

# FIRE ISLAND

At Kokomo, the super-luxe private island in Fiji, chef Lennox Hastie is planning his upcoming four-day takeover. ANNA McCOOE stows away to watch the experience take shape.

Photography MARKUS RAVIK



Clockwise from top: Lennox Hastie inspects island-grown green bananas; cooking coral trout, lobster and crab over fire on Namara Island; at sea on Kokomo's 51-foot Bertram fishing vessel. Opposite: overlooking Kokomo's dock.





Clockwise from top: coral trout, crab, lobster and kaikoso – a Fijian mussel; preparing cassava and parcels of snapper for lovo; the pool at Dravuni, Kokomo's five-bedroom residence. Opposite: Hastie prepares lunch on Namara Island; one of the resort's Sunset Villas.

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If you were stranded on a desert island, what would you bring? Better yet, who? It would have to be someone who was good with fire. And finding sustenance in their surroundings. In this case, I don't need shelter, thanks to a swoon-eliciting beachfront villa with infinity pool that awaits my arrival. And since this island is more “private” than “deserted”, a warm and professional hospitality staff is ready to assist my needs. As survival gives way to splendour, Bear Grylls can stay where he is. I'll be bringing Lennox Hastie.

And so here we are on Kokomo, the ultra-prime resort on the edge of Fiji's Kadavu archipelago, encircled by the Great Astrolabe Reef. And I'm not stranded. Instead, I very willingly stowed away to preview the island's upcoming residency with the virtuoso chef responsible for elevating Australia's obsession with fire cooking. Part test run, part research trip, this visit to property titan Lang Walker AO's private island will decide exactly how Hastie's four-day February 2024 takeover will take shape.

“I always love exploring different cultures, particularly through fire,” says the chef who opened Sydney's Firedoor in 2015 and Gildas in 2022. “That's what brought me to Australia in the first place and now brings me to Fiji.” English-born to a Scottish mother and Australian father, Hastie forged his love of fire at Etxebarri in the Basque Country and carries that flame with him wherever he cooks. “There are so many beautiful places in the world, all joined by that one mother: cooking with fire. For me, that's where the story continues.”

At Kokomo, fire weaves through Hastie's discovery tour as he learns cooking techniques from across Fiji's islands and villages. These include lovo (cooking with hot stones in the ground), and span to ika tavu (fresh fish cooked on hot stones). “Fire is very spiritual

here,” says the chef, “so I'm looking for ways to bring forth local ideas on a larger scale, which is super interesting to me.”

Our reconnaissance mission brings us to Namara Island (Kokomo's uninhabited neighbour) – all sun-bleached sands and shimmying coconut trees. Here, we watch a bed of cinnamon wood and foraged coconut husks slowly turn to ember on a braai. Hastie places a delicate rack of pork ribs (pigs are bred small in Fiji for lovo) down first. Later, it's joined by coral trout, mud crab and a blue spiny lobster, all freshly plucked from water around us. Watching Hastie orchestrate a procession of magic moments – the point where rendering pork fat caramelises but doesn't burn; the instance the coral trout's eyes pop to signal just-cooked flesh – we have all the entertainment we need. So too, does Hastie, “Grilling is an interactive sport,” he says, wielding a tray to flatten the lobster. “Once you put something on the grill you have to nurture it. That's one of my greatest beliefs.”

For Hastie the call up to work in paradise (“quite possibly the dream”) was too tempting to ignore. Even more so, given this particular paradise includes vast villas, three dining spaces and sustainability projects ranging from water desalination to coral restoration.



Then there's the produce. We are in Kokomo's 2.2-hectare farm when he points out young leaves of bele, a Fijian mountain spinach, which we soon learn benefits from a brisk dance with fire. Further in, there are rows and rows of bok choy, cabbages, and eggplant to harvest for dish experimentation. “Having them freshly picked makes a huge difference,” says Hastie. “The transportation of ingredients is what diminishes them.” And while Fiji, outside of Kokomo, isn't known for food, Lennox argues it could be. “There are some incredible ingredients here,” he says. “For me, sitting by the water, you want fresh fish or shellfish, prepared simply.”

Herein lies the island's greatest culinary boon, the abundance of seafood, underscored by the island's sustainable Dock to Dish ethos. We experience the program in action on board *Katoa*, the Kokomo's 51-foot Bertram vessel as Kokomo's master fisherman Jaga Crossingham leads our attempts to catch our lunch. Waiting for the fish to bite, Crossingham regales us with stories of going from village to village offering sevusevu (the gift of kava root) to seek permission to fish these waters. In doing so, he has encouraged the local fishermen to operate more sustainably, avoiding females with eggs, protected species, and anything undersized. He has also taught them to catch lobsters by hand instead of with spears so they can be kept alive in the Kokomo tanks awaiting service – making the resort the only place in Fiji with live lobsters.

This, and the goldband snapper he has just reeled in, have Hastie's attention. “There are so many resorts that are surrounded by water, where you can't access fresh fish,” he says. “You think, if only they can send a boat out. Well here, they send a boat out. It makes a huge difference to what I do, which is so ingredient based.”

