

By SALLY RAE

MILLERS Flat farmer Peter MacDougall was at a restaurant in a London hotel about a decade ago, when he ordered New Zealand lamb rack.

So impressed with how it was cooked, he passed on his compliments to the waiter who then returned with the chef.

Ironically, it turned out that the chef was brought up in Alexandra and trained at the polytechnic in Cromwell.

It got Mr MacDougall thinking about the young chefs being trained in Cromwell and whether they were being taught with the best quality grass-fed beef and lamb produced in New Zealand.

It spurred him into action and he contacted Beef +

Lamb New Zealand and Alliance Group, who supported his idea.

For the past few years, cookery students at Otago Polytechnic Central campus have prepared a dinner for farmers, following the Beef + Lamb New Zealand Central South Island Farmer Council annual meeting in Cromwell.

This year, about 50 people attended the dinner in the polytechnic's Molyneux Restaurant. They included council members, other farmers and representatives of Beef and Lamb NZ and Alliance Group.

The dinner has been a "big success" with all involved, from the students to the farmers, enjoying it, Mr MacDougall said.

This year, an entree of beef fillet was served, followed by a main of six-hour braised lamb shoulder and crusted lamb rack, then

Mouth-watering ... A main of lamb rack and lamb shoulder created by cookery students at Otago Polytechnic Central campus.

PHOTO: SALLY RAE

chocolate mousse with raspberries.

The outstanding meal was created by level five diploma of cookery students at the polytechnic, with front of house duties undertaken by level three students.

Originally, the dinner was held as a competition, with teams of three catering for a table of 10 each. But it became a "logistical nightmare" to oversee, so the competitive aspect was done away with, senior chef lecturer Roydon Cullimore said.

Profit from preparing the dinner enabled the students to travel to other competitions, where they had enjoyed considerable success.

There was a focus on sustainability at the polytechnic, which had two vegetable gardens and chickens on site. All herbs and micro-greens were also grown.

Students used the produce in their dishes and were not allowed to use anything that was out of season.

Food scraps were either fed to pigs, and the pigs were later slaughtered and broken down for the students to cook, or went into compost, so it was a "natural loop".

Instead of buying in meat, students were taught how to break down whole animals,



PHOTO: DEECEE RICHARDSON

Just so ... Otago Polytechnic Central cookery student James Coyle plates a chocolate mousse dessert.

whether it was a deer, goat, pig or sheep.

That gave them a much better

understanding of the animal and they also learnt not to waste any part of it.



They were also taught how to use a gun, at a shooting range, so they knew how to make a clean kill if ever they did go hunting.

Student Jamielee Stewart (19), originally from a sheep and beef farm near Lumsden, loved creating dishes from natural produce. The best flavours were natural flavours "as long as you know how to cook it", she said.

Beef + Lamb New Zealand general manager farm Richard Wakelin enjoyed his trip from Hawkes Bay to Central Otago. Seeing young people working in the campus kitchen, learning their craft and delivering it to farmers who produced the product, was "pretty special".

Mr Wakelin looked after all the farmer-facilitated activities, such as research and development, extension and the regional team.

There were eight regional-based extension managers whose role was to work

alongside the farmer council to identify, plan and deliver extension activities for farmers.

Each farmer council decided what type of activities were delivered in its region and it was very much based on regional priorities.

"I don't believe in a cookie-cutter approach, it depends what the needs are in a region. For us, it's how you build a more resilient community as well. Regional economic development comes from a strong rural community," he said.

Beef + Lamb New Zealand Farmer Council chairman Martin Coup, a sheep and beef farmer from the King Country, was heading into his fourth year in the role and it had been "quite a ride", he said.

Last year, 17,000 people attended farmer council-organised events, which was up from about 4000 when he first became involved.



Appealing produce ... Otago Polytechnic Central campus level five cookery student Jamielee Stewart prepares carrots.



Cooked to perfection ... Cookery student Marina Valls prepares lamb racks.

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