



29 APR, 2023

## Walk up an appetite

Sydney Morning Herald, Sydney

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FOOD | SOUTH AUSTRALIA

# Walk up an appetite



**A new chef with star credentials elevates the Flinders Ranges' Arkaba Walk. By Nina Karnikowski**

The late afternoon sun is making South Australia's Wilpena Pound glow neon orange, as our group of four female hikers sits at an old wooden table on an empty dirt plain. The table heaves with platters of zesty pumpkin and lentil salad scattered with pomegranate and coriander, tender lamb chops fried with saltbush and brown butter, chunky beetroot tzatziki, and garlicky greens and charred zucchini – dishes that are wildly better and more exotic than one might have any right to expect out here in the bush.

Which makes sense, since the new head chef here on The Arkaba Walk – a four-day hike that traverses the Arkaba Nature Conservancy, a 24,000-hectare former sheep station, is South African Calvin Von Niebel – who has spent the past 10 years working as executive chef for Yotam Ottolenghi's seven delis and restaurants in London.

For anyone who hasn't had the pleasure of cooking from the Israeli-born British chef's bestselling cookbooks, or indeed eating at his venues, Ottolenghi is kind of a big deal. And it's kind of a big deal that Von Niebel, who curated Ottolenghi's menus and oversaw

100 chefs across the group, is now here in the South Australian outback, cooking for us hungry walkers.

After dealing with pandemic-related staffing issues and stresses in London, Von Niebel decided it was time for a change. He'd met Maggie Beer in London while cooking for an event of hers, and when he moved to Australia, she connected him with Wild Bush Luxury, which owns the Arkaba Walk and Homestead.

"Arkaba appealed because I love the bush and being outdoors. I spent a lot of time in the bush as a kid in South Africa," says Von Niebel after breakfast the next morning at Arkaba's Black's Gap camp. The prospect of cooking

outdoors also enticed him. "When I'm cooking for mates, I'm doing *braais*, South African barbecues, cooking over coals."

Von Niebel's food, which combines Ottolenghi's distinctive Israeli flavours, with elements of Thai, Malaysian and Indian cuisine he picked up while travelling Asia for three years, elevates the Arkaba experience. On our first full day hiking, after traversing Wilpena Pound before crossing into Arkaba's conservancy, we stop for lunch beneath the eucalypts, watched over by a pair of emus.

We find wraps stuffed with zingy quinoa salad, braised beetroot and egg, tahini and pickled mango in our lunchboxes. It's a welcome

change from the soggy sandwiches I've eaten on other multi-day hikes, and fuels us up a steep ascent to a bluff with spectacular views over the conservancy and the Elder Range.

Later that night, as I wriggle into my swag in a bush hut at Arkaba's Elder's camp, I think about how, after a decade in London, the Ikara-Flinders Ranges must have felt like another planet to Von Niebel. "It was definitely an adjustment, moving to Hawker, where there's

only 300-something residents," he tells me back at the restored 1850s Arkaba Homestead, after a second full day hiking through dry creek beds, Mallee scrub and cypress forests.

Aside from the obvious issues of loneliness and isolation, there have been professional challenges. "You can't trial chefs in the kitchen because we're so remote, you usually have to employ them based on their CV and attitude," he says.

Sourcing fresh ingredients is another issue – produce arrives just once a week from Adelaide, unlike the twice-daily deliveries in London.

The plus side is that Von Niebel has resurrected the homestead's vegetable



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garden, where he now grows herbs, fruit and vegetables that he can harvest as needed. The Ikara-Flinders Ranges is also full of native ingredients that he's working into his menus, including saltbush, lemon myrtle, native lemongrass and quandongs.

Powdered quandong adds a tart, tangy kick to our final meal – braised leeks with a macadamia gremolata and romesco sauce, accompanied by a herby kale, egg, radish and scorched grape salad with a creamy feta dressing. Eaten on the homestead's back patio, to the soundtrack of a marimba of insects, it is a culinary revelation.

