

MY LIFE

Laurent Loudeac, award-winning chef

There's not too many people who can boast they've cooked for a poet, an All Black, and a husband and wife acting team, but Laurent Loudeac, executive chef at Wellington's Hippopotamus Restaurant, did just that recently, serving up the pasta dish that saw him named supreme winner of the 2009 Kapiti Chef Collection to a group of Kiwi high-fliers that included Sam Hunt, Josh Kronfeld, and Jennifer Ward-Lealand and Michael Hurst. On August 22 he's plating up the same dish - Kikorangi tortellinon on creamed leek, micro salad and crispy parma ham shaving - for 400 guests at the Restaurant Associations Feast By Famous Chefs dinner at SkyCity in Auckland.

It's a far cry from the days he spent as a youngster making lunch for his dad at the family home in Chateaubriant, France. But after more than 20 years in the industry, Loudeac, who's cooked in Switzerland, London, and Australia, where he was sous chef at Sydney's famed Level 41, reckons he's pretty much where he wants to be these days.

His first job in New Zealand was at Puka Lodge in Pauanui, after which he moved to Wellington's Parkroyal (now the InterContinental) and then to Hummingbird, where he cooked for four years.

With 15-year-old son Jeremy - a national age group swimmer - living with him every other week, Loudeac is a simple eater when he's at home, favouring what's called "cuisine grandmere" - comfort food such as roast chicken and braised lamb shanks.

In my last year at college I used to go home with my dad every lunchtime. My mum used to get out what we needed for lunch - it might be steak or calves liver or whatever - and I would cook it.

I come from a very, very middle-class family. I originally wanted to be a vet, but that was too expensive and I wasn't very good at maths, which I apparently needed... we knew someone who worked in a three-star restaurant in a little hotel so I did holiday work experience to see if I liked it, and that was the start of a two-year apprenticeship. **Chefing and being a vet - they're two opposites really.** Either you cook animals or you fix them. Another thing I wanted to do



Top chef: Laurent Loudeac says being a chef is not regarded as a profession in New Zealand.

was a truck driver, so I could travel. **I don't go out to dinner in Wellington very often.** Despite the number of places, it's really quite limited - there's cafes and then there's high-end places. I could go to the White House or Logan Brown, which would cost me a fortune, or I could go to a cafe where I'm going to get what I would get in every cafe.

Being a chef I know what a dish costs, how much it takes to make it and when I see some of the prices, I go "oh, hello... that's not right".

My son doesn't really cook, no. He won't be a chef. He's not into cooking at all. He wants a job where he's going to become rich; he wants to be an accountant or a psychologist. If I had my own business I might push him into it. You can make quite good money being a chef, but it takes a while.

The young chefs coming out now want an \$18 an hour plus position straight away. It's become more trendy, but it's still not seen as a profession in New Zealand.

You only become a chef because you want to be a chef, not because you've seen it on TV or you want to write books. It doesn't happen - it's maybe one out of a million chefs who might be on TV one day. You have to work weekends, and holidays and at night. These young guys come out and there's no more Saturday nights with the boys, and it's like "Shit, I don't like this actually".

It was always mum in the kitchen at home and the men in the professional kitchens. But I think that's been to do with strength. It can be quite physically demanding. But women bring a more refined touch, a nicer vibe.

I ate horse back in France. My son and I were in the butcher's section of the supermarket looking for something for dinner and we saw cheval. So we had a steak. We eat cows, so why not horse?

We had foie gras on the menu for six months but we had some young hippies protesting outside with loudspeakers, so I took it off. I didn't want to do a dish with controversy about it.

I've never done 400 people before. That will be interesting especially as I'm doing three tortellini per person, so that's 1200 tortellini. It's all good experience so I'm not too worried... maybe I should be.

JULIE JACOBSON

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