



Celia Laity is a lucky woman – she gets to combine her green-fingered passion with an enthusiasm for all things epicurean in a business that operates from her Taupo home.



Above: A simple table setting. From left: Celia snips a stem of Delphinium 'Pacific Giant' to add to an arrangement; Shaved Parmesan garnishes the Roasted Red Onion and Spinach Salad; Enjoying a glass of wine with students before lunch.



There's a very simple philosophy behind the Easy Entertaining classes that Celia Laity offers in her comfortable yet breathtakingly picturesque Acacia Bay country home. And that is: People love to be invited. "Of course you could meet friends at a café, but it's never the same as sharing your home," she says.

Embracing this lore, groups of up to 36 eager 'students' gather in the living room at Celia's where, inspired by the shimmering tableau of Lake Taupo below and the sleepy spirituality of Mt Tauhara in the distance, they're given the passion and the practical pointers to host their own lunch and dinner parties.

"It's my mission to encourage women to say, 'I think I can do that'. It's not about being a fantastic cook – it's about fellowship and hospitality."

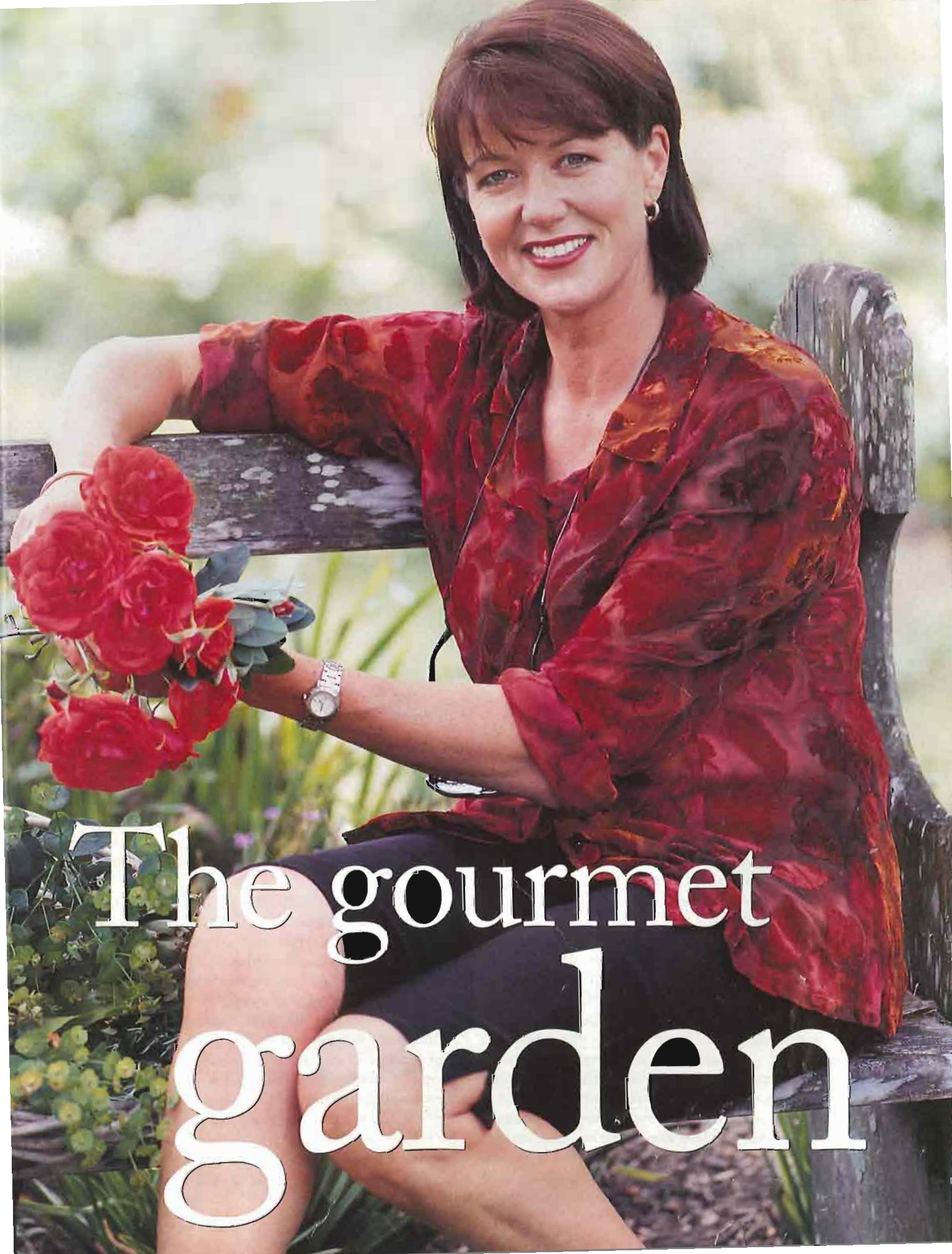
Simple but stylish is Celia's motto: with step-by-step ease she shows you how to create table arrangements using flowers and foliage from the garden and, once the scene is set, serve up a menu that's fresh and delicious.

