



FROM TANGAROA TO TĒPU

New Zealand kingfish are easily recognisable by their distinctive yellow tails. They're a large, fast-swimming hunter and the star of one of the most popular dishes at Peter Gordon's restaurant The Sugar Club.

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY QIANE MATATA-SIPU







ETER GORDON (NGĀTI Kahungunu) is the father of fusion cooking in Aotearoa. Blending flavours, foreign foods and textures is his trade. Doing so with the best of New Zealand produce is his passion. On the 53rd floor of Auckland's Sky Tower is his most recent offering to the restaurant scene, The Sugar Club, showcasing the finest local cuisine—with a twist.

The restaurant is a rebirth of sorts, with the first Sugar Club opening in 1986 in Central Wellington. It was here he brought an Asian and Middle-Eastern-infused menu to a New Zealand market.

"The Sugar Club in Wellington was the first time I had been in charge of what ended up on customer's plates," he says. More

recently, he went on a journey of self-discovery with his TV series *Fusion Feasts* for Māori Television. "I visited marae around the country and took traditional Māori food and put a fusion twist on them. It was an opportunity to mix my favourite flavours from around the world in fresh and exciting ways."

The Sugar Club blends Gordon's favourite foods with the most popular dishes from previous restaurants, as well as a few new additions. One of those additions is a Line Caught Beetroot Marinated Kingfish, a dish so fresh you can almost taste the salt water.

Sourcing their produce from a local supplier less than 90 minutes away, Gordon and his head chef Neil Brazier boast that it is one of the most sustainable and locally sourced

Skipper Darrin Fabricius (above right) catches up with another local fisherman while docked at Leigh Wharf. The Coral V crew work four days on, three days off, only coming to shore to unload their catch and re-stock supplies (top left).



products on their menu. “I believe in buying local and sustainable. Supporting local isn’t just about the environmental impacts. It is good for business, employment, personal wellbeing, and yes, it can also mean a lower carbon footprint.”

3am: THE CATCH

“I’ve been on the boats for 28 years,” says *Coral V* skipper Darrin Fabricius. “We’ve been fishing on the top end of Great Barrier today, baiting the gear at 3am so it is set by 4.30am. It takes 90 minutes to set the lines so we have breakfast before we start the haul.”

The ‘haul’ begins at 7.30am and can take about five hours.

The *Coral V* is one of approximately 50

boats contracted to the Lee Fish Group. The company, based in the seaside town of Leigh, north of Auckland, supplies the nation’s finest restaurants, hotels and lodges.

With boats fishing from as far north as Cape Reinga down to the Bay of Plenty and West Coast, Lee Fish supplies the market with snapper, kingfish, hāpuku, trevally, tarakihi and gurnard. They also catch lobster.

Today, this boat alone has caught more than 150 bins (each bin containing 15 kilograms of fish) of mixed species using a longline method of fishing. The method aids in a selective catch and results in a higher quality product.

“You can see the eyes are clear, and not cloudy. That shows they came aboard alive,” says Fabricius.

The fish are caught with a hook and landed aboard the boat where they are killed using the Japanese method of iki-spiking. This leaves the scales in tact, preserves the fish and prolongs shelf life.

“Line fishing is a more labour intensive method compared with other methods [such as trawling],” says Fabricius, “But it is definitely my preferred way to catch fish commercially. The fish come in live and there is much less wastage. This method is also good for targeting specific species using location and bait, so there are no throwbacks.”

It is also seen as a more sustainable method of catching fish in New Zealand waters.

“Everyone has their own opinions,” he continues, “But I can say I have no hang ups



about what I do as a commercial fisherman. I can proudly stand by this method. I find this is the best way to work in a public space that helps manage and preserve quota species and protects our resource.”

As one of the most sought after species, used most often for sashimi, crudo and ceviche dishes, kingfish is plentiful, but not widespread. It has a small commercial quota, which gives it a very high market value.

“Our kingfish is exported to Asia, Europe, USA and Australia,” says Sam Birch (Ngāi Tahu) of Lee Fish. “It is very well recognised.”

Domestically, the species is also popular amongst top restaurants and the company supplies all the main centers from as far north as Russell, right down to Queenstown.

“Within New Zealand we only service restaurants, hotels and lodges. This means the customer has a direct connection with their producer and know the fish they are getting off us is the freshest product available because it doesn’t pass through any other channels to get to them.”

The *Coral V* has an all-male crew with 37 years experience between them. They all started as teenagers and say while it can be monotonous work, they love their trade.

Awatea Aitken (Ngāi Tahu), the newbie on board, has been on the team for less than a month. Both his grandfathers were fishermen for Lee Fish Group and, at only 17, he is proudly following in their footsteps.

“It’s a tough job,” he admits, “but I haven’t

been scared off yet!”

Alex Dryland started at 16, working his way up to trainee skipper over the past five years and 20-year-old Zakariah Paikea (Ngāti Whātua, Ngāti Wai, Ngāpuhi) was a fresh-faced 17-year-old who showed up for work experience one day, and never left.

