



Cath (left) and Sue love sharing Wellington's culinary highlights with guests.



Traditional Greek biscuits at Mojo cafe.

# culinary capital



Paua ravioli, a signature dish at Logan Brown restaurant.

In a city known for its cafes, walking tours where people can sample culinary and caffeinated delights make complete sense

STORY SARAH CATHERALL PHOTOGRAPHS NICOLA EDMONDS

Coffee beans crack like popcorn and begin to turn a lovely chocolate brown. Within about 15 minutes of being subjected to temperatures rising to 220°C, they'll change from a soft green to the rich, dark shade that is eventually ground into coffee.

When Catherine Cordwell began her food tour business three years ago, she thought coffee beans started life that colour. Now, she puts her hand into a sack sitting near the roaster in Wellington's Mojo cafe and pulls out a handful of beans resembling peeled pistachio nuts. "Smell them," she encourages

me. "Often all people can smell is their hand cream. The beans don't really smell of anything."

She's right. Despite years of daily lattes, I've never witnessed this transformational process.

Mojo's resident roaster, Lambros Gianoutsos, came to Wellington in 1960 as a 19-year-old from the Greek island, Kastos, taking a job in a dairy here. Now he works for his son, Steve, who set up Mojo Coffee Cartel a few years ago, and is demonstrating his new job, typically roasting between 150 to 270kg of coffee beans a day.

Cath, 40, is one half of Zest Food Tours, which runs gastronomic





rambles around Wellington and the Wairarapa. Her business partner is Susan McLeary, 53, and the pair share an office in a converted brick bakehouse on eclectic Cuba Street. It's from here that they run Zest and their own separate communication consultancies.

Cath and Sue met while working for the Game Industry Board in the early 90s, where they promoted Cervena venison in New Zealand and the US. Zest was born just after Cath's third daughter. She spotted a story in the newspaper revealing that cruise ship visitors were typically shown little more than scenic views and the shops on Lambton Quay. She got on the phone to Sue, lamenting the fact that they were missing out on Wellington's unmatched food and beverage experiences, and told her something should be done about it. The pair quickly realised there was a niche waiting to be filled for tourists seeking a culinary adventure in the capital.

The tour business evolved over coffee as Cath's baby, Charlotte, now five, sat in a highchair in the many cafes the pair had grown to love. Their mantra was to showcase the best of everything: baristas, chefs, restaurants, coffee, and

gourmet food produced by locals. "We realised that the biggest advantage we had was that we knew so many people in the food industry. We both had enough knowledge and experience to give us credibility," Sue recalls.

Both women have specialised in the food and beverage industry in their respective communication careers. Sue markets Ruth Pretty Catering and in the late 80s was the founding director of the Food and Beverages Exporters Council. For the past four years, she has also run a small vineyard and homestay, Paper Road, in Martinborough. Cath lists chefs, brewery owners

“ We both had enough knowledge and experience to give us credibility ”



**Clockwise from above left:** handpainted truffles are among the delicacies to be found at Schoc Chocolaterie; Zest guests share stories over lunch at award-winning restaurant Logan Brown; Mojo's perfectly roasted coffee beans.

and gourmet food producers among her clients and friends – she has a dream job promoting acclaimed Wellington restaurant Logan Brown and The Original Grillslinger, the owners' barbecue tool kit that they're selling here and overseas.

Around Wellington and more recently, Martinborough and Greytown, gastronomic hot spots have become like familiar friends to the pair. Cath and Sue each run about four tours a month and have hired several tour guides.

The tours take two forms: Walking Gourmet is a half-day venture on foot, starting with coffee roasting and proceeding to Meat on Tory, an urban butchery where visitors can taste the products. They then head to Schoc Chocolaterie for a sensual feast and Moore Wilson Fresh, where the guide gives a behind-the-scenes look at New Zealand products such as Maori potatoes and smoked eel. Experts talk along the way and the guests end the tour with a restaurant or cafe lunch at Logan Brown, ➤

### favourite zest tours

**walking gourmet** Explore Cath and Sue's favourite food places, touring on foot through the capital's eateries and finishing with a light, three-course lunch. A four-hour tour, costing \$210 per person for up to six guests.