There's no pretension in her presentation either – her all-white dinner service, embossed with fruit on the rim, was a real find. Celia spotted it at The Warehouse and although the

plates have different trademarks on the back, theirs is a timeless appeal, just perfect for offsetting the crisp colours of Roasted Red Onion and Rocket Salad or a Sticky Tahitian Lime Slice.

With a background in primary school teaching, Celia brings spontaneity and support to her classes. Students may arrive quiet and a little hesitant but, having enjoyed lunch and a glass of wine outside in the walled courtyard, they leave clutching a booklet of recipes, in a rush of laughter and camaraderie.

Now well established in her niche market, Celia hosts some 30 tailor-made classes each year. Book clubs, garden clubs, fund-raising events, partners' programmes from the nearby Wairakei Resort conference centre – they're all welcomed at the front door of Sugar Maple Lodge, the house that Celia, her husband Hugh and their four children have called home for three years.



The gourmet garden

Left to right: Celia and Andrea Langford-Lee enjoy lunch; Citrus Mayo, Red Pepper Relish and Bread & Butter Pickles; Sticky Tahitian Lime Slice; Spicy Chicken Salad and Roast Capsicum Aioli; picking artichokes from the potager.



Yet walking the culinary trail is a fairly recent diversion for Celia. When the family moved from Auckland to Acacia Bay five years ago, she dreamed of continuing her garden design business in this flourishing lakeside retreat. It proved difficult with only 22,000 people in the town. There were one or two commissions – wealthy older residents who loved Celia’s work but also expressed a keen interest in learning how to make the loaves of bread she’d take along as part of a shared lunch.

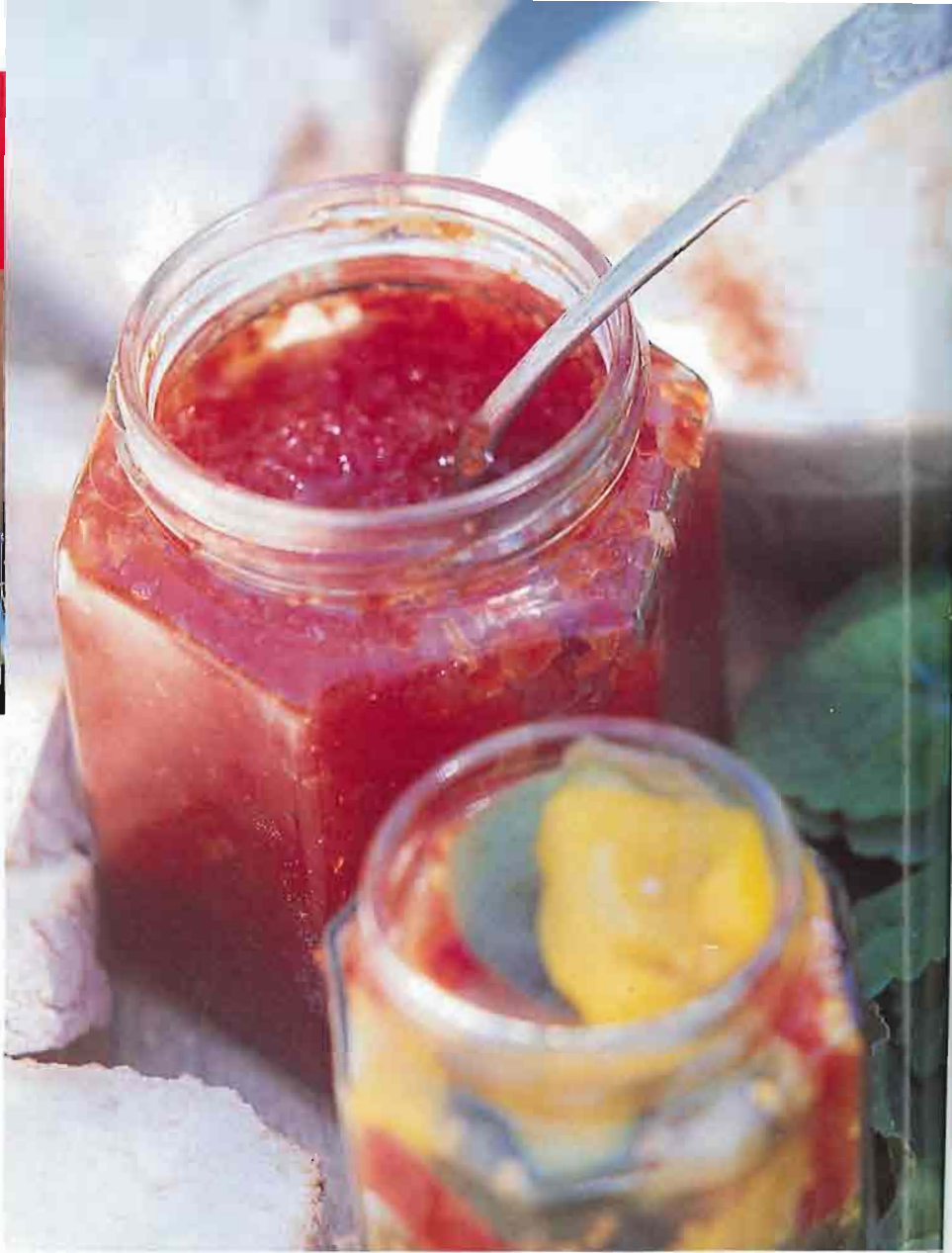
“I had a few classes at the house to show them how to make it and things just snowballed from there.”

