



Culinary tribute: Annie Neighbors (aka Chef Renee Kelly) and Michel Escoffier aboard the Silver Whisper in Lyttelton. Photo: David Hallett

# Family classics

The Escoffier name is alive and cooking. Mary Kirk-Anderson meets the great-grandson of one of the world's most celebrated chefs.

For a group aboard the Silversea's cruise liner Silver Whisper, which docked at Lyttelton for the day on Monday, culinary considerations are about more than just what's next on their shipboard menu.

The special 14-day Tribute to Auguste Escoffier voyage, from Sydney to Auckland, is celebrating the life and legacy of the great French chef, often referred to as the "Chef of Kings, and King of Chefs", who revolutionised French cuisine and the way professional kitchens operated. Guests are treated to cooking demonstrations and special meals based around Escoffier's recipes, and, perhaps most importantly, they share their cruise with his great-grandson, French-born Michel Escoffier, vice-president of the Foundation Auguste Escoffier.

"I just enjoy myself, and I make sure our guests are happy," Michel Escoffier says. "It's pretty relaxed. I am basically a guest speaker, and I talk about Auguste — not just a bio of his life, but anecdotes and so on."

Escoffier describes those who take the Escoffier voyage (mainly Americans) as "gastronomes".

"They are pretty knowledgeable about food and wine, and about Escoffier."

On this voyage, the group is relatively small, just 13 people, but on the other four Escoffier Tribute cruises, also presented by the American Institute of Wine & Food, there have been about 30 people. Those cruises were in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic coast of Europe.

"This is the first to a faraway, exotic

place," says Escoffier, who is joined on the cruise by guest chef Annie Neighbors (known professionally as chef Renee Kelly), of Renee Kelly's restaurant in Shawnee, Kansas. Neighbors, who is a member of Les Dames D'Escoffier, is involved in planning the menus and the special Escoffier lunch and dinner, and presents the two cooking demonstrations on days when the ship is at sea, in this case on its journey from Australia to Milford Sound, its first port of call in New Zealand. The demonstrations take place in the ship's theatre and the Escoffier meals in the intimate Champagne Room, one of three restaurants on the 380-passenger Silver Whisper.

Auguste Escoffier's contribution to modern cuisine is remarkable, especially given that he was at the height of his achievements around the turn of the 20th century, publishing his seminal work, *Le Guide Culinaire*, in 1903. As well as creating classic dishes such as the Peche Melba and Tournedos Rossini, he changed for ever the way hotel kitchens ran, developing the efficient Chef de Parties system, and insisting on greatly simplified recipes and menus. His collaboration with Caesar Ritz resulted in the founding of the first Ritz Hotel, in Paris, and, together with Ritz, he had enormous input into other great luxury hotels of the era (and of today), including the Savoy and Carlton hotels in London.

Michel Escoffier, who was born just over 10 years after his great-grandfather's death in 1935, describes Auguste's legacy as having three important facets — he was a culinary visionary; at a time when cooking was not a profession held in high esteem, he set organisational and behavioural standards in the (professional) kitchen that are still in use today; and he was a humanitarian.

It is this latter, less well-known aspect of Escoffier's life that Michel Escoffier likes to highlight.

"The humanitarian aspect is what I insist on today. People know him as a great chef and organiser, but they don't know he was a great humanitarian, concerned with the welfare of chefs and the poor. He was the first to create fundraising dinners for chefs who were sick or retiring and so on, and there are many other stories of his efforts."

"When he was at the Savoy with Caesar Ritz, he would collect all the supplies that were not served and, rather than throw them away, he put this out every morning and the nuns of the Little Sisters of the Poor would come and collect these things with a horse-drawn carriage — this is about 1891-92. One

## CLASSIC MENU

An Escoffier-inspired lunch, as served on the Silver Whisper

Amuse bouche

\* \* \*

Sole Florentine

\* \* \*

Champagne sorbet

\* \* \*

Lamb rack Provencale

\* \* \*

Peche Melba

\* \* \*

Miniardises

morning they did not show up. He went to see the Mother Superior and learned the horse had died and they did not have £5 to buy another, and £5 was certainly a lot of money then. So that night a young commis chef from the Savoy showed up at the Little Sisters of the Poor with an envelope with £5 in it.

