

food for thought



One woman's celebration and promotion of the ultimate in comfort – ie, food – has been key to our more sophisticated palates.



The farmers market where Catherine Bell shops each Saturday morning is part of a revolution in Kiwi cuisine – a revolution which she helped kick-start in 1984.

Catherine is best known as having owned the iconic Auckland cookware store Epicurean Workshop and as the current owner of *Dish* magazine.

Back in the early 80s, she had just returned from a fabulous cuisine-packed year in Europe, where she'd studied at Leiths School of Food and Wine, cooked for families on Corfu and for a gentleman in Provence, worked at up-market kitchenware shop Divertimenti (one of the owners was an ex-pat Kiwi), done a course on making fresh cheeses at Neal's Yard Dairy, and worked at country house parties.

All of this – but especially buying fresh ingredients from growers at local markets – saw her return to New Zealand bursting with enthusiasm. To a land containing no mesclun, arborio rice, couscous or balsamic vinegar.

The first step was becoming co-owner of a Mt Eden deli, and importing the ingredients she'd discovered. Trays of mesclun (she'd brought the seeds back with her) were growing in the window, with leaves snipped to order.

Those simple but fresh ingredients form the basis of Catherine's everyday cooking. She doesn't necessarily plan ahead ("I'm normally not that organised") but

decides what to prepare for dinner on the night, knowing that the fridge is full of good fresh food bought at the weekend markets. And like any working mother, time always seems short.

Her two grown children, Tom (21) and Olivia (17), certainly benefit from having a gourmand as a mother. While neither of them is directly following in Catherine's foodie footsteps yet, they have developed an appreciation of good food. Like any family, they eat their fair share of takeaways "but they tend to be good quality, like the Malaysian place in Khyber Pass or Japanese," says Catherine.

As a self-confessed Francophile, her cooking often has French leanings but she enjoys cooking across most cultures, from Asian to Mediterranean. In winter, Catherine revels in 'slow cooking', with her casserole dishes getting a good work-out. In summer, a family favourite it to make pizza dough and cook the bases, perhaps with just some pesto or tomato paste, on the barbecue. Then everyone around the table just adds their own choice of fresh ingredients to the base.

Her cooking is very seasonal, and she loves cooking duck. "I always lament, though, that fresh duck here comes without the head and feet. There's something about a whole bird that emphasises its farm origins."

Catherine is thrilled with how our cuisine has matured in recent years, but says we shouldn't become complacent.



She cites genetic modification and factory farming practices as clouds over our food.

“There’s some strange Government thinking re GE. I want people to think about these issues, to wonder what’s happened to our clean green image, to know what goes into making our food.”

She hopes that *Dish* magazine can quietly stimulate some debate in these areas. Meantime, she is happy to be living in a city where cultural diversity means you can eat out on a different ethnic cuisine every night.

The Epicurean Workshop in Newmarket (which closed in 2006 after 17 years of trading) was originally designed along similar lines to Divertimenti, and included a cooking school. It was extremely hard work, but “it enriched my life considerably”, she says. She traveled extensively, met many of her favourite chefs and food writers, and was able to continue her own education as a cook, writer and businessperson.

Today, her Auckland townhouse reflects her global adventures, with mementos from the various countries she has visited adorning many of the furniture surfaces, the walls and even the floors.

Catherine’s interest in food and ‘challenges-not-problems’ attitude are heavily influenced by her mother.

“She was a very good cook who educated herself about food by reading Elizabeth David, among others. She was very frustrated because she couldn’t get fresh basil and all the other wonderful ingredients she read about... Unfortunately she died young and didn’t experience the food revolution here.”

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Catherine still runs Epicurean as an on-line kitchenware store (www.epicurean.co.nz), and still has the wholesale business, selling to other retailers and to the hospitality trade.

And despite Catherine’s determination to simplify her life, she can’t help seeing opportunities at every turn. In Dunedin recently she noticed plenty of Chinese restaurants but no yum char. She sees a desperate need for vegetable gardens in every school – especially in less wealthy areas – and lessons on how to prepare and cook the produce.

With all these ideas constantly on the boil, it seems likely Catherine will always be verging on too-busy – to the benefit of the nation’s cuisine.

Turn the page for one of Catherine’s favourite ‘comfort’ recipes.

- Resene Brunette
- Resene Kamikaze
- Resene Quarter Spanish White



risotto porcini casserole

Although not a true risotto, this dish makes a hearty meal in colder weather. The porcini mushrooms add richness to the flavour but can be omitted if they prove hard to find. They should be readily available in small packets in your local specialty food store.

- 15 grams dried porcini mushrooms
- 120 grams unsalted butter
- 4-5 spring onions, finely chopped
- 2 carrots, peeled and finely chopped
- 2 cups arborio rice
- ½ cup dry white wine
- 4-5 cups beef stock or brown chicken stock, heated
- 500 grams fresh mushrooms
- 3 cloves garlic, crushed
- ¾ cup fresh Italian parsley, chopped
- sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1-1½ cups Parmesan cheese, freshly grated
- 1 cup cream
- 2 eggs
- pinch of ground nutmeg

Place the porcini into a small bowl, cover with hot water and let stand for 30 minutes.

Melt half of the butter in a large pan, add the spring onions and carrots and sauté for 10 minutes. Add the rice and cook, stirring to coat with the butter and vegetables until the rice is warm.

Drain the porcini, reserving the liquid and slice. Strain the liquid through muslin to remove any grit. Pour this liquid over the rice. Add the wine and enough hot stock to completely cover the rice. Simmer, covered over a low heat, adding more stock as needed, until the rice is tender – about 30 minutes.

Melt the remaining butter in a frying pan; add the porcini and fresh mushrooms and sauté until tender. Stir in the garlic and parsley and simmer uncovered for 10 minutes. Season with salt and pepper.

Preheat the oven to 180°C. Spread half the rice in the bottom of a buttered baking dish and top with all the mushroom mixture. Sprinkle generously with parmesan and spread the remaining rice on top.

Whisk the cream, eggs and nutmeg together and pour evenly over the rice. Sprinkle the top with the remaining parmesan. Bake until the top is puffed and brown – about 30 minutes. Serve with a crisp green salad. Serves 8. **H**

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