I don't think I ever will be. I'm a one-person band, although my brother does my graphic design. It's lovely collaborating with other businesses in Kaikōura - that's the beauty of how working in a small town can benefit us all." Top right. "I'm proud of what I've achieved. It's something that brings me real joy and peace and pride. I suppose a lovely goal would be to export my gin to England, even if it's just one case every now and then. Otherwise I just want to keep developing my product and keep it the best I possibly can."

After nearly seventeen years in Kaikōura, Justine Schroder, 53, says she feels like a local – especially since launching Mt Fyffe Distillery, featuring two gins that capture the flavour of the land.

How did you end up in Kaikōura? I came over from England as a midwife and spent a few years working in Christchurch and then Westport. I'd always wanted to come to New Zealand for the tramping and the skiing, and once I was here, I absolutely fell in love with the lifestyle and the landscape. A friend of mine had settled down in Kaikōura and I was staying with her one New Year's Eve when I met Barry at a party. He's a fifth generation sheep and beef farmer here. He whipped me away to the dance floor – I don't think anyone had ever seen Barry dance before! We courted for a couple of years before we got married and had our boys, Toby and Jack.

What do you love about living in a small community? Kaikōura is a small town but we're quite united. I joined the A&P Show Committee as soon as I got here because it reminded me of the shows we have in England. To me, the A&P Show personifies what the community of Kaikōura is all about. Everyone goes to the show, and there's something for everyone, whether it's the Ferris wheel for the kids, the livestock and machinery, or the baking and fruit and vegetable sections where locals fiercely



compete with each other. Last year we brought in a new feature, a Local Produce tent that showcased the businesses we have in the area – like Hāpuku Kitchen, Esses Wine, Middlehurst Station, as well as my distillery.

What inspired Mt Fyffe Distillery? It was a combination of things, and then the Kaikōura earthquake acted as a bit of a kick in the guts. I'd spent ten years making the kids my top priority and I realised I needed to do something to feel myself again. I wanted to do something out of the box, and show my boys that, if you've got a dream, with hard work you can achieve it. I said to Barry, "I'll just diversify on the farm. Maybe I'll raise a few more calves for you." He said, "Well no, because when you're away I'd have to look after them." So I said, "Alright, I'll breed pigs." He said, "Well, that's the same thing." I said, "Oh, I'll tell you what I'll do – I'll milk sheep and make cheese!" He just looked at me. Finally I said, "Well, I love drinking gin. I'll make gin." And he said, "Have the garage!"

I found a course, and flew up to Auckland for it. When I walked in and saw the beautiful copper alembic stills and botanicals, I had this lightbulb moment and I thought, "Oh, yeah! I really love this." I came back fired up and ordered a wee still – just two-and-a-half litres – and I started picking botanicals and playing around. It took me twenty-seven attempts over two

years to get the right blend for my first gin, and I launched three years ago.

How did you come up with the recipes? I realised quite quickly that living on a farm meant that I could tell a story with my gin, in terms of the botanicals that I could collect and use to infuse it. I've got two gins – Woolshed and Shearwater. Woolshed is all about the fact that I'm distilling here on our sheep farm, and for that I use botanicals I can gather here – like elderflower and kānuka from different paddocks, mint and rosemary from the garden, and a couple of lime trees that I keep an eye on around the district.

Shearwater, meanwhile, is all about Kaikōura. The Hutton's Shearwater is endemic to our coastline, and they breed in the mountains and then fly out to sea to feed. I use botanicals that reflect that journey: rosehips gathered up the Clarence for the mountains, borage from the rivers and creeks, and karengo seaweed

harvested here on the Kaikōura coast. I wanted to put my heart into my gins. Mt Fyffe Distillery isn't just another distillery – it's a farm distillery, and it's me out there gathering and processing all the botanicals. The land provides the flavours behind my gins, and that's the story of who I am.