"He continued (giving unused supplies to the poor) at the Carlton when he took over. He was there for 20 years, until he retired. Later, he was very sad to find that his successors had not continued the practice."

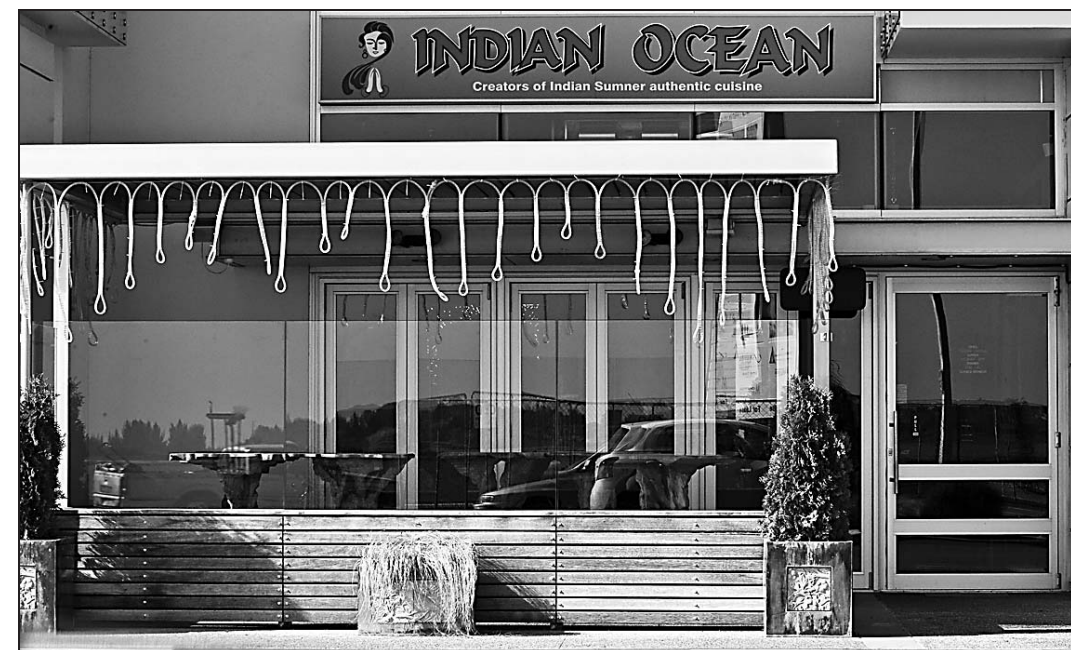
Michel did not grow up in thrall to his great-grandfather's story, but work as a business consultant and in marketing new technologies took him around the world. It was during these travels that he became more aware of his heritage.

"I noticed that every time I was in a large luxury hotel, I often had a little note from the director asking, 'Are you related to the famous chef, and when I would say yes, it was 'can I buy you a drink', and I got to talking to people about hotels and restaurants, so, around 1986-87, I started being more interested in the field of gastronomy and started to be more involved in the activities of the Foundation Auguste Escoffier."

"But if you want to know if I cook, my answer is, I love cooking, but only confidentially with friends. I am more interested in the teaching side of it and in new technologies, such as bringing multimedia to the Escoffier teaching."

It is a modern approach his innovative great-grandfather would likely approve of.

# Measuring up to mum's



Indian Ocean: good food, but the service needs work.

Photo: Carys Monteath

We had booked, but our arrival seemed to have taken the waiter by surprise. After an obligatory "can you please wait", we were summoned hurriedly to a table that had just been vacated.

However, one could have easily parked oneself with a drink on the outside chairs with the eatery view to take in.

Indian Ocean is part of a quartet of restaurants — the others are Indian Summer, Indian Harbour and Indian Fendalton.

