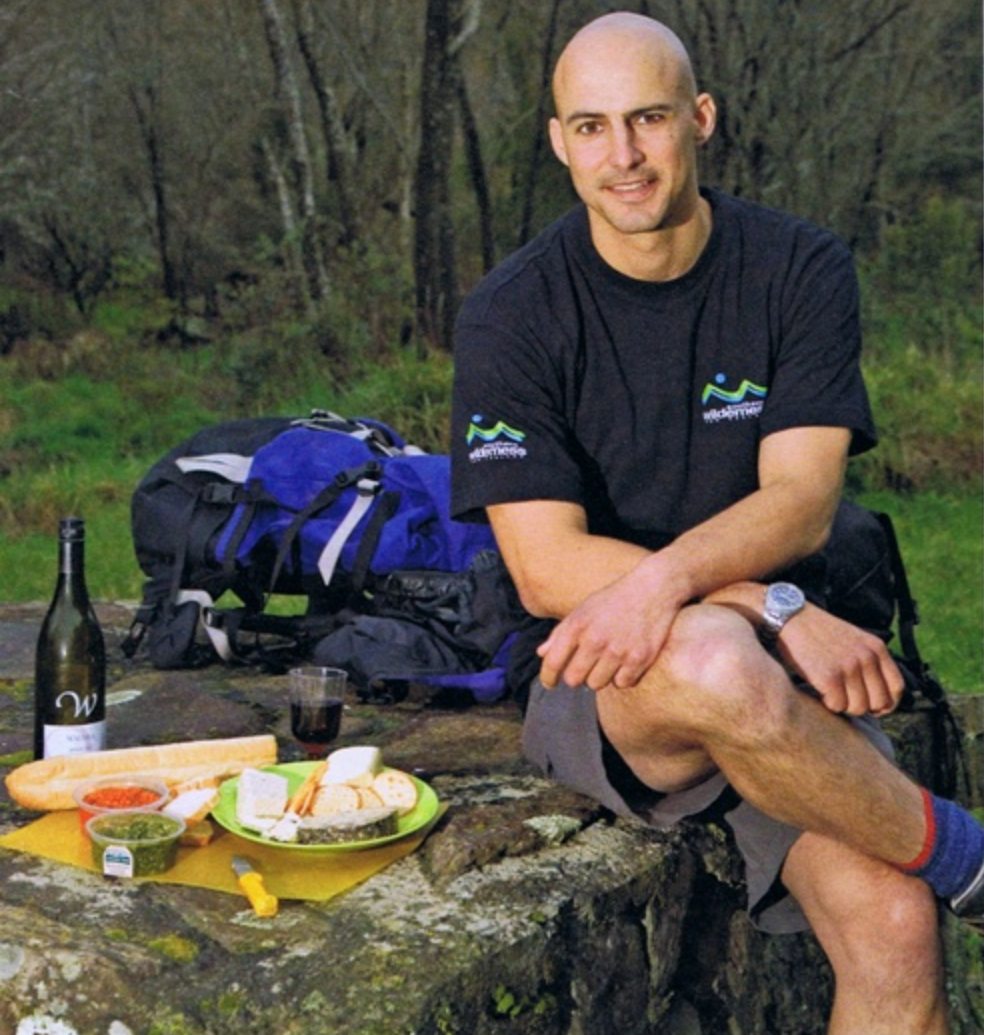


Haute Cuisine on the Heaphy

A Nelson foodie keeps hikers happily on track.



Ryan Kelly's backpack is seemingly bottomless. From every compartment he pulls out an astonishing array of hearty fare – enough to feed eight people over five days hiking the Heaphy Track. Whether it's tender lamb, a fat cap-sicum or perky lettuce leaves, not a single item is flattened, bruised or wilted.

This self-confessed foodie has been guiding hikers in New Zealand and Australia all his adult life. Several years ago, he decided to

combine his love of cuisine with going bush, despite a lack of refrigeration and electricity. His secret weapon became a vacuum-packer and protective cushions of air.

The pack of our second guide, Erin Smith, is just the same – a mobile gourmet pantry weighing close to 30kg that makes my 10kg pack look as lightweight as Paris Hilton's handbag. "At least mine gets lighter every time you guys have a meal," she says.

So while Kelly's clients are happy enough

to doss down in DoC huts and bathe in gasp-inducing mountain-fed rivers, their palates are ready for seriously good flavours.

"I want to spoil people, so much so they remember this walk as the best they've done," he says. "Accepting dehydrated foods was part of the experience that wore thin with me. It doesn't have to be boring. After a long day, I want people to sit down knowing some pretty delicious food is about to be put in front of them."

Fare ranging from lamb or Thai chicken curry to New Zealand salmon – with fresh greens – is cooked on gas stoves before dark. No electricity means no refrigeration, so on day four the salmon is delivered on ice by a third guide who walks in from the track's opposite end.

Amid the ambience induced by candle-light and gathering around the table with hikers from all over the world, it's easy to feel guilty when the plunger coffee is melting the fudge truffle in your mouth (like the wine, it's made in Nelson), knowing others are spooning up unidentifiable stew from battered aluminium bowls.

The cure is to remember the money. It costs about \$1400 for a five-day walk with guides who know the local history, flora, fauna and how to find hidden caves and waterfalls and are also your sherpas and chefs. The final night is spent in relative luxury in a lodge with a three-course dinner and breakfast included.

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