



Dinner guests Dean Gray and Anna Masters are served seared tuna by friend and chef Alison Robert. **Opposite page:** Alison sets the table for her Friday night meal.

# PLAIN SAILING

A former chef on super yachts, Alison Robert now runs her own cooking school. Amazingly, after a busy day at the stove, she still delights in preparing a Friday night meal for friends

Story by JOANNA BATES Photographs by KIERAN SCOTT



Josh Stockford gets into the Friday night spirit.

Friends relish an invite to Alison Robert's Auckland home for dinner. And why wouldn't they? Alison is a well travelled, UK-trained chef who runs her own cooking school, Main Course, in Auckland. She takes much of her inspiration from her Mauritian French father and the sea, upon which she spent six years as a chef on super yachts.

So, those friends just can't stay away; not even Auckland's notorious peak-hour traffic can keep them trapped. Dean Gray, with strict instructions to be at Alison's inner-city home by 6pm, ditches his cab in traffic and sprints the 30-minute distance.

He would be mad not to when the menu for this Friday night's dinner includes seared tuna with potato and mango curry and onion chilli jam, followed by a decadent dessert of lemon verbena cake with dark chocolate and ginger sauce,





**This page, top left and above:** Alison – a natural entertainer – banter with her guests as she prepares dinner. **This page, top right:** Short on flowers, the hostess dresses up her dining table with an elegant alliance between rosemary sprig and tea light. **Right:** Let's eat!



Anna Masters enjoys the evening.

accompanied by fresh cherries.

Alison describes the style of her food as “born of travel and different cultures.

“I’d say that I lean towards modern styles of cooking with traditional foundations and a healthy helping of nutritional balance,” she says.

“Whether it’s New Zealand or Italy, food has the same function – to nurture, nourish and support. I love peasant food and my dad taught me a lot about where food comes from: not to be fussy or fancy with it, just respect it. Work with flavours, use the abundance of spices, herbs and vegetables to make it into a healthy, tasty, nutritious meal that you share with the people who mean the most to you.”

Alison believes these are all very holistic theories but, nonetheless, basic human – and often neglected – needs. While she integrates these principles into the classes she teaches at her cooking school, fun is also a vital ingredient.

Alison has a knack for inspiring and enthusing others and says building confidence is also important.

“Everyone can cook, and once you understand the basics, it is not only easy but creative and enjoyable. Preparing food can lower our stress levels, it brings people together and makes us smile.”

The fun factor is what draws her guests into the kitchen as she prepares them a casual dinner. Everyone is asking questions and, being a natural entertainer, Alison slips into cracking jokes while she slices and dices.

An hour before dinner is due to be served – and photographed here – work commitments lead to a casualty on the guest list. Within seconds, Alison is juggling

kitchen duties with calling friends for a last-minute stand in.

The ring-around turns up Jeff from next door, who was destined to eat pizza and guzzle beer with his flatmates. He strides into Alison's kitchen, just as she becomes impassioned about entertaining her friends: "I love cooking for my mates at home. It happens about once a week, more so in the winter because my house is warmer than my friends' villas," she jokes. "I love making meatballs and pasta when the *Sopranos* is on – we all eat before the show and gorge on tiramisu from Delicious in Grey Lynn – it can't be beaten.

"I'd love to say that I prepare fantastic food each time, but mostly it's just what I feel like making and what's lurking in my fridge. Or I base the meal on unused produce from Main Course. Either way, it all goes, it's enjoyed and appreciated."

Alison says her years on super yachts made seafood a favourite ingredient, but soups are on the menu big-time.

"I'm a pseudo mother," Alison laughs "so I love making soups. My background is seafood cookery and I enjoy all that too – a fresh scallop is a truly wonderful thing – and I love anything Italian. I always have Parmiggiano Reggiano in my fridge, along with lemons, organic free-range eggs and that lovely olive oil from Rangihoua on Waiheke Island.

"Pulses and legumes are a favourite, too, because they are so good for you, yet so cheap to buy."

Alison again mentions her father. He has had a significant influence on her cooking and the type of food she enjoys eating.

"My Dad rocks! His food is so wholesome, made with love, and it's tasty. Whether it's a bowl of porridge in the morning or my favourite – fricassée du haricot rouge, which is red bean casserole with smoked pork hock."

Another influence is her adopted home, New Zealand, about which she is equally as passionate.

"A lot of my inspiration comes from the land. How lucky are we to live in a country that is so green and untouched by serious mass production and chemicals? Those hog farms and cereal plains in the USA scare me! Mussel picking on Great



**Above:** Tuna on a potato, mango curry. **Below left:** Geoff Willets swaps beer and pizza for something more delicious. **Below right:** Writer Joanna Bates shares a laugh with Josh Stockford.





Barrier, mushroom hunting out west, apple growing in Cambridge, these are real things that come from heaven.”

Alison says she loved (almost) every minute of her yachting experience. It was hard work, humbling, a journey of discovery and “wicked fun”.

Despite cooking for the rich and famous, Alison says the work couldn't be described as glamorous. “When you sail past three countries without even seeing the shoreline because you are cooking your arse off in the galley for 12 guests and eight crew, it's not really glamorous. There is a lot of planning – I learnt to keep oak-leaf lettuce for two weeks, preserve meat without refrigeration and pickle everything!”

