

# Full circle

## – Craig Wilson back home

What do Paul McCartney, Luciano Pavarotti, and paddlers along the coastline of Abel Tasman National Park have in common? Dining at the table of Kiwi chef Craig Wilson, that's what.

These days, as Wilson preps canapés and three-course dinners for his kayaking and hiking guests, oyster catchers call from the sand flats and the surf whispers quietly over the estuary bar. Meadowbank Lodge, Awaroa, is about as far as Wilson could possibly get from his previous kitchens, many of them temporary set-ups in whichever swanky hotel was hosting the touring rock star he was working for at the time.

Life has turned a kind of full circle for Wilson, now back in his hometown of Riwaka cheffing for the family tourism business after an overseas stint which saw him managing his own London restaurant, developing a focus on macrobiotic diets and touring cities throughout Britain, the US, Europe and Russia to chef for various performing stars.

Wilson first trained at Wellington Polytechnic, at the same time gaining hands-on experience with Ruth Pretty and David Jordan at the well known chefs'

former Marbles Restaurant. Thus began a mentoring relationship with Pretty that continues today. He calls the chef-turned-catering-doyen his "other Mum". He helped her at the Lord of the Rings world premiere in Wellington, and now she's helping him with the development of the catering side of Wilsons Abel Tasman National Park – a multi-faceted kayaking/walking/launch and lodge business in the park.

After training, Wilson left Wellington for the brighter lights of London's kitchens. With friends he established Freedom Restaurant in Soho, then after four years moved to a health food shop, thus honing the skills which led to the rock star road trips.

"I was approached by an agent looking for someone who could cook macrobiotic food for Tina Turner, so that led to spending the next three to four years on the road, touring with Tina, KD Lang, Pavarotti and Michael Jackson. "The stars like that holistic, fresh, organic diet. When they're performing they can't really have a big dinner and go on stage, they have to work up to it."

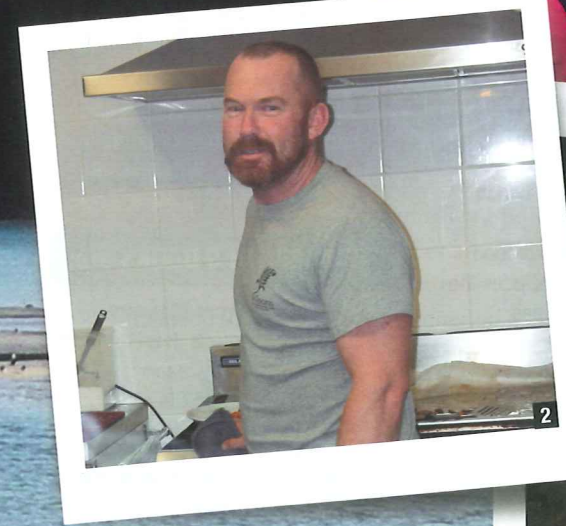
Working on the road generally meant flying into a city ahead of the star, often turning the whole floor of a hotel into

a kitchen, then organising the food through a local supplier, with the help of a representative from the tour organising company, and a translator. A lot of cash goes on tour, says Wilson. "I was shocked by the amount of food waste, the rampant consumerism," he adds.

"It all got a bit much for me in the end. I went to work for Paul and Linda McCartney, in between tours catering for his video shoots, or working at their Surrey 'compound', which included the catering base for Linda's organic vegetarian pies which sold throughout Europe.

"When Linda died I came home for a holiday, and I've been here ever since. The family business had upgraded, so I came on board to run the food operations." Upgraded – to the extent that Wilson claims Wilsons Abel Tasman now offers the "best food of any guided walking trip in New Zealand".

