

Wilderness *bliss*





This page: (left) The driftwood chandeliers of the Widgeon II; **(right):** Kirsten Dixon takes a class through prep at the Tutka Bay Lodge's cooking school. **Opposite page:** One of the cabins at Tutka Bay Lodge, Alaska



LEARN TO CREATE FRONTIER FUSION IN THE ALASKAN WILDERNESS.

Words **Jocelyn Pride**

Kirsten Dixon, the Stephanie Alexander of Alaska, isn't joking when she says, "A good cook can cook anywhere." I'm standing on her old wooden boat surrounded by 400,000 acres of pristine wilderness learning to cook Alaskan style. There's no road access, no running water, no gas or electricity, no oven – in fact there's no kitchen.

"Alaskans have something different to offer the world," says Kirsten, who has been creating frontier fusion in wild places for over 25 years. "I work hard to give guests an experience they won't forget."

Tucked into a cove of Kachemak Bay, one of the only fjord-type estuaries in the USA, access to Tutka Bay Lodge is via the water, air or a combination of both. Homer, an eclectic artist's village, is 25 minutes away by water taxi and Anchorage is a 90-minute flight by seaplane.

Kirsten, her husband, Carl, their daughters and partners work together to run Within The Wild, two lodges in remote areas of Alaska. Winterlake Lodge was their first property almost a decade ago before they added Tutka Bay Lodge in 2010. Each property is unique and offers guests a rustic eco-luxe Alaskan experience. With several books published

and appearances on national television, Kirsten's 'quirky' cooking school in the Widgeon II at the Tutka Bay Lodge is fast becoming globally recognised.

COOKING WITH KIRSTEN DIXON

The Widgeon II is an ex-WWII troop carrier, come crabber, and the perfect spot for a cooking school. Secrets of bygone days are buried in the crooked walls and creaking floors of the two storeys of rough wooden slabs sitting on top of a rusty steel hull. Plump colourful cushions line one side of the main cabin, while an enormous driftwood chandelier floats above the handcrafted table, which is elegantly set ready for our banquet – once we've managed to cook it.

Individual work stations with chopping boards, cooks knives and ingredients are laid out ready for our small group of foodie adventurers to chop, blend, knead, and above all, laugh. There are no short cuts – we make everything from scratch and even help to collect ingredients.

We take a boat to select oysters from the floating oyster farm in the next inlet. With old-fashioned nets piled up around him, owner Mike Nakada stands on the pontoon shucking sweet, juicy Kachemak Bay oysters. We also look for blueberries and salmonberries in the forest and gather herbs from the pretty kitchen garden.

We are making king crab beignets. Juggling the soft batter from one spoon to the other is harder than it looks.

"It's all in the flick of the wrist," says Kirsten. Secretly I think it's more about her Le Cordon Bleu training (same Paris school as Julia Childs) but I persevere until there are 12 acceptable beignets on the tray ready to steam on the small gas burner.

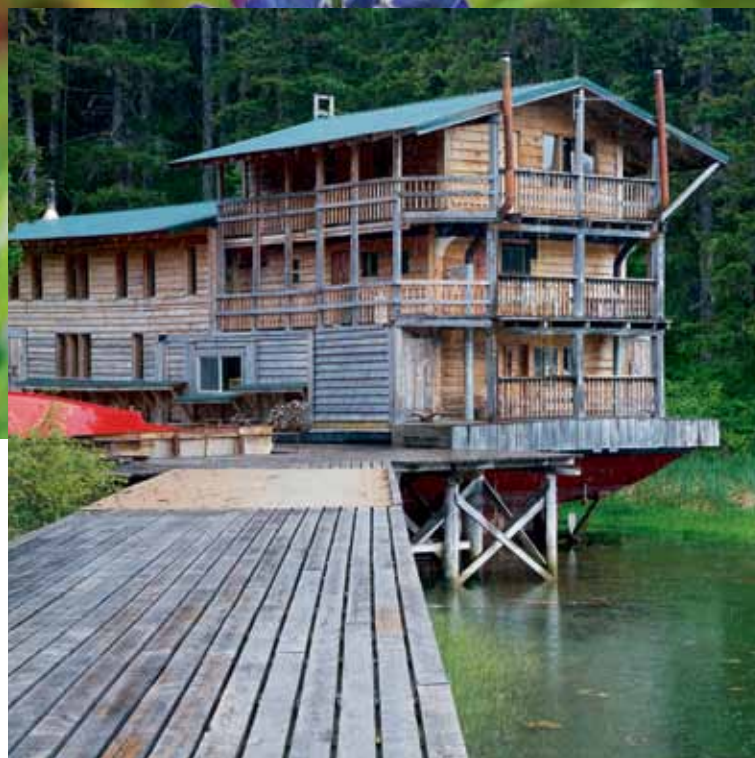
Cooking classes for up to 12 people are held in the Widgeon II every Friday, Saturday and Sunday from May to September. Guests either stay in-house or come across from Homer for the day (the classes coordinate with several cruise ship companies). Menus are based on Japanese, French, Italian, Spanish and Indian recipes with an Alaskan twist.

