

NZ House & Garden on Holiday

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Mussel Power



Rustle, bustle, hustle, tussle. Not a lot of words rhyme with mussel and that's a problem when trying to pen An Ode to a Mussel. One entrant in this year's Great FitzRoy Mussel Festival's poetry competition gamely tried to make do with cauffle (sic) but to no avail.

It's safe to say the bivalve *Perna canaliculus* (try rhyming that!) doesn't inspire in quite the same way as a nightingale or a Grecian urn. No matter. Poetry is just part of the mix that attracts the festival crowd to the island locals call 'The Barrier'.

More than a tonne of greenshell mussels are consumed on the day. But compared to food festivals on the mainland the Great Barrier event is small and, like the mussels, decidedly home-grown. It's organized and run by the islanders for the islanders – they cook the mussels, man the bar, judge the poetry and provide the live music. It's their gig and that's what makes it special.

"Lots of islanders come and the Port FitzRoy harbour fills up with boats," says organiser Wayne Anderson. "When the band's swinging and people are dancing on the tables, it's great fun. The worst part is trying to get them to leave."

You have to like mussels, of course. The Cryer family of Auckland certainly does; onHoliday has the photos to prove it. Philip and Nicki and daughters Grace, Nina and Emily holiday at Medlands Beach, 30km from Port FitzRoy on the wild side of the island; the side that's exposed to the full-on smack of the Pacific Ocean; the side where the surfers go.



When Philip first visited The Barrier this is where he stayed, in a hut at Medlands Beach. "It was Easter 1987 and it rained every day for four days. We had such a good time." Now next to the hut, tucked in behind the dunes, there's a simple, stylish bach equipped with solar power, outside shower and composting toilet. Life is still simple on The Barrier and so are the holidays. Nicki paints, Philip goes fishing, the older girls surf and Emily likes to forage – for mussels. "I love them. Me and my dad, we get them off the rocks. He cooks them up and we eat heaps and heaps."



Philip and Emily collect the small wild variety that grows all around the coast. The cultivated mussels are farmed on the quiet western side of The Barrier, in the sheltered waters of Katherine Bay and at Port FitzRoy where the festival is held. It's the perfect place to farm greenshells. The water under the buoys is so clear the mussel-laden ropes are visible several metres down and the markings on the kingfish can be seen clearly as they weave their way between the lines. These are the mussels that are destined to be battered, frittered, skewered, grilled and steamed just up the hill at the festival site in the grounds of the Port FitzRoy Boating Club.

Surprisingly, this is the first year the Cryers have made it to the festival but they melt easily into the day, cruising the food stalls, drifting with the current, a nibble here, a nibble there. The mussel sausages, made with minced lamb and mussel meat, get the nod early on. The burgers look good too but Nicki rates the kebabs as best in show – juicy mussels, streaky bacon, chunks of red onion and capsicum, caramelized on the grill and drizzled with sweet chilli sauce.

Kaye van Steen has made 600 kebabs which must have kept her busy in the hours leading up to the festival. When she's not skewering mussels she works as a nurse on the island but she's not on duty today – "it's the other nurse's turn".

The other nurse is just metres away, applying a dressing to a tray of smoked mussels. The garlic, soy and sweet chilli glaze cuts the manuka smoke and the mussels are delicious. The Cryers have worked through two platefuls already. Behind the scenes, the island's mussel farmers are shucking as fast as they can to keep pace with demand.

Past the loudspeakers bouncing with the sound of the North Barrier Music Club, there's a stall devoted to steamed mussels. These are served in bowls and splashed with a sauce made from coconut milk and more sweet chilli sauce.

Just in case the sauce runs out Geoff Naismith, the island's chilli man, has set up a table with rows of bottles lined up in order from mildly hot to positively deadly. Geoff grows chillies in raised seaweed beds and the sauces he makes from them are so good a round of beer is required to cool the heat.

Chillies aside, there's a Kiwi flavour to the food that recalls the days when sausages had sand in them and the only type of lettuce was iceberg. There's mussel salad with mayonnaise and a dash of curry powder and there are lots of mussel fritters.

The Maori Women's Welfare League has gone big on the fritters. The local branch has spent hours in the marae kitchen steaming and mincing mussels. They've set up camp under the trees with buckets of batter mix. If the fritters run out they've also got corn cobs and fried bread – an island speciality.

By mid afternoon the sun is blazing and the Cryers are juggling hats, plates, serviettes, plastic forks, drink bottles, sunblock and loose change. Philip finds he can jive to the music AND keep his sarong in place. "I'm good at multi-tasking when it comes to eating and drinking."



The girls have eaten enough and they've picked their way through the other stalls: the CDs, sunglasses and T-shirts. They've examined the local pottery and they've bought a pet rock each.

The locals aren't dancing on the tables just yet and the poetry judging hasn't started but it's time to go home. A big bucket of mussels for just \$10 is a final bargain that's hard to resist – one more for the road.

The road, by the way, is a shocker. Narrow with lots of windy bits, ups and downs and plenty of gravel. Heat and dust and half-digested mussels, it's all too much for those in the back seat. Somewhere between FitzRoy and Medlands Beach, Nina loses her lunch.



Back at the bach there's time for a lie-down before dinner. Dinner is the bargain bucket of mussels that's been rolling around in the boot. Philip's famous mussel risotto is on the menu tonight and Nicki is planning to serve the rest with her fresh tomato and coriander salsa.

But Nina – she who will "never eat another mussel again, ever" – reckons she might just pass on that. Until next year.

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