That's a more impressive claim when you consider the logistics involved. The two lodges are located on relatively remote coastline, with launch access only to the Torrent Bay Lodge, and a combination of launch access or a convoluted road then an estuary barge trip – feasible only at high tide – then a tender transfer to land and



1. The view from the front lawn is a bit different from the view from previous kitchens

2. Wilson in the kitchen at Meadowbank

3. Not your normal commute – chef Wilson and companion Archie heading to work



quad bike and trailer ride to Meadowbank Lodge at Awaroa.

The lodges run on generators, supplemented by a hybrid solar battery system. Cooking is by LPG gas, and all gas bottles and batteries have to be boated in as well as the food.

"During the season (which lasts around five months) we have 28 guests and five staff in each lodge, pretty much each day. Orders are brought up the coast three days a week by boat. It's always interesting at the start of a season with new staff, you'll get a chef who's used to hopping down to the supermarket if something's forgotten." Nevertheless, standards are high, with a strong focus on local, seasonal and organic foods.

"We try to do as much organic as we can and we source produce from around the Nelson region. We have to work seasonally. It's not like working on High Street here. Rather than going out with a list we work the other way around, we see what's available and work from there." Working more seasonally is something chefs everywhere will need to do more of as fuel prices go up, Wilson believes.

"This season our produce is totally from Nelson, not even Marlborough. We have mussel and salmon farms in Golden Bay.

Our beers are from Nelson's Founders Organic Brewery, our wines come from Nelson and Golden Bay."

Evening meals at the two lodges include canapés, then a choice of two starters, two mains and two desserts. "We ask our guests in the morning what they'd like and email their orders through to the next lodge. We also offer a vegetarian choice and cater for alternative diets, there's always an option although people do have to let us know in advance."

"This year we raised the bar hugely, and next year's menu is going to be quite Kiwiana," Wilson enthuses. He recites from the proposed menu which will begin this September: entrées such as steamed paua ravioli, whitebait fritters with lemon mayonnaise, gratinée of mussels with spinach and barbecued scallops with sweet chilli sauce and crème fraîche. Mains could be barbecued proper with ginger, soy and coriander, or lamb racks with red wine glaze. Kiwiana really kicks in with the desserts: Kapiti honey ice cream in brandy snap baskets or little pavlovas with whipped cream, passion fruit honey, kiwifruit and raspberry sauce, to mention a few.

Wilson's role these days is one of overall food and beverage management. This

means training chefs for a task which involves rather more flexibility than is required in your average lodge kitchen. "It takes me a few weeks to train up a new chef or lodge person. They have to be able to operate an outboard and fix the generator as well as cook. Then there's the knowledge of the park, the flora and fauna that the guests ask about, and our family history (hearing the Wilsons' long and colourful family history at Awaroa is a significant part of the guest experience). "We like to move our staff around, sometimes cooking, sometimes guiding or crewing on a boat. They are such a huge investment, we don't want to let someone go just because they don't like cooking anymore."

Wilson also aims to establish a centralised kitchen in Riwaka, where food could be prepared, sauces and relishes made as seasonal produce came to hand, and lunches packaged. It would make a lot of sense, he says.

"We would be able to improve stock management, decrease fuel and staff costs and give lodge staff more time to host guests."

However, with the business evolving as it is – last year accommodation units were added at Meadowbank, this year a new boat has been purchased – his kitchen sits in the wish-list queue of company developments.

And after the heady world of cheffing for the stars in the world's major cities, how does he cope with life back home in Riwaka?

"Working on the road was quite physically demanding. I really like the pace here in New Zealand and the Kiwi 'number eight wire' attitude, rather than turning any small problem into a huge dilemma. Queuing I don't miss, or traffic or pollution.

"I guess the emptiness is something I've come to embrace. When I was in my twenties it was all about the big cities. There is all the talk of crowds here at Abel Tasman and yes, in the middle of the day there are people around but once the boats go it's empty again.

"Every now and then I'll do a function with Ruth. Sometimes when you're cheffing in isolation it's nice to work alongside someone else. You can read so much but it's nice to feel the pulse of another kitchen."