

# I beat my husband playing pool on Mull...

...and we ended up opening a restaurant in the leaking, draughty (and loo-less!) hovel he called home

The food of love: Jonny wooed Carla over lobster

by Carla Lamont

**I** WAS living in Victoria, Vancouver Island, Canada, in 1994 when I heard about a job vacancy at a hotel on the Isle of Iona, Scotland.

My colourful landlady (who made a good living at pretending

to be Queen Elizabeth II) said a friend of a friend had worked there, and the job might be available.

I was 28 years old and working as a line chef in a tourist-based restaurant that did up to 400 lunches a day. I was making the same thing day after day and was



bored out of my mind. I needed a change. The hotel on Iona was looking for a meat-eating chef, as the entire kitchen staff was vegetarian.

After sending my CV and labouring through an intensely weird phone interview about eating meat, I got the job. And before I knew it, I was flying the 4,000 miles

to Glasgow for the beginning of the season.

I was to work as an assistant cook at the seafront Argyll Hotel for six months, a 'Fawltly Towers' type of place with crazy corridors and a mish-mash of staff from all the corners of the world. Yet I fell in love with Iona and the surrounding isles – the clear teal waters, the white sands, the atmospheric ruins and the friendly people. It was a million miles away from my city life in Canada. Fashion meant little here. I went to the shop in my pyjamas one day without comment from the locals. There was only one problem, no pool table.

In Canada, I was a pool addict and captain of a winning women's eight-ball team. I had played for

hours each day and was suffering from withdrawal symptoms. I heard there was a table in the pub across the water at Fionnphort, so on my first day off I ventured to Mull on the little ferry. I made my way up the tiny village street to the Keel Row pub and went to find the pool table.

The whole point about playing pool for me is competition, but there were no players in sight. I went back to the bar and asked the charming owner, Andrew: 'Doesn't anybody play pool here? I came over from Iona to play.'

'Well,' he said, 'there's John or Peter. You'd catch them on Saturday, maybe.'

So I drank up, headed back to Iona and waited to get a Saturday off work. A couple weeks later

in June, I made it over. As before, the pool room was empty. I sat at an outside table to enjoy my cider in the sun. Soon after I heard a couple of guys at a table behind me, discussing books.

It was then I noticed the dirtiest fellow I'd ever seen. Dressed in what used to be a white T-shirt and faded jeans, this wiry, muscled man was covered in something like black axle grease.

**H**E even had smudges of it on his face. But shining amidst the mess like gems in a dung heap was a pair of the brightest blue eyes. That was my first sight of John. He burred in his Scottish accent: 'You'll be the Canadian pool nut, then.' Not yet introduced to the island telegraph, I wondered how he'd heard of me.

'I must be,' said I.  
'Are ye wanting a game of pool then?' asked John.

'With you? Like that?' I answered.  
'That's right,' he said, waiting.  
'OK then.' And it all began.

After I had thrashed Jonny at

several games of pool over numerous pints he asked me over to his place the following week for a dinner involving fresh lobster.

The night of the dinner, Jonny and I walked across the fields, by fallen stane dykes and over what was soon to become 'that dreaded plank' over the drainage ditch. He lived in the bothy, a squat byre-like farm building with gaping barn doors at either end and a barely habitable section in the middle. It was solid stone, with three foot thick Caledonian granite walls and a rusted tin roof full of holes. It had no hot running water, just a lone tap from a well; no central heating, just a sputtering open fire of peat.

During our first date the place kept filling with peat smoke as down-draughts came through cracks in the chimney breast. We had to keep open-

ing the door to let the smoke out and putting on our coats to offset the chill night air. We were sitting in a one-room rustic bachelor suite, kitchen and living room in one. The surroundings were less than salubrious, featuring an appalling brown fuzzy couch, cupboard doors of orange swirled plastic and a tin bath hanging from a

nail in the wall. I was dubious about the whole evening, having been asked on a dinner date by a grubby man I'd repeatedly beaten at pool in the village pub the week before.