How long Von Niebel will stay at Arkaba remains to be seen, so best book in quickly before he heads off on his next grand adventure. **T**

### THE DETAILS

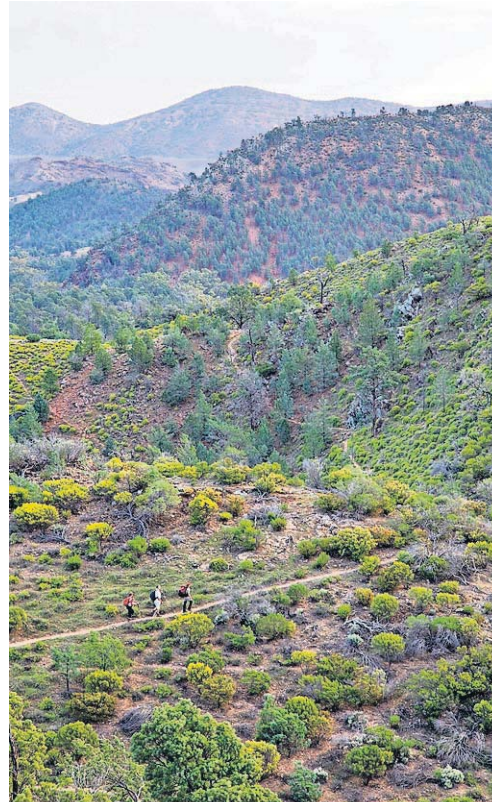
#### STAY

The four-night Arkaba Walk operates March to October, from \$3500 a person twin share, including meals, drinks and accommodation, and three days of guided walking (10 to 15 kilometres each day). Nights one and four are in the Homestead, plus two nights swag camping. See [arkabawalk.com](http://arkabawalk.com)

#### MORE

[flindersandoutback.com.au](http://flindersandoutback.com.au)

*Nina Karnikowski was a guest of Wild Bush Luxury.*



(Clockwise from main) Chef Calvin Von Niebel; breakfast room at the homestead; one of the camps on the walk; on the trail; a dish by Calvin Von Niebel; pre-dinner drinks at Arkaba Homestead; emus out and about and hiking through South Australia's Flinders Ranges.



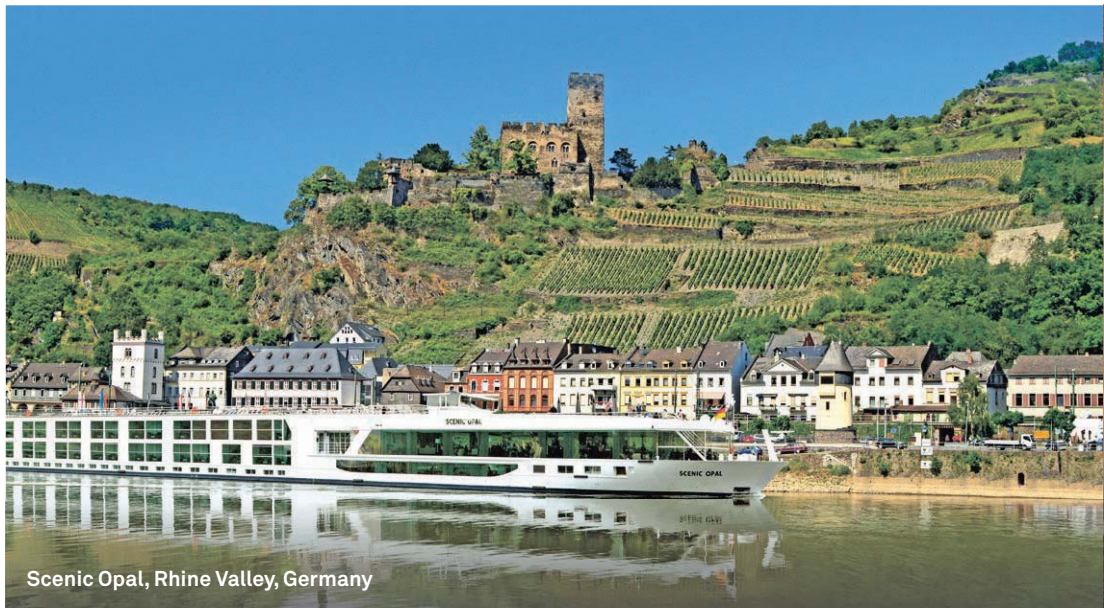
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Scenic Opal, Rhine Valley, Germany



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