

Carême at home in New Zealand

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Recently, an email arrived with a very intriguing address: jo at careme.co.nz.

Carême is the famous pioneering French chef, adopted by Jo Crabb in New Zealand, that is. She runs cooking classes in Martinborough, which is a small town at the south end of the North Island, about an hour from Wellington. Given how New Zealand tackled Covid, I wanted to know how that had affected Jo and her classes. But I was also pretty surprised to learn that Jo and her partner had a holiday home in the south of France, where they would spend a couple of months a year before the pandemic. Almost 20,000 kilometres; seems like an awful long way to go to a second home.

Jo Crabb: We're not the only ones in Martinborough. Martinborough is a small town of 1,200, 1,400 people. At one time, there were three or four people who had houses, owned houses in France. That's not bad.

Jeremy: Where did you start to cook?

Jo Crabb: When I went to university in Christchurch, Canterbury University. I really thought, "Golly, this isn't for me." I finished it, but then I thought, "No, there's got to be something more interesting." I just started cooking. I just got a job, work your way up.

Jeremy: When did you start doing cooking classes?

Jo Crabb: Oh, I just made that up. [laughter]

I mean, I just decided to do it. I'd hurt my back and some of the physical restaurant stuff was going to be a bit tricky, so I thought, "Oh crikey, I have to do something." It was a bit of a leap of faith because -- and also, you can practice it. [laughs] You have to practice it on live people. We just started. We just decided to do it. The first class, crikey, it was exhausting. Of course, I learnt a lot more than they did. Of course, those who came to the first class, they had to sit there and take it. Well, they claimed to enjoy it at the time. We'd planned and we'd planned. You can't think too far ahead. You have to entertain them. You have to make sure everyone's engaged but you have to be amusing. Also, at the same time, the lunch has to turn out

and that is the most important thing. If the lunch doesn't turn out, you're in trouble. They loved it, fortunately. We've been doing it for eight years now. I've got slightly better but it should always be an adventure. It should never be over-prepared.

Jeremy: You offer a whole range of classes, I looked on your website, there's a whole range of things. You do seem to prefer classical French cuisine.

Jo Crabb: Yes.

Jeremy: Why? Let me just back up. These days, classical French cuisine has a bit of a kind of dull reputation.

Jo Crabb: It's got a bit of baggage. Yes, I know, it has too. I still think that French food is the best and I have tried a lot of food. I go around eating a lot. Honestly, the French take food more seriously. The Italians take food very seriously, the Indians take food very seriously and I love all their food. I still love French food. Yes, that grandma thing.

Jeremy: You say the grandma thing but your hero seems to be Carême.

Jo Crabb: Carême, ah, yes.

Jeremy: He's not exactly a grandma figure in cooking is he?

Jo Crabb: No, he's not. I suspect he was a rather nasty man too actually. Although he had a daughter who he didn't have a lot to do with. One night, she burned all his papers which is a bit of a shame. I don't think he was particularly nice.

Jeremy: He had an enormous influence on French cooking and you seem to be channeling that approach to cooking, I think.

Jo Crabb: He taught the world a lot about food. He really did. He was a major influence.

Jeremy: Is French cooking actually, is that your most popular class among the people who are coming to learn, or is it just the thing you like doing most?

Jo Crabb: Well, the things that you're most enthusiastic about are normally the thing you're best, isn't it? The French ones are always

popular because I go on about them a lot. Then the bread and yeast classes are always popular too because they're practical. Then the spicy classes are popular too. The Indian ones, yes, spices.

Jeremy: The other thing I found intriguing was that one of the things you say is that, in most classes, you focus on one or two easy things that can make a real difference. What sorts of things?

Jo Crabb: Well, it's a rather unkind thing to say but a lot of people do very basic things wrongly. You can just teach them really simple things like the way to hold a knife and go out and buy a good knife. Just tell them to do it and they do it. It makes a big difference. Things like, if you say to them, with the right sparkle in your eye, to make their own mayonnaise, it transforms cooking. It transforms your lunches. You've got little potatoes with mayonnaise, yum yum. [chuckles] Every sandwich that you're ever going to make is going to be good.

Jeremy: When you say, "Make your own mayonnaise," do you mean with a whisk or can you use one of those immersion blender things?

Jo Crabb: In the classes, we do it with a whisk because making a small quantity, it works out well with a whisk. We take turns, it's very bonding. Food is very bonding.

Jeremy: Okay, so mayonnaise is one but once you've decided you're going to make your own mayonnaise, what else can you do among these little simple things that make a difference?

Jo Crabb: Roasting and grinding your own spices. It transforms it. It makes it just so, so much better and it's so easy. People buy ground spices. When I go to their houses, I see them, it's awful, it's depressing. I know they're old, they've been sitting in the cupboard for a year, two years. Throw them out.

Jeremy: Do you find when people come and see you do this, do they actually notice the difference then and say, "Oh, gosh, the scales have fallen from my eyes"?

Jo Crabb: Yes. Whether they actually do it at home afterwards -- I like to think they do.

Jeremy: The bread thing. You mentioned the bread thing being very popular. Of course, we have during the COVID thing, we have seen an explosion of people home baking — and not just sourdough but a lot of sourdough. Do you think that'll continue once people no longer have to do it?

Jo Crabb: No, I don't. I wouldn't be surprised. I like to think some things will last, like the walking and cycling. Personally, I don't think the sourdough one will. I know what a fag it is to look after sourdough. When you go on holiday, what are you going to do? I have techniques.

Jeremy: Leave it in the back of the fridge. That's what I do.

