



Back to basics

ANNA AND JOHN MAHY TOOK A BOTTLE OF WINE, A WORLD ATLAS AND A PIN AND SOMEHOW ENDED UP TEACHING HOMESTEAD SKILLS ON NEW ZEALAND'S SOUTH ISLAND.

By Kirsty McKenzie, photography Ken Brass

As Mark Twain famously observed, 20 years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the things you did. So when English couple John and Anna Mahy felt like a lifestyle change, they sat down with an atlas and over a few drinks, worked out likely destinations for relocating with their young family.

"Africa was a possibility, but we thought it was a bit unstable for kids," Anna recalls. "France appealed but there was a language problem, so we settled on Australia or New Zealand. Then I read Bill Bryson's description of Australia's very large and very poisonous animals and New Zealand seemed like the better bet."

Which is how, in 2005, Anna, a former nurse and John, an IT consultant, found themselves living in Charteris Bay on the shores of Lyttleton Harbour, about half an hour's drive from Christchurch. In the interests of travelling light so they could move on if it didn't work out, they arrived with a single suitcase, a twin children's buggy, a baby backpack and children Elizabeth, now aged 10, Evie, aged nine and Huey, now eight years. After three months travelling around both islands, they settled on Lyttleton Harbour, which had just the right mix of country life with access to the city comforts they were looking for. There they've put down roots, both in the literal and figurative sense.

"John and I had spent much of our formative years in Guernsey, just off the coast of France, so we were quite spoilt when it came to food choices," Anna explains. "When we first arrived in New Zealand we were having difficulty finding organic produce, so it wasn't long before we started our own garden." ➤



CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE: Eight-year-old Huey helps Anna with the sausage making machine; the entire Mahy family is involved in the cooking school; Elizabeth is a dab hand at linking sausages and provides expert assistance for the class members;



students at The Pig in a Day class are given herbs, spices and other flavourings and encouraged to invent their own sausage recipes; the class covers everything from fresh and cured sausages to bacon and prosciutto.



Difficulties finding ethically and sustainably produced meat and smallgoods sent Anna and John to the library and the internet, where Anna met her cyberspace mentor, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, who, through his *River Cottage* television shows, cooking classes, delis and recipe books has converted many Brits to the joys of food integrity and becoming more self-sufficient in terms of ingredients.

“Once I learned how easy it was to make bacon and sausages I’ve not bought either since,” Anna explains. “Friends and neighbours tasted what we were making and wanted to learn how to do it, so we hit on the idea of running a class for them.”

These days, the Mahys have moved on from a few friends crowded around their kitchen table at home to a dedicated cooking school in a late-19th century timber cottage which began life as the Charteris Bay School. At Preserved (the school’s name) Anna and John teach all the homestead skills, from making ham, pancetta, prosciutto to dry and wet-cured bacon, fresh and cured sausages, preserving and bottling surplus fruit and vegies and making jam, jellies, pickles and chutneys. Cheesemaking and bread baking are also on the schedule, both skills that were second nature to our forebears but somehow seem to have slipped off our CVs in a fast-forward, fast-food world.

Country Collections joined the Mahys for one of their hugely popular Pig in a Day workshops. Foodies from all over the South Island had joined the class to spend the



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: A recipe booklet accompanies every Preserved class; herbs and spices get a pounding; Anna demonstrates the art of linking sausages; students are encouraged to cook off small quantities of sausage mix as they make it and adjust seasonings as they go.



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morning making all sorts of smallgoods from organic, free-range pig and the afternoon turning pork mince into their very own “homebrand” fresh sausages. John and Anna’s children are actively involved in the classroom and Elizabeth is a champion at turning a metre of sausage into links and patiently moves from one student to the next demonstrating her technique.

Between helping out in the classroom and serving lunch on tables set up outside the school house, the kids are free to roam and climb trees in the backyard. They are home-schooled and Anna says it’s great to see them have the freedom to pursue their passions. “For Elizabeth this means languages, while Huey is more hands-on skills oriented,” Anna explains. “He could turn out a creditable spag bol by the age of four and really is turning into a useful little cook. There’s more to life than knowing the square root of everything and I want the children to become well-rounded adults, so we give them a pretty free rein.”

Elizabeth is currently working on lesson plans for cooking classes for kids and believes people learn better from their contemporaries. “Having seen what she can cook, all her friends are keen to learn,” Anna observes. “Because families don’t cook or bake as much as they used to, skills are slipping away. I like to think that in some small way, Preserved is helping to redress that situation.”

For more information visit www.preserved.co.nz. ccs



CLOCKWISE FROM

LEFT: The Mahy children are free to climb trees and play in the grounds when they are not helping out with the school; lunch is served outside on sunny days; Anna takes a break from teaching at the school house in Charteris Bay.