



Cultured owners Wendy and Conrad

Cheese bored? Get cultured...

Interview and photos WILLIAM DAVENPORT

Cultured 185 Jackson St, Petone



Tell us a bit about yourselves – upbringing, work history, lifestyle and so on.

I grew up mostly in New Zealand (Conrad in the UK and New Zealand) and then three years in New York and London after graduating in the early 90s. With a Canadian mother who loved entertaining, we grew up with many interesting dinner party leftovers in our lunches! So we didn't really have a typical kiwi diet growing up. My time in New York really opened my eyes to wonderful delis, diners and specialty food stores. Zabars and Dean & DeLuca were particularly inspiring. I also drank a lot of 'coffee to go' in New York, which wasn't commonplace at all in New Zealand at that time. And now we have a coffee caravan – our little red, 1970 Espresso Rescue. I've never had coffee like we have here in Wellington – we're so lucky – even returning to Europe and New York three years ago, we couldn't get coffee as we know it here. The milk isn't as good and the espresso rarely so freshly roasted and ground.

As for the cheese, however, our last trip was a bit of a market adventure, as we were travelling on a budget and curious about what the locals ate in our various small town stops in France, Spain and Italy. We ate wonderful cheeses and on our return to New Zealand, and doing coffee at the markets, we were going crazy at the lack of cheese available there. So I started investigating, and for a while we sold Kingsmeade cheeses from our



coffee caravan at Harbourside Market on Sundays.

Work wise, I guess you could say Conrad and I have escaped from the office... Conrad was a personnel manager at one of the big banks and I was a public servant for 15 years. After some fairly stressful contract positions before our six months overseas with our two children, I kept telling Conrad I wasn't going back to what I did before. So we worked Espresso Rescue on our return to New Zealand in 2007 and kept an eye out for what else we could do to bring delicious things to people.

Wendy, you attended the NZ Cheese School. How was that?

Yes – in the middle of 2009 my friend Mindi Clews and I ran away for a week to the New Zealand Cheese School to do their week-long Artisan Cheesemaking Course. That was last July, and neither Mindi nor I have looked back. We went back in October to learn about cellaring cheese and sensory appreciation (judging). Mindi then left her IT project management role to work for Over the Moon Dairy and the NZCS as its business development manager... and I opened a cheese shop!

Why a cheese shop?

There was something so real and rewarding and magical about that cheesemaking week, and the wonderful milks and cheeses we were immersed in, that lit a fire in us



both. We talked all the way home about what we could do to bring more of these amazing cheeses to people. Conrad and I had already thought about doing coffee from a fixed spot somewhere in Petone and when a space became available we jumped at it. We signed the lease in September, added a kitchen and opened our doors in November. We laugh about how naive we were those first few months, with a conceptual business plan but only slowly growing certainty about what we would stock, but we've now found our feet and have wonderful customer feedback.

Do you just sell cheese?

We're about cheese and coffee, things that go with cheese and coffee and a special category called 'random things I like'. We added organic groceries when we realised the gap left in Jackson Street after the organic shop closed some time ago. I love being able to offer people on their way home at the end of the day the fixings for a complete meal, and help them avoid a trip to the supermarket for just a few ingredients.

Why Petone?

Petone has a great reputation now as a growing foodie haven. Our local coffee and milk suppliers, Ripe and Zany Zeus, have been very helpful and patient as we develop our businesses. There's an excellent small-medium business community in the Hutt, and especially Petone, fostered with the help of Robert and the Jackson Street Programme. We're lucky now to have several local unofficial mentors, with whom we can test out ideas and learn new skills and retail tips. Even in our block there are people we can both collaborate with and get advice from – that's very important to me. Petone has so much to offer and the more that like-minded businesses can work together, the better it is for us all and for our customers. I also find people are keen on learning about living sustainably, making the right choices for themselves and for the environment. We're part of the Conscious Consumers Café Guide, a wonderful Wellington project celebrating and promoting the choices we were already making to reduce our business' footprint.



Do you have many local suppliers?

We stock as many local products as we can, always mindful that we can't compete with the 'big guys' on range or volume, so we may as well get the best products we can for our people. Cheese-wise we stock as much New Zealand non-cow cheese as we can, to offer a decent choice to the seemingly growing number of people who can't tolerate cow's milk well. We've personally met all of our current cheesemakers, and most of our other food suppliers too. Those relationships make such a difference. We're building a bit of momentum now, where people are bringing us their products, rather than us having to do so much research into what's new out there.

We have a growing range of accompaniments for cheese, many of which are small, local makers – Elaia gourmet olive products and Olivo and Bella Olea oils from the Wairarapa, Paula's Pantry and Little Wolf products made in Wainuiomata and Bees Blessing cordials and marmalades from Mangaroa Valley. We're very lucky in the Wellington and Wairarapa regions, having so many fresh and delicious products available. We sell organic cheeses and yoghurt from Zany Zeus in Lower Hutt, ewe and cow cheeses from Kingsmeade in the Wairarapa (who have their own sheep and use their neighbour's jersey cow milk) and Cwmglyn in Eketahuna – the wonderful Biddy Fraser-Davies with her three jersey cows. We stock quite a few cheeses from Over the Moon in Putaruru, who have wonderful washed rind, buffalo and goat cheeses in particular, and fresh

buffalo mozzarella, ricotta and yoghurt from Clevedon. We also love selling traditional Georgian cheese from Colchis in Auckland, and we seasonally stock some interesting cheeses, goat and cow, from Sherrington Grange in the Marlborough Sounds. And as soon as we can stock raw milk New Zealand cheeses, we will!

Are New Zealanders open to trying new cheeses?

Absolutely. We have a growing community of regular customers, all with their favourites and keen to try whatever we have that is new and different. People are open to new flavours - not everyone likes washed rind or goat cheese, but we always have palate cleansing pastes on hand to sooth any flavour shocks...

And they want to make cheese! One of my favourite things is watching people set, cut and feel their first batch of curds at our home dairy workshops. Mindi is a wonderful teacher and people leave their three hours of making and eating cheese brimming over with new experiences - wonderful. We sell French cheesemaking cultures now too, thanks to Guy de Lambert at Innovative Packaging here in Petone, who imports most of New Zealand's cheese wrappings - inspiring stuff. We're building our range of over-the-counter cheesemaking supplies - people are very keen to learn and continue making their own cheese at home, a demand we're more than happy to meet. ☺

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