



# Fleur's patch of paradise

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AFTER a month tramping the wilds of New Zealand's southwest, surviving on packets of dried hiking food, we sit at a stripped-back table at Fleurs Place in Moeraki on the Otago coast.

Although we have no booking at this idyllic dining spot 70km north of Dunedin on the South Island, manager Wayne Annan has graciously found us a table near a wall of wooden palings, maritime maps and a parched print of the Waitangi Treaty; there's an antique slow-combustion stove to one side.

Upside-down wineglasses hang from a Gaudi-esque wire sculpture suspended over the bar. The owner, Fleur Sullivan, sits at a small bench in the thick of things, greeting customers and adjusting her spectacles while sharing a joke with staff or delving into piles of unruly ledgers, her white hair emphasised by her black clothing.

Amid the hubbub, she manages to sign a copy of her book, *Fleurs Place*, the idea for which followed a visit from English restaurateur Rick Stein in 2006. Stein had chosen to come to Fleurs Place — over anywhere else in the world — when he was commissioned to write a travel article for England's *Daily Mail* newspaper.

In doing so, Stein created the South Island's very own *MasterChef* celebrity (another book, on Sullivan's colourful life, is due to be released in November).

My girlfriend and I begin our meal at this unlikely celebrity haunt by sharing an antipasto plate, followed by fish pie for me and a shellfish hotpot for her. The latter, a porcelain bowl of dazzling green-lipped mussels and pipis with lemongrass, ginger, white wine and saffron, is the winner.

Fish is the big thing at Fleurs, much of it sourced straight from the boats plying Moeraki Bay. Muttonbird is a specialty but other regular menu inclusions are dory, moki and gurnard; order fish of the day lightly dusted with flour and served with sauces ranging from caper and lime to chilli, coconut and coriander, or try mussels in a laksa-style soup.

In the same way as the fish, vegetables are sourced locally, largely from small, organic growers.



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Fleurs Place, on NZ's Otago coast, specialises in seafood

## THE HUNGRY TOURIST

After an enjoyable dinner we linger outside near the old Moeraki jetty, where the air smells of seaweed, salt and garlic. The night cries of wheeling gulls float across a sparkling harbour and little blue penguins nest between waterline rocks at our feet.

There were grand plans for Moeraki — “a place to rest by day” in Maori — in 1873, when British builders began a branch off the Dunedin Oamaru line, descending to Port Moeraki. By 1877, trains ran six days a week, but it was short-lived; the Port Moeraki line closed after only two years.

Sullivan grew up in a large family to the north of Moeraki, on a farm built by her great-grandparents. Her hunter-fisherman father shot rabbits from the speeding family car while the young Sullivan gripped the steering wheel.

By 1997, she was running a successful restaurant in Clyde, Central Otago. But after being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, she was drawn back to Moeraki by the romantic notion of a house on a high, windswept headland, a place in which to rest and recover. Before long a “for sale” sign appeared on a dilapidated fishing shack — the site of a 1936 whaling station — nearby.

The indomitable Sullivan acquired it, as well as a tumble-down shed salvaged from a rail-

way siding just south of Oamaru, its beams and flooring to be used in the fit-out of what would become Fleurs Place, its final incarnation a bucolic amalgam of iron-clad schoolhouse gables, lattice windows and lean-tos with idyllic seaside vistas on three sides.

Today, the 80-seat diner even features a grand old timber staircase, saved from a demolished family mansion in Dunedin.

The morning after our dinner, we head for the far side of the bay. Distant specks on the beach emerge from a sea-mist; as we get closer we see they are strings of spherical stone boulders up to 3m in diameter. Streams of frothy bubbles in serpent patterns drift between the boulders and our wet boots.

During the great Polynesian migrations, the Maori say, a war canoe foundered here, its round food baskets becoming the famous Moeraki Boulders. Scientists, on the other hand, say they are grey-coloured septarian concretions from the Palaeocene period of 60 million years ago.

After our walk we return to the jetty and amble across to Sullivan's catering caravan, adjacent to the restaurant, where we stock up on vacuum-packed chowder and a brace of still-hot savoury muffins. Our dried hiking food rations seem but a dim and distant memory.

• [fleursplace.com](http://fleursplace.com)

*Fleur: The Life and Times of Pioneering Restaurateur Fleur Sullivan* will be published in November (Random House NZ, \$49.99; [thenile.com.au](http://thenile.com.au)).