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cooking school

castle bound

ONE WAY TO EXPERIENCE LIFE IN A REAL
SCOTTISH CASTLE IS TO COOK IN ITS KITCHEN.



I'm sitting in my room in Amhuinnsuidhe Castle (pronounced avin-soo-ee) looking at the gleaming waters on the loch and watching red otters plunge from rocks by a small waterfall. The landscape is rocky, almost surreal. There are few trees due to the strong Atlantic winds that can pound this island at certain times of the year. But late summer in the Outer Hebrides can be very beautiful, as it is today. With rocky hills covered with bracken and heather, and black-faced sheep grazing nearby, time seems to stand still.

The castle, built in 1867 by the seventh earl of Dunmore is the traditional home of the owner of the Amhuinnsuidhe Estate, which covers North Harris on the island of Harris, off Scotland's west coast.

THE SEAFOOD IS THE MORNING'S CATCH DELIVERED BY THE LOCAL FISHERMAN HIMSELF.

And for the past four years, Rosemary Shrager has been running residential cooking classes, through spring till late summer. These four and a half day courses attract people from all over the world, who come to enjoy the wonderful ambience of the castle in its uniquely wild and remote setting as much as to polish their culinary skills, and enjoy the ever-entertaining company of Rosemary in the kitchen.

This larger-than-life Cornish woman with a booming voice has a knack of making all her guests (up to 12 persons in each class) feel welcome, comfortable and ultimately, like a success. Though there are comprehensive course notes on all the demonstrated recipes, Rosemary focuses on mastering

techniques rather than the recipes, ensuring that guests leave with new skills; set to adapt, modify and create their own dishes. Her other gift is making sure that no one falls to the side and gets forgotten. Everyone gets a chance to try their hand at what they want to learn most. As for those who wish to avoid a specific task, an alternative is quickly found so that they remain part of the group.

The course uses fresh local produce. Even the seafood is the morning's catch delivered by the local fisherman himself. Students would rush out into the courtyard to admire enormous king scallops (still in their shells), flapping langoustines and bright blue lobsters! And venison comes from the Estate's own deer. In fact the castle also organises hunting and fishing parties at various times of the year above the regular offerings of painting and photography classes. Nevertheless, there is always enough free time for those who just want to enjoy the beauty of the Estate. Guided walks led by the local ranger are available as well as fishing with one of the Estate's gillies (guides) who always know where the salmon are biting.

The group gathers each morning for a light breakfast of homemade brioche, breads and jams,



and then spends the rest of the morning cooking. Everyone is involved in the various aspects of the preparation. But in order to cover as much as possible, some dishes are simply demonstrated or finished off by an ever-capable kitchen team behind the scenes. Lunch, consisting of the morning's efforts, is eaten at around one, followed by a leisurely few hours set aside for resting, walking, or special local experiences such as a drive to the beach or a visit to one of the local weavers (of the world-famous Harris Tweed).

Class resumes at around five in the evening for the group to complete dishes started in the morning and to create other dishes for dinner. Then it's time for a quick freshen-up before meeting in the castle's grand dining room to be served the fruits of their labour, beautifully plated and finished off by the wonderful kitchen staff. Dinner is a three-course affair accompanied with excellent wines. Coffee and liqueur (or more likely malt whisky) are then served in the library. Guests can strike up a tune on the magnificent Steinway piano or give a short reading. Both Rosemary and Bridget (her ever-smiling assistant) remain with their guests until after-dinner drinks

and are always happy to answer queries on cooking, the castle, the estate, or the island in general. Learning to cook can quickly and easily unite a group of strangers making for an evening that stretches way into the night. **WD**

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