The courses were served with a fisherman's swagger and a smile. The starter of octopus-stuffed tomatoes was tangy, creamy, divine. The main course was lobster. A whole lobster all to myself. A bit incongruous in a broken-down shanty to say the least.

After devouring the lobster, prodding every bit out with the end of a teaspoon, I licked my fingers, put my gloves back on and dreamily sipped at my wine. Despite the peat smoke, I could smell the rhubarb crumble in the oven. A great finish to a memorable meal.

Together, the Scotsman and I had braved the smoke, the draughts,

and the hideous décor. I was in love. With the food or the fisherman, it was hard to tell.

A few months, several lobster dinners and a hundred pints of cider later, I moved into the bothy on Jonny's windswept croft. Moving into this rustic hovel when you are used to a large rambling Victorian house with roll-top baths, cornicing and gingerbread trim was a shock. In the bothy there were whole areas devoted to spiders, a comical but distressing colony of shrews, a stoat periodically hunting mice between the walls, slug trails across the dishes every morning and NO INDOOR TOILET. I am not even going to broach the horror of the dreaded overnight pee pail.

The wild Hebridean winter saw every form of vermin trying to share a home with us. There was ice on

the inside of the bedroom window and duvet. I learned to cook on one burner and roll pasta on a coffee table. I worked as head chef for five more years at The Argyll on Iona then started my own catering business, where I cooked in castles, houses and baronial mansions across Mull.

**I**T WAS very challenging trying to cater for weddings and such from the confines of the bothy. One time we had to set up old barn doors on logs to use as extra counterspace in the open end of the stone steading. Piping the perfect meringues can be difficult enough without stepping over creels and avoiding swooping swallows that were nesting in the

rafters. Somewhere along the way, Jonny and I got married to the skirl of the bagpipes on an old granite fishing pier at Carsaig on the rugged South coast of Mull.

My passion for food grew as I learned to forage on the croft for ingredients and experimenting with the catches from J's boat. He worked on his fishing boat around the picturesque shores every day that the weather was fit and brought me sea urchin, crab, octopus and conger eel for my culinary creations. After ten years of living in the byre, though, I'd had enough of roughing it. I was ready for some luxury, or even just hot running water and central heating. We had been half-looking for a place to buy and renovate, but we only had a few hundred pounds, and we loved it here.

Then Jonny said: 'Why don't we stay where we are and turn this place into a restaurant?' And that was the birth of the idea that was to become our home, life and living.

Between planning permission, building control, bank loans and a terrifying monster called a 'bill of quantities' our project was delayed many times. We kept our heads down, worked like dervishes and saved the pennies.

While red tape raged, Jonny kept stolidly fishing the shoreline of South Mull to help keep the funds in our coffers growing. He agonised over application forms with me and colourfully ranted against bureaucracy like a true anarchist.

I spent that time trying to save money for the project as well as doing the business plans, crazy paperwork, and the interior and exterior designs for the restaurant and house. I hired myself out as a relief chef on the island and worked on and off at various hotels. We were

basically in limbo until the gods of banking and building control saw fit to let us get on with it.

It cost all our savings and all our combined wages to pay for the architects, planning permission and the bill of quantities – a huge tome the size of a New York phone book, full of figures, costing materials and labour for the build. Every nail and tin of paint had to be priced out. We desperately needed a contractor we could rely on.

Through the grapevine we heard that Nigel, a builder from just down the road, had quit working on his mussel farm and maybe, just maybe, was taking on work. Nigel is a guy of contrasts: a Gaelic choir singer, fan of Buddhist meditation and all things green, and an inveterate pinchpenny. He was perfect.