"We modify traditional recipes to fit our geography," says Kirsten, who understandably sources most ingredients locally. "Modern Alaskan cuisine is coming of age – people all over Alaska are proudly building a food industry."

NOBU CONNECTION

Back in the 70s another chef saw the potential of fish swimming freely in the icy waters of Kachemak Bay. Nobu Matsuhisa opened his first restaurant in Anchorage. For 50 days and 50 nights he worked tirelessly in the tiny restaurant serving what was to become one of the most

Left: Tramping through the Alaskan wilderness. Right: the Widgeon II, which hosts Tutka Bay Lodge's cooking school.



famous dishes in the world – Black Cod with Miso. Today black cod (also known as sablefish) is shipped by the container load from the waters of Kachemak Bay to the 24 Nobu restaurants around the world.

We steam black cod straight from Kachemak Bay and serve it with our very own handmade ramen noodles. Selected wines from Oregon complement each course as we sit around the table marvelling at our newly founded rustic cooking skills.

SLEEPING IN THE TREE TOPS

Of course not everyone comes to Tutka Bay Lodge to cook, some people come just to eat and relax. The carved wooden sign on our cabin says 'Eagles Nest' and that's exactly what sitting on the private balcony feels like. Looking out across the bay, densely forested islands emerge out of the navy blue water, snow-capped mountains float in mid air above the clouds and the wing beat of feisty Rufous Hummingbirds sounds like distant church bells.

Each of the six cabins fulfils the Alaskan dream. Red roofs with matching doors contrast with local gnarled, knotted timber and large picture windows. With handmade furniture, thick patchwork quilts covering beds swimming in pillows and a sprig of flowers from the garden on the bathroom vanity, Kirsten's hallmark eye for detail leaves nothing neglected.

"Alaska has always been on our bucket list, but we hate roughing it," says a

fellow guest from Hawaii. "Here we are pampered and get to taste some of the best food and wines in the land."

Sometimes the best food turns out to be something completely left field. One day we have reindeer sausages with crème brulee French toast for breakfast, Dungeness crab followed by huckleberry tart for lunch, rose petal cookies for afternoon tea and roasted rack of lamb with poached pear tomatoes over zucchini-feta pancakes for dinner.

PADDLING, HIKING AND RELAXING

Between meals, there are various activities coordinated by Gus (alias Michael Gustafson), the lively entertainment manager. I take a sea kayaking expedition and paddle the bay exploring the inlets and islands, water teeming with wildlife on all sides of the kayak. Whales spout fine mist in the distance while sea otters cheekily float by.

"The number of these sea creatures in the bay tells us how healthy the water is," says Gus. This being the case, the hundreds of sea anemones and starfish clambering over the rocky walls makes it easy to see why the fishing industry in Kachemak Bay is sustainable.

Another afternoon we hike through the dense old growth forest shouting 'hey bear' at every turn. At first I'm unsure if our calls are to entice bears to come and play or to scare them away. I soon learn this is an essential survival tip in Alaska.

"Bears don't like surprises," says Gus. And although I'm busting to see a bear in the wild, I'm glad our 'hey bears' keep any local bruins out of sight.

Further afield there's a boat trip to Grewingk Glacier or a visit to the artist's studios and quaint shops in Homer. For something more restful there's always the in-house relaxation program – morning yoga classes, complimentary massage and the authentic wood-burning sauna.

At the end of the day, as twilight gives way to the brief hours of darkness, my favourite place is the outdoor hot tub. On my last night, enveloped by the warmth of the water, I drink in the red light shimmering across the bay – thunder rumbles somewhere in the vastness and the haunting cry of a loon sends a tingle down my spine. Nature at its best and a parting gift from the unforgettable Tutka Bay Lodge.

+ Info

+ Air Canada flies to Vancouver and has connections directly to Anchorage. Visit aircanada.com for details.

+ For bookings and more info on Tutka Bay Lodge visit withinthewild.com – they can also organise Float plane transfers.

+ Oceania cruises offer amazing cruises throughout Alaska. For details visit oceaniacruises.com.au