



Neo title

Words AURORA REES
Photos TANJA DOVE

Neo Cafe
132 Willis Stret, Wellington City

On those rare occasions when Danielle doesn't have her signature Rocky Road in the cabinet, she gets "told off". Her customers aren't afraid to tell her what they want and that suits her just fine. Happy to listen, Café Neo on Willis Street prides itself on being a 100% people-oriented place.

Photographic memory ...

It's probably no surprise then that, whilst the rest of us might sleep-walk to work in the mornings in a murky state of dream-limbo, co-owner Danielle Harkness will often wave to regulars while walking or from her bike and automatically remember exactly what they ordered for lunch last week, and how they take their coffee.

Neo fosters an ideal that people appreciate a personal dimension on both sides of the counter. "We want to have fun and customer involvement is definitely part of that." Danielle relates, "Life sometimes isn't easy and it's really easy to make someone's day worse. I want to make that thirty seconds to an hour here easy and hopefully make their day a little bit better." A sugar-coated approach is a welcome concept to swallow. "I've got a really great team; they bend over backwards to make people happy." This includes 21C Holly Walters and chef Josse Anderson, both of whom, Danielle insists, are an integral part of the household and two sets of hands she "couldn't live without". All share a positive attitude.

Hey Norm!

Getting to know the regulars' names (or at least their coffee preferences) is part of Neo's philosophy. "I don't want to say it," she hesitates (uh-oh, I feel a tune coming on), "but you know, it's kind of like Cheers, 'the place where everybody knows your'" Well, you know the rest.

Part-time wanted ...

Danielle's tale is a 'rockin' road' in itself—and a pretty sweet one. The journey to Neo first began after arriving in Wellington from Hawkes Bay with fresh-eyed ambitions to go into journalism. She would frequent the place (then already established) and came to be a regular fixture. "I'd come in to eat and loved it," she narrates, "I saw a sign in the window for a barista and asked myself, should I apply for it?" She jumped in head-first and signed on as a part-time barista, "absolutely loved it", soon trained as manager and later bought into the business, with now previous owners. Eventually the opportunity came up for ownership and within a week Danielle made a snap-decision and went for it.

Today at 27, Danielle, together with business partner, long time mate and rather clever 'number-cruncher' Dion Leslie, they drive the business like



a well olive-oiled bus. When asked what the best part about running the show is, the reply is swift: "I never knew what I wanted to do until I got this place; I love this place! I love the social aspect of it." Being a sociable bunny helps!

Making a meal of it ...

On weekdays, Neo is a busy breakfast, morning tea & lunch-stop for nearby office workers and

students. Reliable favourites include their lush big seller: Field Mushrooms and Mash Stack (delicious garlic and thyme mushrooms, wilted spinach and grilled tomato on gourmet mash, drizzled with hollandaise and herb-infused olive oil) and Danielle's personal favourite: the Corn Fritter Stack (with pumpkin, carrot and spring onion served with tangy, homemade capsicum relish and a dollop of sour cream).

Neo fully utilises its prime locale at weekends. Saturday brunches are hectic. Draw-cards include: the Big Neo Brekkie, the Muffin Stack and Homemade Cinnamon Fruit Toast with Honey-infused Mascarpone.

Corporate catering is a core facet of their business. Clients can easily hop onto Neo's website to submit their orders. A VIP programme



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rewards members with a free dose of coffee plus keeps them informed of the latest café news. Speed of service is also paramount, so regulars can purchase pre-paid coffee cards in order to get their shaking mitts on a faster hit.

Although primarily a day-gig, Neo also does private functions and cocktail parties and are licensed for just such occasions. New trading hours into the evening have also given regulars and newbies alike, the opportunity to make Cafe Neo an after show destination, with a focus on the sweeter side of life. The café is in high demand, especially during the holidays.

Ask a silly question, get a silly answer ...

Asked if they have any immediate plans to revamp the menu, she jokes, "I know there's at least eighty percent of it we wouldn't be allowed to take off!" Silly me—pointless fixing what's not broken. Besides, followers probably wouldn't let them mess with what works. It's a democratic vote.

Not-so-hidden talent ...

As I scan the warm magenta room, I notice

a fellow patron demolishing fudgy chocolate cake like it's a contest: a promising sign. I'm introduced to some sassy baking (an array of old-school, Edmonds-era goodies) and I eye the Caramel Slice—sugar-lust triggered, this may get ugly (side confession: as a kid I once scoffed an entire tray full of this stuff and was promptly sent home ill from school). But the golden caramel in these babies looks to be double-layered, so I soon develop selective amnesia. "All my stuff, all family recipes," notes Danielle. "It keeps me really busy." I glance towards the door and wonder if the slice and I would make it out unnoticed. And, more importantly for that matter, if the slice would make it home unharmed—doubtful.

Baking is a specialty of Danielle's. She's 'the designated baker' in the family. Judging by the enormous triangles of fluffy Citrus Slice, Banana Friands, solid chocolate Rocky Road (with lashings of lollies and red liquorice) and Muesli Slice (with white chocolate and candied cherries), the role's an obvious fit. I suspect Christmases at 'Chateau Harkness' are probably grouse.

A force of gravity

Danielle is confident in Neo's coffee roasters, Gravity. "We have a really good relationship with Gravity. They're more than just a business to us, they're friends." They also supply Neo with their newest stir: 'Live Loose-leaf Tea'—a novel twist on the humble cuppa. So what exactly is the 'live tea experience'? Sniff and select from a menu of 13 aromatic blends. Next follows a tray with a glass teapot and cup for steeping your potion, plus a nifty instruction box with built-in hourglass to time your brew. All of which are sourced by one of New Zealand's premier tea selectors, Matt Greenwood. This is a 'tea-riffic' way to raise the altitude on your average high-tea. Danielle says most 'tea-totallers' totally dig it, bar one, who

asked, "I'm too old to be trendy ... can I have a mug?"

But if knitted cosies don't float your tea bag, never fear. Come mid-afternoon, deprived coffee devotees can take away a \$2.50 fix at Neo's caffeine 'resuss' station, to numb that 'three thirty-itis'. Such evil genius, they just get it. Call me, we'll do lunch!

Never say 'never' at Neo. Danielle freely encourages customers to come in and discuss their requests. "Whatever the event or catering need, just pick up the phone, call me and we'll discuss it." No matter the plan, they'll make an open effort to oblige and, more likely than not, come to the party.

At Neo, you just never know - chances are the answer will always be a friendly 'yes!' ☕