However, modern yachts are like commercial kitchens nowadays, she says, so you just have to provision for your trip and then be creative over days 10 to 21 with tinned produce and herbs.

There are many happy memories and travel experiences for Alison to draw upon – Alaska was a highlight, and watching migrating whales in Mexico – but being able to indulge in the outdoor life in New Zealand, riding her mountain bike and taking her dog, Bruce, for seaside walks is what make her happy now.

“I love New Zealand because I am an outdoorsy kind of chick. It's green, clean, unpopulated and people are so patriotic – go the All Blacks!”

Having good friends over for dinner, Alison believes, is like the icing on the cake.

*Turn the page for Alison's lemon verbena cake recipe.*

*For more information on Main Course cooking school visit [www.maincourse.co.nz](http://www.maincourse.co.nz) or phone (09) 302 1460.*

## Seared tuna with potato & mango curry & onion chilli jam

**SERVES 4**

- 600g piece tuna loin (cut into 4 even-sized pieces)

### Onion jam

- 2 Tbsp grapeseed oil (see Glossary page 151)
- 2 large onions, sliced
- 2 cloves garlic, sliced
- 1 red chilli, sliced
- 2 Tbsp red wine vinegar
- 2 Tbsp fish sauce
- ½ cup brown sugar

### Curry paste

- 2 red chillis, deseeded
- 2 thumbs fresh ginger, chopped
- 1 tsp ground turmeric
- ½ cup roughly chopped shallots
- 5 cloves garlic
- 1 tsp sea salt
- 1 Tbsp grapeseed oil
- 100ml water
- 3 Tbsp fish sauce
- 2 Tbsp lemongrass purée (in tubes at supermarket herb section)

### Curry

- 1 Tbsp grapeseed oil
- 2 x 400g cans coconut cream
- 8 washed potatoes, boiled until tender and cut into cubes
- 2 ripe mangoes, cut into cubes
- Dash fish sauce
- 1 packet washed baby spinach leaves
- 1 bunch coriander

### Onion jam

**1** In a saucepan over moderate heat warm oil, add sliced onions and garlic and sweat them until clear and soft.

**2** Add chilli and cook for another 2 minutes. Add vinegar and fish sauce, stir and add the sugar. Cook until the onion



is shiny, soft and caramelised, and the mixture starts to look like chutney. Set aside and allow to cool.

### Curry

**1** Blitz all curry paste ingredients together in a food processor.

**2** Heat grapeseed oil in a saucepan over medium heat, add the curry paste and cook gently for 3-4 minutes until the shallots are soft and your kitchen smells yummy!

**3** Add coconut cream, bring to the boil, turn down the heat and add potatoes and mango cubes. Simmer for 5 minutes, allowing potatoes and mango to warm through. Do not allow to boil or overcook otherwise you'll end up with stodge.

**4** Season to taste – add a dash of fish sauce and stir through the spinach.

### Tuna

While the curry simmers, heat a heavy non-stick frying pan over high heat – don't use oil as it will smoke. Put the tuna pieces in, let them brown on one side (about 90 seconds), turn them and cook on the other side for the same time. They should be brown and slightly crispy on both sides and pink/raw in the middle (this dish is not for those who like their tuna cooked through, or for pregnant women).

### To assemble

Immediately serve the seared tuna fillets on top of the warm curry with a big dollop of onion jam. Garnish with chopped, fresh coriander.



**All pictures:** Alison adds an original touch to her lemon verbena cake by offering each guest their own mini jug full of dipping chocolate for the cherries.

## Lemon verbena cake with chocolate & ginger sauce

Lemon verbena is a herb that has been used for centuries to lift the spirits. Alison grows it to use in tisanes (infusions) and to add to her bath at the end of a big day. This cake is the ultimate treat! Although not that well known, supermarkets do carry fresh lemon verbena in the herb section. To dry your own for this cake, leave it somewhere warm for about two days. Otherwise buy lemon verbena tea and use that. Most garden centres sell small lemon verbena plants if you want to grow your own.

**SERVES: 8**

### Cake

- 2 free-range organic eggs
- 3 tsp dried, ground lemon verbena
- 50g granulated sugar
- 100ml grapeseed oil
- 100ml apple or orange juice
- 100g plain white flour
- 2 tsp baking powder
- 70g ground almonds

### Sauce

- 375g dark chocolate melting buttons
- 4 tsp ground ginger
- 200ml single cream

**1** Preheat the oven to 180°C and spray a 23cm spring-form cake tin with a non-stick cooking spray.

**2** Whisk the eggs, lemon verbena and sugar together until pale and fluffy. Gently stir in oil and juice. Sift flour and baking powder over the top, add the ground almonds and fold together.

**3** Cook for about 35 minutes or until a knife comes out clean. The cake should be golden brown. Rest it for 5 minutes then turn it out and transfer to a cake rack to cool.

**4** For the sauce, melt chocolate in a double boiler, stir in ginger and remove from the heat. Quickly whisk in cream and return to heat to warm through. Serve warm in a jug. 🍴



Lemon verbena cake and fresh cherries  
await the chocolate & ginger sauce.