

Features

Post-Sandy, no shelter for pets >27
James Bond at his best in 'Skyfall' >28
Why diets and saving plans can fail >33

How a Brief Bali Escape Changed One Woman's Life

Joni Sweet discovers Janet DeNeefe's love for Bali's community, culture and cuisine

What started as a brief holiday in Bali in 1984 ended up transforming Janet DeNeefe's life. She fell in love, not only with a man she would marry five years later, but also with the community, culture and especially cuisine of the island oasis. Almost 30 years later, Janet proudly calls Ubud — where she runs a cooking school, a cafe, two restaurants, a popular guesthouse and the famed Ubud Writers and Readers Festival — her home.

"I moved there in 1985 wanting to learn about the food," the Melbourne native recalled. "Once I had the knowledge, I knew I should impart it on what has always felt to me like a university town where you go to learn something about that culture. So I always knew I'd set up a cooking school there."

DeNeefe will share her knowledge of Balinese cooking in a talk hosted by Jakarta's Indonesian Heritage Society at Erasmus Huis on Tuesday at 7 p.m. She will discuss how she turned the island into a hands-on classroom by training in the kitchens of her husband's family and becoming a "village cook."

"I'd watch my husband's sister and her helper cook breakfast and I was totally absorbed in it. I'd later come back to Ubud in the afternoon and then hang around his brother's restaurant and just sit in their kitchen," she said. "It was sort of my PhD in Balinese cooking."

While she said she laments her lack of formal culinary training, that hasn't stopped the "grandma-style cook" from publishing a memoir with recipes, "Fra-

grant Rice" in 2003, and a Balinese cookbook, "The Food of My Island Home" in 2011. She has also taught thousands of students the art of balancing spices and how to properly understand and honor the traditions behind the dishes.

"Initially I thought I was just recording recipes, but I came to realize that I was unraveling aspects of the culture and maybe the fundamental principle that the Balinese have of harmony and balance. Everything they make is sort of this extraordinary balance of a thousand ingredients," she said.

In her classes, students can learn how to make dishes such as spiced fish in banana leaves; gado-gado, a boiled-vegetable salad with a peanut sauce dressing; smoked duck and chicken satay. DeNeefe also takes them one step further into Bali with tours of neighborhood markets.

"Asian markets are very romantic and that is where you get the most exciting food because it's catering for the local community and there's a lot of color and excitement and Asian ambiance," she said.

With the belief that good food can break down cultural borders, the 53-year-old makes a point to highlight not only the cuisine, but also Balinese society and its Hindu culture.

"It's a really beautiful religion," she said. "There's a lot of ritual involved, but it's really poetic and beautiful, so it's hard not to be attracted to that. But also within the culture is the way the communities operate and their attention to relationships, to family, community, to the way they care about people."

The inexhaustible woman, who was originally trained as an art teacher, hosts



Australian Janet DeNeefe has lived in Ubud, Bali, for nearly three decades. Photos courtesy of Mark Roper

cooking classes at the Casa Luna Cooking School seven days a week. In addition, she runs the Casa Luna and Indus restaurants, Honeymoon Guesthouses, the Bar Luna cafe, and a homewares emporium.

The mother-of-four somehow still finds time to travel around Indonesia in search of gastronomic inspiration for new recipes. She is particularly interested in writing a book about Sumatran food, which she calls "the queen of Indonesian cuisine."

DeNeefe added that she hoped to expand her culinary repertoire by offering food tours as early as next year, a project she began planning in the early 2000s, but put on hold after the Bali bombings in 2002. The following year, her ambition took a literary turn: to ease the blow of the terror attack on Bali, she founded the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival.

"I knew it had to be something that attracted international names and audience alongside Indonesians, something that brought people together," she said. "It had to be something of that magnitude that brings in the world's greatest writers,

thinkers, great minds that can make a difference, because terrorism is something that has such a negative impact, so it had to be something that could dissolve that negative impact with something that would transpire into a really positive thing."

DeNeefe is planning the next literary festival, which will take place from Oct. 2-6, 2013 and again celebrate the theme of the first festival, "Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang" ("Through Darkness to Light"), in honor of a milestone year.

DeNeefe has made it her mission to nourish herself, her family and her students with the rich colors, striking flavors and depth of Balinese food and culture. The tools of her trade merely consist of "a mortar and pestle, a knife, a wok, a stirring spoon and a flame," along with a passion, know-how and an array of simple yet satisfying ingredients.

"Cooking for people is one of the greatest joys and it's not just about food," she said. "It's about pleasing people and looking after people, which for me is really important."

Food Ways of Bali: A Love Story

Discussion with Janet DeNeefe Hosted by Indonesian Heritage Society Tuesday, Nov. 6, from 7 p.m. Erasmus Huis Jl. Rasuna Said, Kav. S-3, adjacent to the Dutch Embassy Rp 30,000

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Uncommon French Forests Behind the Heady Alchemy of Oak and Wine



Oak barrels are used to make Bordeaux wines. AFP Photo

Suzanne Mustacich

It has to be one of the most serendipitous accidents of history. France's towering oak forests, first cultivated generations ago for Louis XIV's warships, today provide the raw material for the barrels that help produce the best wines of Bordeaux, perhaps the finest expression of the heady alchemy between oak and wine.

"We are lucky in our business, because these trees were initially meant for naval construction, not barrels," admits Jean-Luc Sylvain, a third-generation barrel-maker, or cooper, and CEO of Tonnellerie

Sylvain in the south west of France.

"But the fact that we selected and cultivated a variety of oak and forced it to grow in height not girth, has a chemical effect, which has a consequence for wine."

"There is something that happens between the oak tannins and the wine tannins, you have a marriage, an alchemy that takes place in the barrel."

With an annual production of 500,000 barrels, France's coopers dominate the global trade, relying on the forests first cultivated on the orders of Jean-Baptiste Colbert, minister under Louis XIV in the 17th century, in his effort to produce tall, perfect oaks to build a navy capable of challenging England's maritime dominance.

"We are the only country in the world to cultivate oak," says Sylvain, with each generation tending saplings that won't reach their prime for another 200 years. "These trees are more appropriate for making wine barrels than what you can find naturally in the forest."

The French forests are managed to encourage tall trees without branches or knots. The result is timber with a tight grain and the quality of tannins and aromas that improve wine, Sylvain says.

But that is a recent discovery. The humble barrel has spent most of its long relationship with wine serving two mundane purposes — storage and transportation. Winemakers discovered the barrel's

true calling at a point when many were abandoning it due to its bad reputation for harbouring mould, and ruining the wine. Only when cement and stainless steel became available did its true worth reveal itself. "They noticed something was missing in the wine not aged in the barrel," Sylvain says. Research in the 1970s and 80s showed that a clean oak barrel was an invaluable multi-tasker.

"The tannins in the wood balance with the tannins in the wine, and it helps develop aromas," says Charles Chevallier, director of Domaines Barons de Rothschild.

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