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Article by Geraldine Johns, photo by Michael Bradley

## Marriage Material

### Michelin-starred reality TV Chef Nigel Marriage has brought his impeccable pedigree Down Under

**Nigel Marriage** wears the M-word well. *Mellifluous. Mild-mannered. Modest. Michelin.* He really is star material. And he says things like “Oh, that’s so nice” when praised.

It can happen any time – such as last night, when a diner bore down on the kitchen, plate in hand, at Birkenhead’s Eight Point Two restaurant on Auckland’s North Shore. He was intercepted by owner and maitre d’ Lindsay Swannack. One would tend to fear the worst when faced with a scene like this – but the guest did not have remonstrations on his mind. “That was the most amazing meal I’ve ever had!” he said.

(for the record, it was **Marriage’s** hapuka with seed mustard sauce that got the guest – a repeat visitor from Australia – going. I expect many of his creations would have the same effect.)

**Marriage**, Swannack and I are sitting in Eight Point Two the next day and it is here that Swannack relates the hapuka incident. **Marriage** – British-born and trained, who did a spot at the Savoy in his teens – seems to truly take great joy from such accounts. “I love people poking their head in and saying, “I enjoyed it.””

You may recognise his face. He featured in *Return of the Chef* – a reality-based television series based on John Burton-Race’s efforts to set up a new restaurant in Devon, England. **Marriage** was his mate and his head chef. With him in charge, the restaurant – the New Angel – got its first Michelin star in rapid-quick time.

He has worked at other great places and for other famous names (Raymond Blanc’s Le Manoir Aux Quat’ Saisons included). “I was Blanc’s first head chef at Le Manoir – we actually opened with two (Michelin) stars - and that’s never happened in Britain.”

**Marriage** left Devon for Birkenhead in April this year, but he’s been a constant visitor to New Zealand for more than 25 years. He even stayed for four years once, when he set up a delicatessen in Milford, Auckland, in the late 1990’s.

His antipodean pursuits started in 1979. He’d done a two-year stint at London’s Savoy Hotel, where he worked in the pastry department among people with names such as Mr Ian Ironside and Silvano Trompetto. **Marriage’s** Napier-based uncle persuaded him to pay a call. He spent six months here, working his way around the country on an assortment of farms.

“I just wanted to get that sense of freedom,” he says. He loves the outdoors to the same degree that he does the kitchen: has walked bits of New Zealand that his two Kiwi table mates have never heard of and is a frequent visitor to Tiritiri Matangi Island.

If he’s not outside, he’s in the kitchen. You will find him cooking on his days off.

“I love food, I really do. I don’t mind if it’s Mum’s roast dinner or something five-star from France”

The fact he loves what he does is reflected in what he turns out.

Admittedly the (multiple) Michelin awards have trajectorised his career.

“When a chef wins a Michelin, it elevates him above mere mortal chefs.”

Is there a place for them and all their exactitude here?

“I hope not” he laughs. **Marriage** likes restaurants where people talk to each other and to other tables, rather than ones where guests just whisper across the table. British diners, he says are “typically British – move quiet. New Zealand diners are more party-ish”.

In his spare time, Marriage also likes fossicking around farmers markets. Inspiration for the following dish came from one such visit to the Takapuna, Auckland, market, where he says he spotted some ‘Lovely’ dates.

“It may look daunting, but I promise it’s not – really.” He says. If it all gets too hard, you could get him to do it for you. It’s on the menu at Eight Point Two.

## ***Pork Loin, Walnut Crust, Date & Apple Sauce & Spiced Rice***

### **Walnut Crust**

50 gms walnut pieces  
50 gms bread crumbs  
1 clove garlic crushed & chopped  
1 pinch salt  
Olive oil to moisten

Wiz walnut pieces in a food processor until they resemble coarse crumbs.  
Add the breadcrumbs, garlic & salt – process for 20 seconds  
Add enough oil to bring the mixture to a moist crumble, but not too wet & not too fine  
Place aside.

### **Date & Apple Sauce**

30 mls vegetable oil  
1 onion chopped  
1 tsp fennel seeds ) toasted dry & ground  
1 tsp cumin seeds )  
1 tsp tumeric  
1 cinnamon stick  
½ tsp mace  
½ tsp cayenne pepper  
250 mls red wine  
zest & juice of 1 lemon & 1 orange  
400 mls chicken stock  
1 clove garlic, peeled & halved  
Peel & core of the apple used in the garnish below  
1 tsp soft brown sugar  
4 tablespcream  
25 gmns butter  
salt to taste

Heat the oil in a heavy based pan, add the onions, cook for 5 mins.  
Add the spices and on a low heat cook for 2 min stirring often.  
Pour in the wine, boil and reduce by 1/3.  
Now add the lemon & orange, chicken stock, garlic, apple & sugar  
Bring to the boil, skim and simmer for 20 min. Strain through a fine sieve and reduce by half, skimming and boiling rapidly.  
Finally add the cream and whisk in the butter.  
Season with salt & keep warm.

### **Spiced Rice**

50 gms unsalted butter  
1 onion chopped fine  
200 gms basmati rice  
1 sprig thyme  
1 bayleaf  
1 cinnamon stick  
3 cardamon pods  
1 star anise  
zest & juice of 1 lemon & 1 orange  
400 mls chicken stock  
1 tsp salt

Melt the butter and gently cook the onion until tender

Add the rice, stir so that each grain is coated with butter – a few seconds only

Add the remaining ingredients, bring to the boil, cover with butter paper and foil and cook in the oven @ 180 deg c for 20 min

Stir with a fork to loosen the rice and keep warm.

### **Pork**

4 x 170 gms pork loin  
salt  
20 mls vegetable oil

Season the pork and in a hot heavy skillet brown each side

Cook in the oven at 200 deg c for 5 min.

Turn, sprinkle each evenly with the walnut crust and continue baking for 4 more min until the crust is brown

Remove and allow to relax

### **Garnish**

12 fresh medjool dates  
1 apple peeled & cored  
1 tablesp chopped parsley  
40 green beans

Remove the date stones

Dice the apple into ½ cm cubes

Sprinkle with lemon juice

Cook beans in rapidly boiling salted water

### **To Serve**

Spoon the rice into the centre of each plate.

Place the dates & apple in the sauce, warm through and add the parsley

Put the beans on the rice

Slice through the pork and assemble on the beans.

Spoon around the sauce, dates & apples.