

NEW ZEALAND

KIWI CLASSES

New Zealand's dining scene has become as epic, enticing and adventurous as the nation's outdoor escapes, with chefs applying savvy skills, innovative vision and a dash of irreverence to the country's pristine produce. These are the names you need on your radar when you next cross the ditch.



WORDS BY DAVID BURTON

Blessed with bountiful ingredients, plentiful seafood and creative chefs, New Zealand's restaurant scene has become as impressive as the country's natural enticements. To bolster their emerging sense of national culinary identity, the country's leading chefs lean heavily on Aotearoa's renowned produce and unique wonders such as paua (abalone), kina (sea urchin) and kamokamo (a type of squash). Some, especially those inspired to focus on their Maori heritage, are masters of foraging for native ingredients. Others apply classical French techniques to casual dining, and embrace global flavours, especially those that arise from a charcoal grill. The country has evolved into a culinary mecca no less, and here we've whittled down the list of names you need to know and the restaurants to book before crossing the ditch.

BEN BAYLY

Ahi, the Auckland restaurant Ben Bayly opened in late 2020, is a sleek, contemporary reimagining of bicultural Aotearoa New Zealand, with an open hearth, reclaimed native timber, handmade pottery and a woven oak ceiling inspired by a Maori *kete* or basket. As part of this quest for local identity, Bayly's menu displays the provenance of his ingredients, some of which arrive daily from the restaurant's own Patumahoe garden, just south of the city.

In a previous life, the chef clocked in at Michelin-starred restaurants in Paris and London, including L'Atelier de Joel Robuchon and The Ledbury, which accounts for his refined and inventive cooking style. Bayly also can't resist a dash of irreverence. Auckland Island "scampi corn dog" is a luxed-up version of what the chef jokingly recalls as "the crappy corn dogs you used to buy at the races". It comprises a whole sweet New Zealand langoustine deep-fried in a cornmeal and buttermilk batter, then served with a burger sauce (mayo, tomato ketchup, chopped pickles). In other words, fast food for grown-ups.

Like many Australian restaurants, Ahi's kitchen brigade is a multiculti crew – Chinese, Maori, English, French among them – many of whom have an input into the menu. Ahi's wagyu, for instance, comes with koji butter and the quail with coconut yoghurt and carrot garum. "Spending many years overseas cooking, I started to wonder 'what is New Zealand's cuisine?'," Bayly says. At Ahi, he answers the question with an exquisite blend of local ingredients, global influences and urbane interiors in a harbourside setting in central Auckland's Commercial Bay.

SID SAHRAWAT

Sid Sahrawat marries the greatest New Zealand produce with the ziestest subcontinental flavours. The menu at Cassia, his modern Indian eatery in Auckland's CBD, is teeming with striking options. Charred eggplant with kasundi relish. Fresh kingfish with pistachio, chilli and coriander. Karahi chicken gets punched up with bhut jolokia. You're not likely to encounter such inspired pairings elsewhere.

There are a few dishes that customers won't let Sahrawat take off the menu. Crisp, bite-sized pani puri filled with potato, chickpeas and mint have been there since day one – Cassia opened in 2014 – and

while the garnishes for his caramelised lamb chops may change, the marinade and the cooking method never vary. Similarly, his Delhi duck, essentially a duck confit, which currently comes with lychee and kumara (sweet potato), is always dressed with a vegan makhani sauce, based on ground cashews.

Having grown up as the son of an itinerant army general, Sahrawat's culinary influences come from all over India, overlaid with an early career at prominent Auckland fine-dining restaurants. In 2018, Sahrawat and his wife, Chand, also bought The French Café, an Auckland landmark, and renamed it Sid at The French Café. Cassia, though, remains the crowd-pleaser. The brightly lit, subterranean space, accessed via an industrial-looking laneway, has a vivacious energy befitting its tantalising menu.

HELEN TURNBULL

While the small coastal settlement of Paraparaumu might seem an unlikely choice for an avant-garde restaurant, those customers who make the trek from Wellington are rewarded both with Zen-like plate arrangements and the prospect of a post-prandial stroll along the nearby beach with its view of Kapiti Island.

