



My fascination with Cordon Bleu cooking started a year after I arrived in London in the 1970s as a somewhat naive 22-year-old. I was urged by two Kiwi friends to join them at a weekly demonstration class at the Cordon Bleu School in Marylebone Lane. What a revelation. To see sophisticated cooking techniques explained directly to you, plus learning from the experts, was a life-enhancing experience. Amazing concoctions, often using simple ingredients, were masterfully whipped up in front of our eyes. One “prepared earlier” dish was presented at the end of each class for some lucky participant to take home. I remember winning two dishes – an upside-down pineapple cake and braised red cabbage.

Years later in New Zealand, I rediscovered the *Cordon Bleu Monthly Cookery Course* books I’d subscribed to in the 70s stashed away in a cupboard. They delivered a suite of cooking skills to the intrepid cook willing to experiment on family and friends. The difference now was that I was a working parent of four young children, optimistically preparing Cordon Bleu dinner parties for friends in my “free time”.

Leafing through those cookbooks now, I marvel at how battered they are. I certainly got my money’s worth at about \$1.50 an issue. At the same time, I can see why the UK imported so much NZ butter. The recipes use generous dollops of it, decent shots of sherry and each three-course dinner party menu was accompanied by wine suggestions – French or German, of course.

Cordon Bleu helped me discover I was useless at making brandy snaps but could manage a julienne potato cake with ease. And that I didn’t care for boiling cabbage for 10 minutes, preferring my mother’s method of a quick steam with a dab of

Blue-ribbon dining

Colleen Brown is culling her much-loved cookbook collection before moving house. In this final instalment, she revisits her Cordon Bleu collection.



Opposite, gougères with herb cream cheese. Above, from left, preparing chicken: stargazy pie: brandy snaps on the cover of issue No 1. Below, a well-worn edition.



butter and condiments at the end. But how I loved the desserts. I could make an apricot suédoise with meringues – stunning. Austrian coffee cake – a breeze. Choux pastry? Just follow the steps in the recipe and success is yours. I conquered savoury choux pastry, still a personal favourite.

I was introduced to the art of cooking a whole rabbit, a pigeon (really!) or a pheasant (Course 1). Interesting, but not for me. There was an emphasis on beating ingredients by hand, not a kitchen whizz anywhere to rip through a mountain of vegetables. I did learn the very useful art of chopping with a wicked-looking knife. I can still blitz through vegetables faster

than it would take me to plug in my food processor. And the nostalgia. Asparagus prepared simply with ... butter (Course 3). Just like my Auntie Kathleen prepared Uncle Jim's asparagus, plucked out of the garden and straight into the pot. Delicious. There were a lot of anaemic-type aspic dishes. And, shudderingly, brawn with a whole pig's head; prawns floating with cucumber

“Leafing through those cookbooks now, I marvel at how battered they are. I certainly got my money's worth at about \$1.50 an issue.”

and other veges in a mould and, of course, dessert jellies made from scratch. Not even Cordon Bleu however could beat my childhood memories of Auntie Nell's multi-coloured tiers of jelly, from a packet of course, with chopped bananas suspended in the bottom layer.

And it was “no” to offal. The smell of my father's favourite tripe meal remains in my memory to this day. And “no” to stargazy pie – fish heads staring out of a pastry lid. Cheap meat cuts were plumped up with various additions for dinner parties, and the mysteries of how to succeed with a Victoria sponge and Irish stew were laid bare. On the stew, my step of soaking the meat in cold tea came from my Irish nana, Mabel Bridget Ryan. She never divulged her secret meat tenderising formula for Irish stew but I'm sure my mother had a sneak peek, because mum adapted cooking her version to include steeping the meat in a cold tea brew.

I have memories of discussing some of the Cordon Bleu recipes with friends and being told tartly by my mate Anne that life was too short to stuff mushrooms. I secretly agreed.

And then we come to the contentious Course 16, when recipes from the Commonwealth were shared. Australia got four recipes, including the steaks AND the lamingtons, while New Zealand got only three. While our ruffled Kiwi feathers might have been soothed by having pavlova officially awarded to New Zealand, the editors still had a bob each way by printing an Australian version of the book with a pavlova topped with Australian canned fruit. The insult still irritates me. Not a mention of our Anzac biscuits either, another hotly contested antipodean staple. Both countries were cast into the shade by the 13 dishes included to represent Canada, with instructions on how to make



ASHER FINLAYSON



Spinach roulade.

a raisin pie or a lemon cheese tart, plus a multitude of fish dishes. Astonishing. It was as if Canada had been awarded the gold medal in the cooking Olympics.

