

# Straight to the Source

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It is mid morning on South Australia's pristine Baird Bay and a group of Australia's top chefs is getting their final instructions before diving with a colony Australian sea lions.

"You can dive and play with them, but chasing them doesn't work," says Alan Payne who has been running these tours for 22 years. "The best thing is to let them chase you. Don't pick up empty shells, don't stand up and, remember, please don't put your [sic] hand under a rock – you might be in for a nasty shock."

On a normal day these industry

professionals would be sweating over menus, tracking down exotic ingredients or furiously prepping for lunch. Instead, here they are frolicking with a colony of playful sea lions on the remote shores of the Eyre Peninsula – 720 kilometres northwest of Adelaide, the capital city of South Australia.

Rather than dodging their mundane chores in kitchen these 10 chefs are actually in the middle of an intensive three-day Straight To The Source tour of the peninsula which offers these (mostly) city-bound food professionals a chance to see where Australia's most desirable produce comes from – and to meet oyster farmers, abalone divers, wine growers, sheep farmers and others who live and work in this majestic

but challenging place.

By the time this group reaches Baird Bay they have already toured some oyster leases, enjoyed an outback lunch at Smoky Bay and learned about the intricacies of abalone harvesting. The itinerary also includes a fish filleting lesson, a taste of local bush tucker and a Catch & Cook Community Dinner, where the chefs work together to create a multi-course dinner for the people of Ceduna – the last town before the expanse of the Nullarbor.

Despite the packed itinerary, changeable weather and long distances, the visiting chefs clearly relished their time on the Eyre Peninsula and were inspired by the hard work, commitment and sheer





grit shown by so many local producers.

“Of course it’s amazing to spend a morning on an oyster lease,” says Mary-Louise Brandtman, who owns a large catering firm in Sydney. “I’ve been in the hospitality industry for 20 years and I never really understood where oysters came from – I’d certainly never handled spat [oyster larvae] before. But the thing I really got from this tour is the passion of the small producers for what they do – they are so committed.”

Although Regional Development Australia (RDA), with the support of individual producers, has been hosting chefs and other industry specialists on the Eyre Peninsula for

the past decade, the organization has recently teamed up with a number of specialist operators, such as Tawnya Bahr, a Sydney chef and food consultant – and creator of the Straight To The Source model.

Mark Allsopp, food industry development officer for the Eyre Peninsula, says these new tours build lasting relationships between producers and food professionals and generate tangible sales results. Demand for new culinary tours is running hot – previous invitees include celebrated Sydney chefs Pete Evans, Sean Connolly and Martin Boetz.

“Last year I hosted four chef’s tours and this year we’ll do 10 tours. I can’t do all of them myself so it

makes sense to align ourselves with people like Tawnya,” Allsopp says. “I get plenty of positive feedback about the extra business being done – that’s in addition to the direct relationships being forged between producers, chefs and other food professionals. That’s a pretty good outcome.”

Tours such as Straight To The Source naturally complement the region’s overall marketing strategy which promotes the Eyre Peninsula as “Australia’s seafood frontier” based around Port Lincoln, Coffin Bay, Streaky Bay and Ceduna. Allsopp sees future scope in taking such hands-on experiences to an international audience – and possibly for a growing legion of dedicated home cooks and wannabe celebrity chefs.

For her part, Bahr believes that her food tours offer classic win-win scenario for both parties, since chefs and industry professionals often have little chance to engage with small producers first hand.

“Unlike other vocations where professional development is an expectation, chefs and front of house staff are expected to teach themselves. Noticing this gap we have tailored tours with the professional in mind while still offering a unique experience for the food loving public,” she says. “Spending time at the source provides an opportunity to learn what cannot be learnt by reading a cookbook or eating at a restaurant.”