

THE AUSTRALIAN ●

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Something worth bleating about: At the Island Pure sheep dairy, visitors glimpse life on a sheep dairy farm, learn about production and taste some of the products, such as the newly introduced Manchego cheese.



# Great southern land

Kangaroo Island, near Adelaide, is positioning itself as Australia's next gourmet destination and celebrity chefs are happily taking guests on the ultimate food safari

Story **Michelle Rowe** | Photography **Julian Kingma**





**I**t had been a harrowing few months at sea; supplies had dwindled and his crew were virtually starving when Captain Matthew Flinders landed on a rugged island in the broiling Southern Ocean in 1802. The British navigator, in the midst of his exploration of “the unknown coast” (as the uncharted South Australian coastline was then called), immediately noticed something different about the terrain. There were no indigenous people, no smoke from fires that would indicate signs of life. Most surprisingly, the island’s kangaroos, which had shown great fear of humans in previous encounters, were almost recklessly docile.

As it turned out, given their predicament, Flinders and his company aboard HMS Investigator couldn’t have happened upon a more fortuitous spot than this 155km long by 55km wide expanse of land just off the coast. With its lack of predators – human or otherwise – the island would provide them with the perfect refuelling stop. They spent the next few days hunting kangaroos and stocking up on the natural bounty from this unexpected food bowl. In gratitude, Flinders named the island after the animal that effectively saved the lives of his men.

Today, Kangaroo Island, 110km south of Adelaide, is positioning itself as Australia’s latest food destination. For years acclaimed for its abundant wildlife – the lack of foxes, rabbits and diseases has seen creatures as diverse as echidnas, wallabies and what is thought to be the world’s last remaining strain of pure Ligurian bees thrive – KI is now hoping to attract tourists of a more gastronomic bent.

Leading the charge is Southern Ocean Lodge, a luxury wilderness escape on the southwestern coast at Hanson Bay, an hour’s drive from the island’s Kingscote airport. The lodge launched KI Food Safari, a five-night gourmet tour introducing guests to the island’s many

producers, with cooking classes, demonstrations and dinners included, in August this year. The inaugural safari was a sell-out, something of a coup in a flagging domestic tourism market, and in no small part due to the food industry heavyweights who have wholeheartedly supported the initiative. It will now be an annual event.

South Australia-based Maggie Beer and Simon Bryant, of *The Cook and the Chef* television fame, signed up to lead the first tour, and a rotating band of high-calibre chefs is expected to take part in future events. For her part, Beer, a visitor to the island over many years, appears to be enjoying the safari every bit as much as the 32 guests.

“I have seen more of the island in the past couple of days than I have over all the time I’ve been coming here,” Beer tells me as she forages for samphire, to be used in our meal back at the lodge that evening. The group has made one of many scheduled stops, this time to sample American River oysters on the island’s northeast coast, when Beer happens upon the crop, also known as sea asparagus, growing on a nearby shore.

“The people here are so real, so enthusiastic about what they do. Kangaroo Island can definitely be a big food destination,” she says. The locals were the main drawcard for Tim Bourke, founding chef at Southern Ocean Lodge in 2008, who made it his business to establish strong links with the island’s producers and to showcase their wares on his menus.

The ingredients list at Southern Ocean lodge reads like a who’s who of the local food industry: the catch of the day from Kangaroo Island Fresh Seafoods; marron from Kangaroo Island Gold; Fryar’s Free Range Eggs from a farm near Kingscote; honey from Island Beehive; lamb from South Rock Lamb, an hour’s drive away. The menus are devised daily, according to what’s fresh and available.

Love later lured Bourke away to Sydney but he missed

Maggie Beer (pictured) champions KI’s produce, such as cheeses from Island Pure sheep dairy (one of whose lambs is pictured, held by the general manager’s son, Linas Harman); Ligurian bees thrive on the island; far left, taste it all at Southern Ocean Lodge.

the easy relationships he’d established with these artisan food producers and returned to the lodge earlier this year to pick up where he left off. Today, many of his suppliers are included in the food safari, with guests transported in a series of comfortable buses to outlets including a marron farm (where we select a few prime specimens for dinner), a working sheep dairy (for milking and cheesemaking demonstrations before morning tea outside in a glorious country setting) and olive oil makers.

Covering such ground independently would be a challenge; there are vast distances to negotiate (45-minute drives between producers on the schedule are not unusual), roads are largely unsealed, signposting is conspicuous by its absence and many of the small-scale operations featured on the tour don’t yet have facilities open to the public.

Then there’s the parade of wildlife, from possums to wallabies and, in one bizarre sighting, three black calves who’ve escaped their enclosure and thrown caution to the wind at twilight, dashing on to the roads and creating havoc for unsuspecting motorists.