**taste wellington** Combines the Walking Gourmet tour with a drive to the home of a top food writer for delicious homemade treats. Costs \$395 per person for two to six guests.

**martinborough food and wine** Visit boutique food producers and local wineries, finishing with a three-course tasting lunch with matched local wines. A full-day tour costing \$450 per person for two to six guests (including Wairarapa pick up and return).





Nikau or Floridita's. The second Wellington-based tour, which takes almost six hours, starts with walking and finishes with time in the home kitchen of one of the city's top food writers.

The biggest challenge is sticking to the timetable. Once, a four-hour tour extended beyond six hours, when five guests, including a retired American soldier, got on fabulously and were keen to savour every spot. "I spent the whole time on the phone, saying to the next place, 'I'm so sorry, we're an hour late,'" laughs Sue.

Cath and Sue fondly remember one of their first tours, when they were nervous about hosting a group of top American chefs. They knew enough about the food they were showcasing, but were anxious about the "technical stuff", says Cath. But they needn't have worried, as their first stop was at a coffee roaster and none of the chefs had seen coffee being roasted before.

"They were like little kids. We were there for half an hour longer than usual so they could have a go. They were pushing and shoving to get to the roaster. We let them create their own coffee blends, which they then took home. They were so excited," says Sue.

With small groups of no more than six, Zest is successful because tourists at the top end of the market want to make personal connections during their stay. Says Sue: "The



**Clockwise from above**  
left: Schoc staffers Rochelle and Ed encourage guests to sample their decadent treats; Logan Brown's exquisite passionfruit crème brûlée; the Zest Food Tours office is appropriately housed in a stylish converted bakehouse off Wellington's Cuba Street.

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biggest compliment we can be given is that people feel as though they've made new friends."

Like any fresh business, Cath and Sue have made mistakes and changes as they've walked the streets. When they started out, the tours were long and expensive, but three years later, they run a greater variety, and tailor tours to individual tastes. Chocolate Espresso, a new morning jaunt around cafes and chocolateries, is already proving popular.

Thinking ahead, Sue and Cath have registered their business as Zest Food Tours of New Zealand, hoping to offer similar tours in places like Marlborough and

Hawke's Bay, if they can find the right guides, food producers and culinary experts.

Cath explains they took "two or three years" to break even. "Initially, we were doing it for love, but now we're starting to make money." This past summer, they had heavy bookings during Wellington's cruise ship season, taking several tours a week.

Cath jokes that she already holds the record for eating the most paua ravioli at Logan Brown – the signature dish that has been on the menu since the award-winning eatery opened in 1996. Sitting in the restaurant at the end of our tour, she mentions that Logan Brown tried to take it off the menu "but there was too much of a fuss from the regulars". A bottle of Neudorf Brightwater Riesling is on the table and Logan Brown's co-owner Steve Logan tells us that the dish we're eating blends several cultures, combining Asian wonton wrappers, Italian ravioli, indigenous paua, and a French-inspired sauce. Delicious.

It seems Cath and Sue are right: the best way to discover any place is through its food. ☑

Visit [www.zestfoodtours.co.nz](http://www.zestfoodtours.co.nz)

cath and sue's guide to wellington's foodie hot spots

- schoc chocolaterie** "For its sense of adventure for the palate – chocolate with attitude."
- deliario** "Delicious made-on-the premises range of salads, soups and sweet treats."
- mojo coffee cartel** "The coffee beans are roasted and blended to perfection, their baristas are consistently well-trained and their piccolo latte is caffeine heaven."
- moore wilson fresh** "Because it offers so many unique products all under one roof. Great for inspiration."
- astoria cafe** "For being a slice of European style in the middle of New Zealand, but with wonderfully Kiwi touches like the delicious tomatoes on toast on the breakfast menu."