My personal Cordon Bleu pièce de résistance was chicken ballotine; deboning a chicken, stuffing it, arranging it to look like a normal fowl, roasting it, bringing it to the table and slicing through its entire body to create perfect portions of delectable meat, while my astounded guests looked on. It was as if I had made all the bones magically disappear. It is a stunning party trick.

Special occasions of all descriptions were covered in the series. I have the recipe to sort an entire suckling pig, or a decorated boar's head, should the opportunity arise. Spinach roulade and soufflé monte cristo hold special memories of meals with family and friends, some long gone, but the laughter, the fun and taste of the food still lingers. Memories held fast between the pages of those publications.

And yes, I've scoured through those books and cut out my favourites. Chicken ballotine followed by soufflé monte cristo, anyone? ■



I have the recipe to sort an entire suckling pig, or a decorated boar's head, should the opportunity arise.

GETTY IMAGES

Top stuff

Warm and dry growing seasons mean rich pickings in Hawke's Bay.

BY MICHAEL COOPER

These are, I believe, the best red wines we have ever made." Chief winemaker Chris Scott, who has worked at Church Road since 1998, is referring to the winery's Tom Hawke's Bay Cabernet Sauvignon/Merlot 2020 and Tom Hawke's Bay Syrah 2021, which retail at \$220 each.

The 2020 growing season in Hawke's Bay was warmer and far drier than average, to the point of drought. The 2021 season was also warm and dry, with small crops intensifying the grapes' ripeness and richness.

Positioned above Church Road's Grand Reserve wines, which sell in the \$40-\$45 range, these Tom and 1 Single Vineyard wines are the 127-year-old winery's top selections, as their prices underline.

Church Road Tom Hawke's Bay Cabernet Sauvignon/Merlot 2020 ★★★★★

Already quite expressive and approachable, this is a dark, bold, fleshy red, with a powerful surge of blackcurrant, plum and spice flavours seasoned with nutty oak, and ripe, supple tannins. Best drinking 2027+. (14.5% alc/vol) \$220

Church Road Tom Hawke's Bay Syrah 2021 ★★★★★

This rich, smooth-flowing red is deeply coloured, with a spicy fragrance. Highly refined, it is full-bodied, with deep plum and spice flavours, hints of black pepper and liquorice, and excellent complexity and harmony. Open 2026+. (13.5% alc/vol) \$220

Church Road 1 Single Vineyard Chardonnay 2022 ★★★★★

This is Church Road's top chardonnay from a rainy, difficult growing season (there is no Tom Chardonnay from 2022). Grown in the Tukituki Valley,

Wine of the week

Church Road 1 Single Vineyard Merlot 2021 ★★★★★

Dark and fragrant, this robust red from the Bridge Pā Triangle is packed with ripe berry, plum and spice flavours, complex, savoury, smooth and rich. It should flourish for a decade. (14.5% alc/vol) \$120

it has a slightly smoky fragrance. Mouthfilling, sweet-fruited and savoury, with concentrated, peachy, mealy, gently toasty flavours, youthful and harmonious, it should be at its best from 2025 onwards. (13.5% alc/vol) \$100

Church Road 1 Single Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 2021 ★★★★★

This classy cabernet sauvignon was grown in the Gimblett Gravels. Fragrant and dark, it is mouthfilling, with concentrated, ripe, blackcurrant-evoking flavours and the structure to mature well for a decade or longer. (14% alc/vol) \$120

Church Road 1 Single Vineyard Malbec 2021 ★★★★★

Robust, dark and dense, this Gimblett Gravels red is crammed with ripe berry, plum and spice flavours. Finely textured with gentle tannins, it has early-drinking appeal but should break into full stride 2026+. \$120 (15% alc/vol)

Church Road 1 Single Vineyard Syrah 2021 ★★★★★

This refined, elegant red was grown in the Bridge Pā Triangle. Fragrant and full-bodied, it has concentrated, ripe plum and spice flavours, gently seasoned with nutty oak, and a graceful, lasting finish. Best 2026+. (13.5% alc/vol) \$120 ■