How has Kaikōura changed in the time you've known it? For a long time we were bumbling along really well. The whales kept the town busy in the summer with tourists, and although it was really quiet in the winter, fishing and farming were always there as the backbone of the community. Now, we're building this beautiful network of experiences and little local producers. We want to make Kaikōura a destination, not just a stopover. If we can provide a town that's got so many little elements to it, we can give our kids options for their future so they can stay or return here and raise their families in a really beautiful little community that's safe and together and united.





Top left and middle. Hāpuku Lodge. Top right. Addy and Lou. Bottom left. The Beach House Cafe. Bottom middle. The Kaikōura Ranges, as viewed from Hāpuku Lodge. Bottom right. Middlehurst Station Farm Store.

Fiona and Justine's recommendations

EAT

If you want a good pie, I have to say **Middlehurst Station Farm Store**. Head into their store for a really decent coffee and a beautiful homemade pie with their own lamb – you've got that whole paddock-to-plate feel going on. – Justine middlehurst.co.nz

If you want local crays at an affordable price, then the **Kaikoura Seafood Barbecue** is another fantastic option during the day. It's a food truck set up by Jimmy Armers Beach, and you can head down there and have a cray with a side of salad and chips. – Justine thekaikouraseafoodbqq

The Beach House Cafe is a good local hangout with good coffee, and they've got a baker now, so they do all their own breads and cakes. – Fiona beachhousecafe.co.nz

We went to **Zephyr** recently and it was very tasty – classic dishes, and everything was perfectly cooked and nicely seasoned. – Fiona zephyrrestaurant.co.nz

DRINK

Seek out **Esses Wines** – they've put in the work and they're starting to get some awards and recognition now. They bought the vineyard a while ago, and realised they needed to do something quite unique with

the small number of grapes they produce, so they decided to go down the premium sparkling wine route. They have a tasting room at the base of the vineyard to try some delicious *méthode traditionnelle* and understand the dedication it takes to produce and appreciate each vintage. Call or text to make an appointment. – Fiona esseswine.com

STAY

Chris and I managed **Hāpuku Lodge & Tree Houses** for over nine years, so we have a deep connection to the place. It's the perfect balance of thoughtful, relaxed luxury – the hard-to-achieve combination of down-to-earth-yet-professional service. The design of the spaces with views to the Kaikōura ranges on one side and out to the Pacific Ocean on the other – hard to beat. The lodge restaurant produces excellent quality dining. – Fiona hapukulodge.com

You can't go past **Clifftop Cabins** in town, offering views and bach-style greatness. What Seth and Penny have done up there is just incredible. They're just stunning and they're really well-designed. The views from the cabins are world class, perched right on the cliff overlooking the Kaikōura township and sea. – Justine clifftopcabins.co.nz

We've got **Manakau Lodge** up the road here, which is fantastic for groups – you get exclusive use of the whole lodge, and it's beautiful. – Fiona manakaulodge.com

For couples, I'd recommend the **Hāpuku River Terrace**, which is a tiny-home off the grid at the base of the mountains, so it's a real escape. – Fiona hapukuriverterrace.co.nz

DO

I love the walks and the bike tracks that the **Kaikōura Cycling Club** has created. They're all over the place, right down to the Hāpuku River, up to the mountain, right across. You can do the whole thing or just walk a patch of it, and it's that diverse landscape from kānuka bush to a stand of tōtara trees, to beach and river. I do part of that every day with the dogs. – Fiona kaikouracycling.co.nz

If you're a thrill-seeker, check out **EcoZip**. It's an incredible family-friendly activity. It's just south of town, right on the edge of the sea, and a Unimog takes visitors up to the top where the views over the sea and the Kaikōura mountains are second to none. I'm actually hoping to start up a collaboration with them, maybe 'Zip and Sip!' – Justine ecozipadventures.co.nz

If you feel like a spot of shopping, **Addy & Lou** is a beautifully curated store, essentially a collection of everything the owners love – homeware, jewellery, furniture, bags, sunglasses and more. – Fiona addyandlou.co.nz

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