

WHO WE ARE: Karena Armstrong

Expanding tastes

Story by **Emma Masters**. Photograph by **Heidi Lewis**.

Award-winning chef and restaurateur Karena Armstrong has been on a decade-long mission to create cuisine that celebrates what she calls the three Ps – place, produce and people – of the Fleurieu Peninsula.

This year, she's expanding her passion and desire to celebrate everything local in her new role as co-director of the premier eating and drinking festival Tasting Australia.

For those who know the vibrant, driving force behind the Salopian Inn, which Karena co-owns with sommelier Alex Marchetti, her nomination for the prestigious role may seem like a no-brainer, but she says it came as a shock.

'I'm still amazed they asked me to do it. I was actually speechless, which doesn't really happen that often,' Karena explains with a laugh. 'I've been involved with Tasting Australia since 2014 and been an ambassador quite a few times, so I have insight into the festival, but never at this level.'

Karena has travelled the world chasing her culinary dreams before finding resounding success on her return to the region of her childhood. So it's surprising to learn she initially felt nervous about stepping into the shoes of world-class chefs who've held the role. 'I just never would have thought I was the right person for the job, looking from the outside in, but now I'm doing the job, it just aligns with my philosophy – it's more than just the cooking and the chefs, it's about people, the places, and particularly our producers and really highlighting what we do here in South Australia,' she says. 'I was born on the Fleurieu and have a real connection through to producers and have so much respect for what they do, and Tasting Australia as a festival pays great respect to them and includes them in the conversation about food in our state.'

Curating the festival's program is no small feat and Karena has worked tirelessly with her festival co-director Darren Robertson, drinks curator Nick Stock and food curator Emma McCaskill to create the largest-ever program with more than 200 events being held across South Australia.

She's particularly proud of the diverse range of experiences on offer, from the Town Square Kitchen in Adelaide's CBD to destination events in Coffin Bay, the Flinders Ranges and Coober Pedy. These sit alongside a range of unforgettable fine-dining experiences, including

SA legends tribute events celebrating Cheong Liew and Maggie Beer, as well as weekend extravaganzas, lunches, tasting tables and masterclasses.

'What's also really great to see is the growth in the cheaper, more family-friendly, more accessible events,' she says. 'I've got my own family and understand that a \$250 ticket is a really special night out, and that you might also want to do something with your children, so there are also lots of events that are affordable.'

It's also an opportunity for Karena to help bring attention to an issue close to her heart. She's collaborated with SA chef Kane Pollard and NSW's Ben Devlin to offer Wasted, a four-course dinner serving up dishes made from ingredients often thrown away in the kitchen. 'It's one of my big passion projects as obviously restaurants can be quite hedonistic – we're there for people's pleasure – and there's all this food wasted traditionally,' Karena explains.

'I just wanted to highlight a no-waste approach and work with two chefs who've been quite inventive in this space, where the food in front of you will look like a fine-dining plate, but we're going to make it from leftovers and bits, and you'll never know.'

'I'm making tiramisu where I'm going to McLaren Vale's Never Never Distillery to get the spent products from making gin to make syrups. And instead of buying in cream I'm getting local whey, which is a by-product of cheesemaking which often ends up in the waterways and gets thrown down sinks, and makes this light, cheesy fantastic mousse,' Karena continues. 'The tiramisu will have loads of luxury moments, but it's just been thought about and that's what the dinner is about – thinking about how we're behaving around food.'

There are also high hopes the festival will provide a much-needed boost for an industry that has been hit hard in the coronavirus pandemic. 'The restrictions have hurt – it has impacted suppliers, it has impacted casual workers who normally would have lots of work at this time of year and don't have as much,' she says.

'Naturally, as a COVID safe event, we're guided by SA Health and while we hope events don't have to be cancelled we have refund policies in place. I'm hoping it goes really well because it'll support the whole industry and hopefully we're making our way out of this pandemic.'

Taking it back to the region she knows best, Karena said the 21 events offered on the Fleurieu reflect a region that continues to mature and grow. 'We've done an amazing job of building a food community that now supports our producers and our community supports us really well,' she says. 'We have such a diverse offering and the festival will showcase some of the best the region has to offer.'



Above: Karena Armstrong, award-winning chef and restaurateur is this year's co-director of Tasting Australia.