**K**NOWING that this two-room shanty would soon be turned into a restaurant was exciting. During the early work on our renovation we found out that there had been a Bronze Age settlement on our croft. During the time of the Scottish kings, the path taken by funeral processions and wayfarers going to Iona is believed to have passed right through our narrow strip of land. How interesting and expensive this knowledge turned out to be. We were required to employ an archaeologist to supervise the excavating. The cost came in at £1,000 a day. It should only take a day, unless of course we unearthed a hoard of gold or St Columba himself. As it was, all they found was a load of buried fishing rope, some rotting corrugated iron and a crappy Victorian spoon.

We had our share of hiccups: a water source appeared while a trench was being dug, lovely granite walls had to be knocked down due to instability, materials vanished, we lost our rock fireplace to make space in the living room, the liquor-licensing people were schizophrenic, and Nigel forgot to hire a tiler.

We were stuffed into a small caravan. It had a dodgy shower that alternated hot and cold water randomly, a sink drain that smelled like over-cooked cabbage and an oven on which only one burner worked. We shared with mice, shrews and blackbirds that played relay races on the aluminium roof at 5am every morning. I didn't care. The end was in sight. And after all, there was nothing 40 dozen chocolate chip cookies and a grain silo full of tea

couldn't fix.

Altogether, it took seven years from the formation of the chookie stane of an idea of renovating our croft building until we opened the restaurant on May 1, 2009.

Today, I finally have a proper kitchen, churning out everything from decadent handmade chocolates to fresh baked bread, lobster caviar to crab soufflé cheesecake. During the last 20 years, most of our seven acres has been allowed to revert to its natural state. Since the land has been sheep-free, the indigenous plants and bees have not only come back, but natives like meadowsweet and purple loosestrife have flourished.

Jonny and his fishing boat go out most days, so I can serve up succulent lobster, crab, langoustine, hand-dived scallops and fish often caught only hours before in our tiny restaurant with just 20 covers. At night, he doubles up as waiter and wine steward. Last year, we were named restaurant of the year in the Highlands and Islands.

In the winter, we can sometimes be sighted playing pool in the back room of our local pub. And, yes, I still beat the pants off him.

When first coming to the wild Scottish islands, I could never have imagined I would end up running a fine dining restaurant with a romantic Scotsman who happens to be my husband. How one simple decision can change your entire life is still a source of amazement to me. I came from a bustling city to live on a wild moor, from a repetitive life as a line cook at massive clinical places to a small but magical cauldron of creativity on the edge of the known culinary universe.

And all thanks to a game of pool.

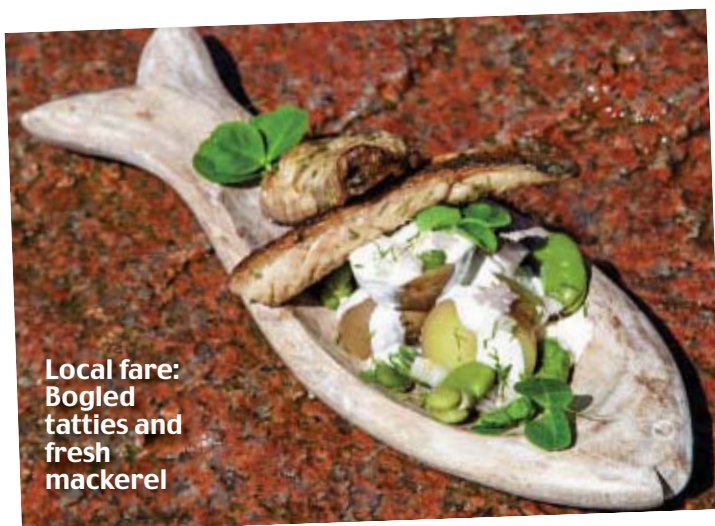
■ *The Ninth Wave: Love and Food on the Isle of Mull* by Carla Lamont is published by Birlinn, £20





**Roughing it: Jonny's basic bothy before, left, and after the seven-year renovation project, right**

... nail in the wall I was dubious about ... and the hideous décor I was in ... the inside of the bedroom window



**Local fare:  
Bogled  
tatties and  
fresh  
mackerel**