“My old man was a fisherman,” says Paikea. “He did net fishing at the Kaipara Harbour. He had a different lifestyle though because we lived on the harbour and he would work from home. He encouraged me to get into this type of work.”

Once the fish are packed in ice, the crew take a 2pm lunch break—often Zak’s famous hot dogs—and make the journey back to Leigh Wharf to unload the day’s bounty.



IWI CONNECTION

Lee Fish works within New Zealand's strict quota management system in order to prevent over-fishing. The company also works with the iwi groups of Waikato-Tainui, Ngāti Whatua, Ngāti Kahungunu, Whangaroa, Ngāti Kuri, Ngāti Kahu and Te Aupouri, leasing iwi quota through the tribes' Annual Catch Entitlement (ACE). Ngāti Whatua also own company shares.

Awatea Aitken (above left) helps unload 150 bins of freshly caught fish from the boat's ice slurry—a job both his grandfathers did during their time working for the Lee Fish Group.



4.30pm: THE UNLOAD

With more than 200 people contributing to the Lee Fish Group, it is the truckies that meet the *Coral V* at the dock to unload the kingfish. On average, most boats unload 40–60 bins with snapper weighing in at about 1.5 kilograms and hāpuku and kingfish at 6–10 kilograms.

The fish are lifted from the ice slurry and into a delivery truck to be driven one kilometre up the road to the company's facility.

It is cold and dark on this late winter's evening and everyone leaps to their positions, emptying the boat as they've been efficiently trained to. Birch takes stock of what comes off the vessel for the next day's pack, making notes to update chefs around →

the country of their species options for the following day.

"The fish stay in their bins with the lids on and are stacked into a large chilled room where they are kept until the morning," he explains.

7.30pm sees the end of a very physical unload. The *Coral V* crew re-stock their ice slurry, put on the evening's roast beef, and head back out into the bay to prepare for tomorrow.

 **6.00am: THE PACK**

"Each order is processed according to the needs of the particular chef," says Birch. "Some are sent whole, some filleted, headed, gutted and scaled.

"When the fish has been bagged and boxed in ice with the restaurant name and details, it makes its final journey to the customer."

By 2pm, yesterday's freshly caught kingfish has been hand-picked and packaged by an expert grader and is on the 53rd floor of

Auckland's Sky Tower, ready to become a gourmet dish.

 **7.00pm: THE DISH**

Gold foil patterns wrap the stacked menus as the Art Deco, Italian-inspired décor showcases a dining room dripping in brass fittings and luxurious fabrics. A stone bench top separates Chef Brazier from the table setting.

With a floor-to-ceiling view of the four corners of Tāmaki Makaurau and beyond, you can almost see the exact spot this piece of kingfish (currently on its way to a sizzling

pan), was caught.

"Aotearoa has some of the best produce in the world on our door step, it seems almost-criminal not to source our ingredients locally," says Brazier. "It is fresh, tasty and hard to be beaten."

Brazier has been head chef at The Sugar Club since it opened its doors a year ago, 250 metres in the sky. He has been cooking with the best for 16 years, at Kauri Cliffs, once judged the third best luxury lodge in the world, his own Pear Tree Restaurant in Northland and in kitchens around the world. However, he appears to be most excited when

"Aotearoa has some of the best produce in the world on our door step, it seems almost criminal not to source our ingredients locally. It's fresh, tasty and hard to be beaten."





The Sugar Club has a unique set up with Neil Brazier (left) leading 15 chefs to work across three kitchens, spread between the ground floor and the 53rd floor of Auckland's Sky Tower.

talking about his role with Peter Gordon.

"I have wanted to be a chef since I was 13," he shares. "Cooking is more than my passion, it is part of who I am."

"Sustainable, lush, fusion cuisine," is how he describes the dish in front of him. He talks through cooking methods while he pieces the elements together.

"We prep the kingfish, portion it, then salt it for 20 minutes," he explains. "The fish is marinated in beetroot and smoked kahawai juice and then cooked. There is a smooth carrot and ginger puree and a spiced coconut and kale sauce, as well as a rice cracker for the dish that looks a little like fish skin.

"This cracker takes a couple of days to make," he points out.

"To finish, we have an oyster wrapped in potato string before we tempura it very quickly and add a few slices of two different kinds of baby carrot."

Less than 39 hours ago the star of this dish was likely hunting squid off the coast.

It is now a slowly disappearing, melt-in-your-mouth, fusion-cooked delicacy that begs for seconds. ☺



COOKING TIPS FROM NEIL BRAZIER

"Fresh is best—the fresher it is from the garden or sea, the better your food will be. You also need to season, not just at the end, but during cooking too. As well as salt and pepper, consider using lemons for seasoning. They enhance and bring out the flavour in food and you will be surprised how many things they go with, from fish, to meat, and even vegetarian dishes."