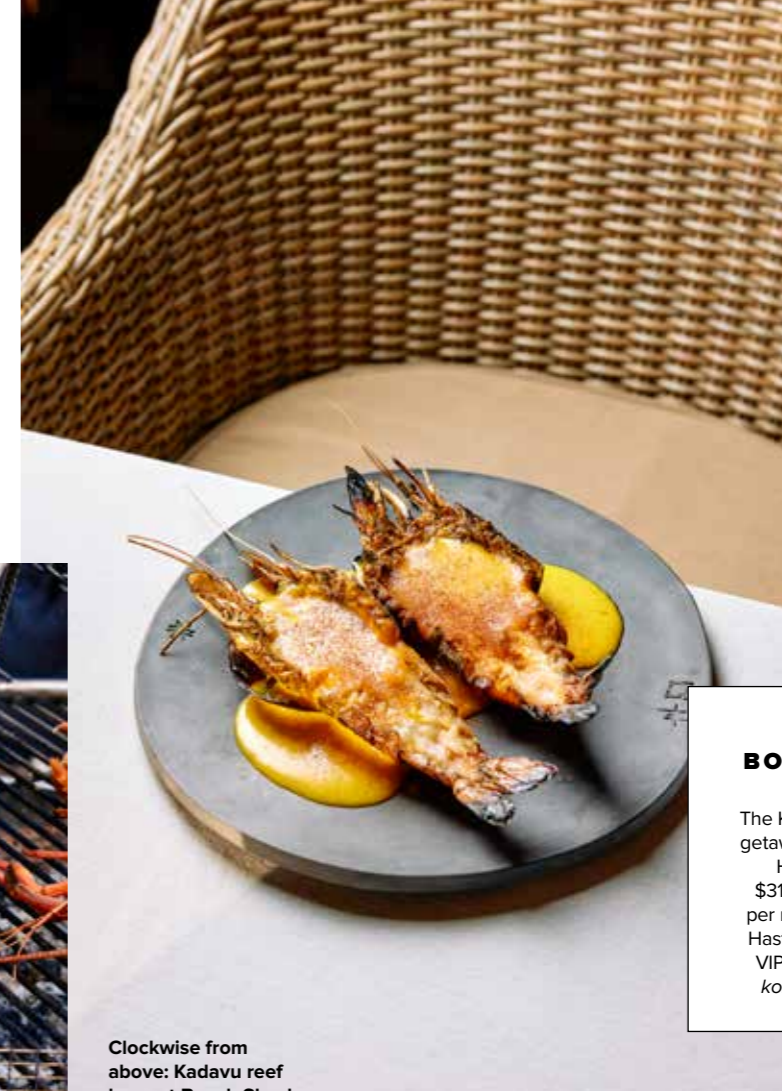
Hastie isn't the only talented chef on Kokomo island committed to quality ingredients. Executive ►

chef Andy Bryant came on board a year ago, bringing with him experience working at Hinchcliff House in Sydney, Supernormal in Melbourne, and Frantzén in Stockholm to finesse the menu at Beach Shack, the island's waterfront grill. Meanwhile Kokomo's rising star, head chef Caroline Oakley has been at the resort since it launched in 2017 and taps into her Fijian heritage to bring finessed family-style dining to Walker D'Plank. In Oakley, Hastie has a ready guide to Fijian cooking, and she is excited to show him a technique from her hometown Biausevu where bamboo is cut, filled with freshwater prawns (though, they use lobster today), closed in with lemongrass and cooked on the fire. As Oakley explains, "There's so many different villages with different cooking methods but they are all linked through fire," she says. "If we could bring that culture to resort dining that would be a good thing. We need to keep our culture alive."

That's a sentiment that continues into the afternoon as Oakley and some of the Kokomo maintenance workers guide Hastie through the lovo process. First, they lay down coconut spines, hot stone, elephant ear and banana leaves into a pit. Then they place tavioka (Fijian cassava) over the direct heat and finally the protein, in this case mud crab, and the snapper Hastie caught himself. The chefs on the island have resisted serving slow-cooked lovo to guests – it tends to have a "sameness" about it – but Hastie is excited to use the process for a single vegetable component to one of his dishes in February. "It's the discovery and formulation that I find so thrilling," he says. "It's only by exploring a place you find the things you thought would be straightforward aren't. And things you didn't even think of suddenly appear. It's interesting to create a menu around that," he adds.

Cooking on the beach with the Kokomo chefs at golden hour, the dropping sun turns the water to mirror, and the island's gentle rhythms take hold. This is when we learn the magic of Kokomo. On the island, the sun, tides and of course meals give scaffolding to a day that is usually a liberal mix of reading, swims, and massages, one languidly blending into the next.

As our reconnaissance mission draws to a close, we start to settle into an island-time haze when the Kokomo helicopter pulls up to take us back to real life. This, we realise, is the trouble with all that fire cooking. The smoke wasn't intended to be a rescue signal. ●



**BOOKING INFO**

The Kokomo Private Island getaway with chef Lennox Hastie starts from \$3160 + VAT per night, per room. Meals, Lennox Hastie experiences, and VIP transfers included. [kokomoislandfiji.com](http://kokomoislandfiji.com)

Clockwise from above: Kadavu reef bugs at Beach Shack; Kokomo's Sunrise beach; Hastie cooking on Namara Island; Namara's picnic set-up. Opposite: Hastie and Kokomo chefs Andy Bryant (left) and Caroline Oakley cooking on the resort's Sunset beach.

**Cooking on the beach with the Kokomo chefs, the dropping sun turns the water to mirror, and the island's rhythms take hold.**

