

FINANCIAL REVIEW

— NEWS WEBSITE OF THE YEAR —

Prior club aims to change the game for discerning travellers



David Prior and chef Alice Waters on the river in front of Ahilya Fort in Madhya Pradesh, central India. Supplied



by [Stephen Todd](#)

Growing up in the riverside suburbs of Brisbane, David Prior yearned for the colour and flavours of elsewhere. While other frustrated adolescents lived vicariously through style bibles such as *The Face* or *Interview* magazines, from the age of 11 Prior had a subscription to the '90s lifestyle juggernaut *Vogue Entertaining Guide*. By the time a friend gave him a copy of Alice Waters' *Chez Panisse Café Cookbook* at the age of 12, he was hooked.

"Even at an early age, food was a gateway into different cultures, different worlds," he says. "Growing up in a place where you don't really fit in, magazines and cookbooks were a way of imagining what life might be. They allowed me to dream bigger."

Today David Prior, 35, is living the dream. As an esteemed food and travel writer, his byline has become the signpost to precious intel in the pages of *Condé Nast*

Traveler, *The Wall Street Journal* and *Bon Appétit*. Next month, from his adopted hometown of New York, he will launch Prior, a travel club for the cognoscenti in the age of Instagram fatigue.



"It's not about ticking the boxes on some bucket list, and it's certainly not about 'doing' a destination. How can you ever have 'done' Japan?" he says. "The focus of Prior is on gaining access to completely extraordinary places and people at incredible moments no one else has figured out how to unlock."

Places like Varanasi during Maha Shivaratri, the annual Hindu celebration of Lord Shiva – with a flute-playing theology student aboard a boat on the Ganges. Or a rammed-earth lodge in the Simien Mountains in northern Ethiopia, a World Heritage Site for its precious biodiversity. Or perhaps the Sistine Chapel, after hours, just the Vatican curator and you.

"In a sense these are the kind of stories I've been wanting to tell but thought I might not get the opportunity unless I made them happen," says Prior. "Working with an extensive network of people on the ground can be quite a challenge to pull off in an authentic and stylish way."

The first of what Prior calls Nomadic Clubhouse meetings will be a weekend in October at Heckfield Place, an 18th-century Georgian manor set in 160 hectares of

the secluded Hampshire Downs, an hour outside of London. Australian expat chef Skye Gyngell of Petersham Nurseries fame is culinary director of Heckfield and a close friend.

"He's a natural traveller," she says, "culturally inquisitive with a profound love of beauty but also a fascination for the layers of meaning behind what makes a place interesting. He's had the same yellow canvas backpack for a hundred years, always on the run, chasing the next story."



Locavore hero

Prior left Brisbane for Sydney in his early 20s, working in restaurants and eventually breaking into styling for some of his revered magazines. About the same time, Carlo Petrini, founder of the Slow Food movement established the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Bra, in northern Italy. Prior applied and was accepted into a student body comprising 60 nationalities studying a curriculum that included placements around the world. He began writing for travel magazines to earn pocket money.

At a Slow Food conference in Puebla, Mexico on food justice and young farmers, he got talking to a woman he soon realised was his hero, Alice Waters, owner of

California's legendary restaurant Chez Panisse and author of the cookbook that had fired his 12 year-old imagination.

"I almost peed my pants!" he laughs.

Waters is a pioneer of the locavore movement, growing, sourcing and preparing organic produce to serve at her Arts and Crafts-style bungalow in Berkeley, on San Francisco Bay.

"It was a high-water mark moment in food consciousness," recalls Prior. "Alice had recently set up the Edible Schoolyard program and was about to plant a sustainable garden outside San Francisco's Civic Centre. And lo and behold, a year later (in 2009) Michelle Obama plants an edible garden at the White House."

Waters offered Prior a job once he'd obtained his *Dottore di Scienze Gastronomiche* degree and for five years he served as her aide de camp – writing, strategising "and carrying the market basket a lot".

"Alice set my moral compass but more than anything she taught me how to connect with people and connect the dots in order to get things done."



On the Ganges River in Varanasi, where Prior travellers can spend the annual Maha Shivaratri festival. Supplied

Deep immersion

The dots he connected to get the Prior "travellers' club" up and running included a test trip early last year to Madhya Pradesh in central India, with a group of discerning friends including Waters, Christina Hudson from Hudson Valley Vineyards and Judy Stewart, former managing director of the Great Barrier Reef Foundation. Through that network he was connected with Marc Blazer, chairman of Copenhagen's famed Noma restaurant, founder of Overture Investment group and now executive director of Prior.

By last November the buzz around the nascent travel brand was so great that David Prior was nominated for the 2018 Bloomberg 50 list of people who are redefining global business.

Prior (the club) will provide bespoke journeys designed in line with members' desires (a series of interviews is part of the process of joining the club); and an evolving roster of member events including a Day of the Dead fiesta at a hacienda in the Mexican city of Oaxaca in November and dinner in Chile's Atacama desert for the next lunar eclipse in January. Each moment is designed to, as Prior puts it "dive deep" into the culture of a people and a place via craft, tradition, nature and food.

During the course of their travels, members meet local craftspeople and traditional producers, thus celebrating and fostering diversity. "When you pay that steward of culture and the land the correct price for their time and knowledge you are contributing to sustaining that culture," says Prior, noting that his company is developing a schedule of financial grants to local causes including the Indian Foundation for the Arts and Slow Food's Ark of Taste.

Prior has a start-up team of 14 staff based in Manhattan, a network of adviser/travellers he calls The Trust and some 50 founding members drawn from the worlds of fashion, the arts, publishing, technology and finance. They share, he says, one essential quality: curiosity.

And yes, he still carries that yellow canvas backpack – although he reckons it's more like dirty khaki these days.

NEED TO KNOW

Membership applications to Prior can be made from September 1 via prior.club.