Now Celia channels much of her energy into designing and tending the garden at Sugar Maple Lodge. The Laitys started from a bare paddock in their 0.8-hectare rural subdivision, moving eight huge trees including cherries and the sugar maple from their previous Taupo property. They brought in trailer loads of sheep manure and mulch to build flowerbeds on top of the pumice that all but makes up the section.

A semi-circle of buxus now curves around the front of the six-bedroomed house that Hugh built from scratch. Deep blue beds of mountain cornflower, interspersed with ‘Fair Bianca’ roses, hug the lake-facing windows. As fodder for her table arrangements and quick-smart dishes, Celia has planted plenty of evergreen shrubs, along with herbs and “all things fragrant”. Lemon-scented pelargoniums, verbena, sorrel and rosemary flourish in beds that edge the sunny back courtyard. A potager provides lettuces, rhubarb and artichokes.

“Things grow incredibly quickly here. I like plants with good foliage that will last – not just one-minute wonders,” explains Celia, who might make an arrangement from hydrangeas and camellia foliage, or a posy from rosehips.

It’s a setting that’s not only beautiful but well-used too –



by the cooking groups who venture into the garden to pick stems for a bouquet, or to hunt for herbs – and by the couple’s children Sam, 9, Johnno, 13, Matt, 16, and Anna, 18.

Indeed a melding of work and family is perhaps what makes the Easy Entertaining concept so enjoyable. A cork-framed blackboard sporting a child’s drawing hangs above the dining table, the passageway is lined with botanical prints and portraits, and amidst the magnet art on the fridge, a sign ‘advises’: Teenager – are you tired of your stupid parents? Move out, get a job and pay your own bills ‘while you still know it all’.

Admittedly, vigilance and cunning is required to keep key ingredients out of the reach of ravenous youth, yet it’s the very traces of family living that turns Celia’s students into guests. “I meet some fascinating and lovely women. By the end of the session they’re so relaxed that they’re having a good nosy around the house.” And Celia believes that’s the way things should be for she’s always happy to share the freedom of her Taupo lifestyle. “Everything’s easier here,” she declares. Even, it seems, becoming the perfect host.



ROASTED RED ONION AND ROCKET (OR SPINACH) SALAD

Serves 8-10

*8 red onions, peeled
300g shaved Parmesan (around 3 cups)
Rocket or spinach leaves*

DRESSING

*1 tsp salt
1 clove garlic, crushed and peeled
3 tbsp olive oil
Juice of ½ lemon
Juice of ½ lime
Ground black pepper*

1. Cut the onions into 1cm wedges, brush with olive oil and roast in a 180°C oven for 25-30 minutes until they start to brown. Meanwhile, combine the dressing ingredients.
2. Pour over half the dressing and set aside to cool. (This can be done the day before).
3. Assemble salad on large platter with layers of spinach, the onions and the Parmesan. Pour over the remaining dressing.

SPICY CHICKEN (OR LAMB) SALAD

Serves 8-10

MARINADE

*Juice and rind of 1 lemon
2 tbsp soy sauce
Ground black pepper
2 tsp grated ginger
1 tsp sweet chilli sauce
1 tbsp oil*

SALAD

*12 chicken thighs or fillets of lamb/backstraps
1 bunch green beans
2 spring onions, chopped (green part only)
4 tomatoes, chopped
1 tbsp capers
1-2 tbsp salad dressing
Mixed salad greens*



1. Combine the marinade ingredients and marinate chicken or lamb fillets for several hours. Drain and pat dry. Sauté over a high heat for 4 minutes each side or on a barbecue. Leave to rest.
2. Blanch the green beans for 5 minutes and combine with the spring onions, tomatoes, capers and your favourite salad dressing.
3. Pile salad greens on to a plate. Place the sliced chicken or lamb on top of the salad greens, then spoon over the bean-and-tomato mixture. Serve with crusty bread or focaccia.



RED PEPPER RELISH

Delicious with cheese and crackers or on grilled meats.

Makes 3 x 350ml jars

*1kg red peppers, cored
2 medium onions, chopped
3 tbsp salt
2½ cups sugar
1 cup cider vinegar*

1. Finely chop the peppers and onions, in a food processor. Drain and sprinkle with the salt. Leave for at least 2 hours. Wash and drain well.
2. Put peppers and onions in a saucepan with the sugar and vinegar. Simmer for 45 minutes, stirring occasionally, until thick. Pour into sterile jars. Seal and label.
3. Keep refrigerated once open.