Jo Crabb: Well, I find it goes off. It doesn't like it. It gets grumpy. It's very temperamental.

Jeremy: I like to think that some people at least will keep baking because they've got the bug.

Jo Crabb: Yes. I like to think so too, but I don't think everybody will.

Jeremy: I wanted to ask you about New Zealand produce because I'm in Italy and the lamb here, it's too young for my taste. We used to be able to get wonderful frozen legs of New Zealand lamb and now I can't find that anywhere. Apart from lamb, and we get apples as well, what's the produce like in New Zealand? Actually, there on your doorstep?

Jo Crabb: Seafood is fantastic. I honestly think we have the best seafood in the world because we have nice cold water and most seafood grows best in cold water. We have stuff, Pāua — abalone — which I don't think you get. It's black and unappealing but its taste is very good. Crayfish, which is rock lobster, that's another good one. Very good fillet fish, it's very good. Of course, our milk and cream are sensational. Our cheese, we're still working on that. Fruit and vegetables are good, but they don't really do that seasonal thing.

Jeremy: Why is that? I mean, we get your apples out of season.
[laughter]

Jo Crabb: Yes, they've really worked on the business thing. They've said, "Okay, we'll get the leeks." We get these lovely big leeks and

we get them for, I don't know, nine months in a year. Then when we go to France, and we find these lovely little leeks just sometimes and they're just so much better. We get tomatoes all the time and they're awful. It's the same everywhere, isn't it? You get bad tomatoes all the time when you want tomatoes in summer.

Jeremy: New Zealand food used to have a pretty dreadful reputation certainly in the UK, and you do a class of colonial Kiwi food. Tell me about that.

Jo Crabb: [laughs] That's priceless. Of course, it's mostly meat and potatoes or variations on stodge because they were working very hard, and they didn't have a lot of opportunities to get different stuff. It's variations on mutton, mutton, mutton, not much else, and potatoes or potatoes. Then we did things like... There was some... You have to read a lot of sort of early kind of stuff. There was a story about a girl who didn't know how to cook and she went next door and the farmer and his wife next door was making scones on a, what do you call it? A thing that sits on fire? Griddle, that's right. She went home and she was going to make scones for her father because her mother had died. She didn't have one so she got her father's saw and cooked it, set that on top of the fire and cooked it. In the class we had a saw, we found an old saw, we set it on the element and we made scones on it. It was quite fun. [laughs] Everyone thought it was hysterical. Then we made butter to go with it. Everyone knows how to make butter, but no one ever does it, so it was fun to do it. It's very easy, you just over beat cream. It was really nice. Quite an experience.

Jeremy: What about the modern approach, which is using local ingredients and local techniques? How has modern cuisine in New Zealand developed? Is it using Māori techniques and ingredients?

Jo Crabb: There are some, but not a heck of a lot. There are a few things which we've learnt from Māori, but to be honest, we haven't learnt a lot. We should have learnt more, but ... usual story. We're learning more. There was quite an exchange and of course, once our sweet potato came, they stopped using their original kūmara, which was their sweet potato, which was their basic... Our cuisine took over, to be honest.

Jeremy: You mentioned the kūmara, the sweet potato that came across the Pacific. Are there any things that are indigenous to the country?

Jo Crabb: Oh, thinks rapidly. Well, of course, we famously have no mammals, so there's not a lot of animals. There are parts of trees, of which the Māori ate, which aren't as appealing these days, like the cabbage tree, tī kōuka, they used to eat the top part of it, like a cabbage. It's not as appealing I feel as a Western-style cabbage. What else would there be? That's kind of it really.

Jeremy: The giant, what are they called? Moas, or?

Jo Crabb: Moa, oh yes.

Jeremy: Were they eaten?

Jo Crabb: Oh, yes. Oh yes, they were definitely eaten by the Māori. Māori would send out parties. The hunting party would live on the moa eggs while they were hunting for the giant moa and they would preserve their moa and eat them for the rest of the year. But I'm afraid they liked them and they made them extinct.

Jeremy: What do you see going forward?

Jo Crabb: We're working on a new project, we're trying to find a new space in Martinborough, but because Martinborough is so prosperous now, there's hardly any spare spaces. Each space that comes up, we're trying to get and we're bidding on a new space, but we keep waiting to see what will happen.

Jeremy: When do you think you'll get back to France?

Jo Crabb: Oh, goodness me. We have to wait for a vaccine. I'm turning 60 next week, so you really want to be a little bit careful. I know that. You're starting to enter the danger years. We're really going to have to wait for a vaccine.

Jeremy: One last question. Do you think that cooking at home in general, we talked about bread, and how people have been making bread during the lockdown, but do you think cooking at home has also gone up a notch maybe as people have been in a way forced to take it on?

Jo Crabb: Yes, definitely. Definitely. Yes. Restaurants are going to have to lift their game because some restaurants are not that good. Often when I go out, I think, “Oh goodness me, really? Oh, dear.” It's nice not to have to wash the dishes, but apart from that, it would be much better at home. Don't you find that?

Jeremy: Honestly, I'm not sure. Because we haven't been going out to people either, so I don't know what people who normally spend more time in restaurants than cooking at home, I don't know what's happened to their cooking. I'd be intrigued to know, the people who were going out to restaurants three or four times a week, what were they doing, and has that changed? I just don't know the answer.

Jo Crabb: I think people will have been doing studies on this. It would be very interesting, wouldn't it? I think they'll be desperate to go out again. It's seeing people. When we couldn't go out, you just wanted to see people. You wanted to just sit there and watch the world go by, sit in a café, and watch people.