Bourke hopes the formalised tour will not only make it easier for gastro-tourists to maximise their time here but provide a welcome opportunity to bring his local food heroes to the attention of a wider audience. “The biggest reason I came back is that I’m able to use everything local. It was so faceless in Sydney,” says the



chef. “Marron is one of the biggest things here and [marron farmers] KI Gold go out of their way to supply us with everything we need.

“We also use as much lamb as we can put on the menu. It’s supplied by Kate and Andy Gilfillan of South Rock Lamb – family producers on the other side of the island – and I really missed them when I was in Sydney.”

The Gilfillans prove to be one of the highlights of the food safari. On day two, our tour party arrives at their glorious home, set high on a cliff-top on the eastern end of the island, to find a 23kg lamb on the spit sizzling on the veranda and platters of vegetables and salads set out on the kitchen benchtop. Beer leaps in enthusiastically to help Andy carve the succulent meat, passing slices to the rest of us to sample before the beast is served for lunch.

Engaging and witty winemaker Jeff Howard from Dudley Wines has brought along some of his best bottles for tasting over the meal. “KI is the newest winegrowing region in Australia, with the first commercial wines produced here only in 1998,” Howard tells us as we tuck in. “We only use Kangaroo Island grapes, pure KI products. The wine and food industry here is very small and young, but the potential is there. The area we have is huge and there’s little pockets of things all over the island. That must be how we sell ourselves, that we have such diversity.”

This diversity is evident on safari. Within the first couple of days we’ve had a fabulous lunch at The Islander Estate Vineyards, a 300ha property near Pardana owned by Frenchman Jacques Lurton, who left his home country to escape its restrictive winemaking rules and regulations and concentrate on doing things his way, blending grape varieties as he pleases and producing the types of wine he’d prefer to drink. His blends are 100 per cent estate-grown and varietals include shiraz, sangiovese and chardonnay.

Following a winetasting in the IEV barrel room, safari

guests are treated to a rustic – and fabulous – lunch laid out on platters atop bales of hay. It’s a generous spread, prepared by Bourke: prawn and mayonnaise rolls, homemade caponata, smoked kingfish, bresaola, gravlax and a terrific lamb tartare made with roasted almonds, a splash of sweet red vinegar, coriander, mint, parsley, cinnamon, cumin and fennel seed, all washed down with the vineyard’s wines.

“The wines we’ve shown today are wines we are about to release; it’s a huge opportunity for us as we don’t have a traditional cellar door or the staff or tourist numbers to justify it,” says the vineyard’s marketing manager Rhys Howlett, as guests go back for seconds. “To be hosting 40 guests at this time of year is just magic. Events like this are special opportunities for KI to showcase its best; as a regular tourist it can be difficult to see everything in a short space of time – just look at the spread.”

We get up close and personal with bleating lambs at Island Pure sheep dairy, where general manager Justin Harman, previously a chef at Bridgewater Mills and The Salopian Inn, is doing great things with cheeses and yoghurts. We are the first to try the dairy’s new Manchego cheese – just six weeks old – after donning paper hats and boots and plastic aprons to enter the production area.


During non-travelling periods, guests can sign up at the lodge for masterclasses including a three-day sourdough-making course, Ligurian honey creme caramel making and cooking with marron, or early morning fishing trips. Perhaps most valuable, though, is the access to Beer and Bryant, two thoroughly committed cheerleaders for the island. The pair chat freely with guests and immerse themselves with enthusiasm in the itinerary. It’s a happy and talkative crowd.

“Maggie and Simon are icons of South Australia, so who better than them to kick off the safari,” says Bourke, who acknowledges that there are still some

Clockwise, from top left: Southern Ocean Lodge, the starting point for the food safari; Maggie Beer and Simon Bryant, who led the inaugural safari; just some of the fabulous local produce; and chef Tim Bourke, who showcases local ingredients at the lodge.

hurdles to overcome in terms of making the island a leader in the gastronomic field; the lack of an abattoir being one (animals must be sent back to the mainland for slaughter; a costly and arduous system), and the small scale of some operations meaning not all are geared up yet to receiving tour guests.

But he’s adamant the island, home to just 4500 permanent residents, is well on its way. “Five or six years down the track, Kangaroo Island will be like the Hills in the Barossa. People will come here for the food instead of a zoo without fences,” says Bourke. “There are a lot of good people here involved in food and wine and there is no reason why food can’t be the number one reason people visit.”

As guests tuck into a degustation dinner prepared by Bourke back at the lodge, more of The Islander Estate Vineyard’s excellent wines are flowing. The flagship is a cabernet franc/sangiovese blend named The Investigator – after the ship Flinders steered in to this pristine wilderness all those years ago. The plucky Brit could little have imagined what he was starting. 

*The next KI Food Safari will be held from August 25–31, 2012; [southernoceanlodge.com.au](http://southernoceanlodge.com.au).*

*Michelle Rowe was a guest of Southern Ocean Lodge and the South Australian Tourism Commission.*