We were blown away by the funky interior of the eatery, which boasted paintings, chandeliers, leather chairs and colourful saris and other eye-pleasing Indian artefacts.

We ordered two entrees for the three of us. My wife, Irene, chose the anari kebab (\$12) — spicy lamb with pomegranate and ginger cooked in the tandoor. She found it moist and full of flavour, and the pomegranate aftertaste was pleasing to the palate.

Simran, seven, was on his own review mission after seeing *Ratatouille* in the cinemas. He would give a verdict on how the food compared to his mother's.

He was very impressed with the garlic kebab (\$14), which featured chicken marinated in yoghurt, garlic, cheese, eggs and cashew paste and baked in the tandoor. If you like garlic, this is a great entree with expertly mixed flavours.

For drinks we had Yalumba

## Indian Ocean

23 Humphreys Drive. Phone 384-7000

When: Tuesday to Sunday, lunch 11.30am to 2pm, dinner 5pm till late. Closed Mondays.

Price guide: Entrees from \$4. Mains from \$16. No desserts available. Licensed. Limited range of wine, some by the glass.

Upside: Good food, good location, good surroundings.

Downside: Poor service.

Shiraz Viognier 2006 (\$30), Kingfisher beer (\$6), and Lemon Lime & Bitters (\$4).

Simran must have been missing his absent sister, who is nicknamed Tika, so he plumped for the favourite British dish, chicken tikka masala (\$16), in her honour. The chicken was barbecued in the tandoor and then sautéed in a tomato-based sauce with spices and sprinkled with coriander leaves. Any Briton would have agreed this was top notch.

Irene's posht lamb (\$16) — lamb pieces cooked in spices and cream, with poppy seeds — was delectable in a different way. The poppy seeds gave this dish a distinctive aroma and taste.

We also ordered keema naan (\$4), chicken naan (\$4) and garlic naan (\$3) with our mains. The naan's texture was such that it melted in your mouth. Irene reckoned it was the best she had had.

My fish curry (\$17) featured ling cooked in coconut milk with almond paste, mustard seeds and spices. The gravy was a perfect complement to the basmati rice. My only criticism of this dish was that the spices hadn't quite permeated the ling.

An empty beer bottle, used glasses and dirty dishes were left unattended on our dining table, but I thought the head waiter did rather well to relocate a handful of diners, without upsetting them, when a big group arrived.

The service could do with a bit more attention to detail. The two waiters were almost too introverted to be in the hospitality industry.

It was only the lacklustre service that detracted from the meal.

Simran's verdict was that the food was on par with Mum's cooking. He insisted on nine. "Nine out of 10."

Incidentally, this is not the first Indian restaurant that has bordered the estuary. In the early 1990s I reviewed one that did not last long enough for the review to make it into print. At last check, Indian Ocean was thriving.

PS: Warning: there is a cobra in the bathroom. —Pramil Mash

## A CULINARY IDOL

An extensive outline of the life of Auguste Escoffier and his achievements on the website Tallyrand's Culinary Fare (<http://www.geocities.com/napavalley/6454/>), created by West Coast chef tutor Jos Wellman, was used in much of the online promotion of the Tribute to Escoffier Cruise to Australia and New Zealand.

Wellman and one of his former Tai Poutini Polytechnic chef students, Ashley Briggs, spent the day with Michel Escoffier and Annie Neighbors in Christchurch, showing them the sights and revelling in the opportunity to meet the great-grandson of a culinary hero.

Wellman says his appreciation of Escoffier's contribution has been further enhanced by meeting Michel. "Just hearing the personal anecdotes, and particularly about Auguste's humanitarian activities, made a big difference to me. I knew he has done some humanitarian work but not to that extent. The fact that he took the time to feed the poor, to give money to hospitals, to support out-of-work chefs — he really made a big difference during his life."

He also discussed with Escoffier the possibility of setting up a New Zealand chapter of the Disciples of Escoffier and hopes to make progress on this during the year.

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