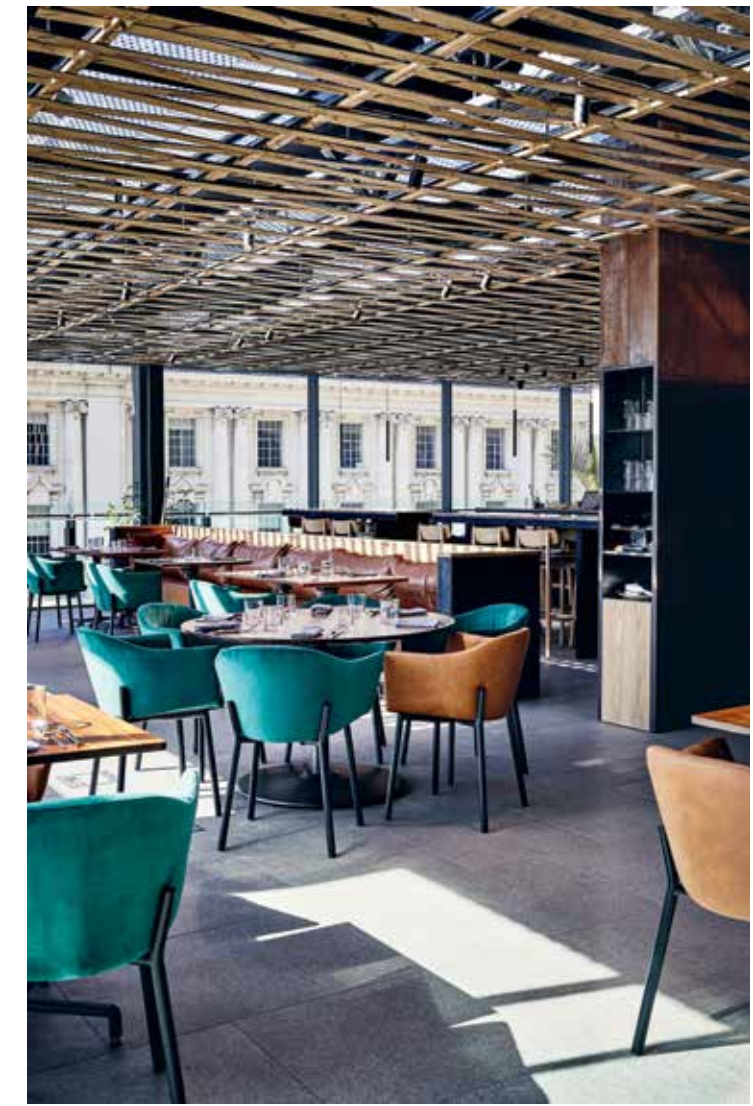
Chef Helen Turnbull was drawn to the town by its proximity to both the seaside wilderness (which provides a wealth of foraged foods) and the famous market gardens of Horowhenua. At her 50-50 restaurant, this local produce is cannily combined with worldly flavours and techniques, especially Japanese, inspired by Turnbull's five-year stint in Tokyo working at restaurants owned by Gordon Ramsay and Michel Troisgros, as well as a traditional Japanese eatery. Hence here you'll find dishes such as locally caught crayfish steamed with yuzu jam and kombu custard.

Lovage, which tastes deliciously of both parsley and celery, is not commercially available in New Zealand, so the chef grows it herself. Her lovage soup is spooned around a twist of celeriac rémoulade, oregano and lime. No visitor is likely to forget the curious sweet-savoury flavour of Turnbull's raw kina (sea urchin) dusted with coconut and a granita flavoured with the indigenous kawakawa leaf, foraged locally.

Turnbull says that in Japan she learnt that respect for the customer begins with positive teamwork and equality between the front and back of house – the principle that has led to her restaurant's unconventional name. We're one hundred percent certain you will relish dining here.

AHI MOMENT

Right: The sleek dining room at Ahi in Auckland has a Maori craft-inspired woven ceiling. Opposite: Ahi's Auckland Island scampi corn dogs with burger sauce are a signature snack.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY MANJA WACHSMUTH



MICHAEL MEREDITH

Some years ago, Michael Meredith was New Zealand's undisputed enfant terrible of molecular gastronomy, wowing customers at Meredith's with the likes of duck-liver parfait-filled beet meringues as light as air, which indeed threatened to dissolve into thin air if you were too slow in eating them.

Having closed Meredith's in 2017, he's back with Mr Morris, his new restaurant in Auckland's fashionable Britomart complex, attracting savvy diners staying at the Hotel Britomart, whose designers, Cheshire Architects, were called in for a reprise here. Leaving the distressed brick and plaster walls inherited from Café Hanoi, they reworked the interior to be "comfortably rough around its carefully crafted edges". That translates as pale oak tables, a stone bar and curved banquettes.

In keeping with this casual style, Meredith's current cooking is simpler, with no less than 70 per cent of the repertoire prepared over a charcoal grill. The paua (abalone), however, is lightly steamed to balance with the richness of a ginger and garlic seaweed sauce made with Japanese nori and New Zealand's own karengo. Inevitably, there are periodic flare-ups of the old molecular trickery: slices of cucumber are compressed in a vacuum bag with oyster water to form a garnish for raw oysters; chicken skins are baked to form wafers for his signature parfait, now made with the humbler chicken liver. Sous-vide is used more than ever. Conveniently, Mr Morris is open for lunch and dinner five days a week.

JAMES PASK

The team at Atlas restaurant in Wellington are a resourceful bunch. Under the direction of exacting chef James Pask, they make their own lardo, bake their own bread and churn their own butter to spread over it. This might come malted, or perhaps whipped with beef drippings and Parmigiano. Pask also keeps them busy pickling, curing and fermenting – each year they set down 100 litres of chardonnay vinegar from grapes supplied by Yu Group stablemate Luna Estate in Martinborough.

Atlas, as its name suggests, draws on influences from around the world for its menu, but the focus in the kitchen is on seasonal, ethical and organic produce sourced nearby. Wedged comfortably in Wellington's CBD between a leading law firm and the Deloitte tower, Atlas is unashamedly swank. Diners sit in padded chairs amid a green and gold-themed décor, and an erudite sommelier introduces the 376-strong wine list. It's a place where diners want to linger. "When you book a table with us it's yours for the night – no turns, no pressure," says Pask. "Settle in for a couple of hours or the whole evening."

Aware that Atlas is expensive, Pask offers a tasting menu driven by price point as well as separate vegetarian and vegan options. He also writes the menu for the Yu Group's other upscale restaurant in Wellington, Cinderella. Here the cooking is much more free-form, with leeks grilled à la minute over a wood fire and aubergine baked to order in the cinders. "Cinderella is more about cinders," adds Pask. "All the cooking is done over wood, working with fire and the ashes." Visitors to Wellington would be wise to direct their pumpkin carriage to both standout eateries.

JOSH EMETT

Dark, romantic and moody, Onslow is housed within the shell of a grand heritage building in Auckland. Yet, like its owner-chef, Josh Emett, this debonair new arrival effortlessly merges traditional with exceptional. Familiar words like parfait, brioche and béarnaise appear frequently on this former *MasterChef New Zealand* judge's menu in dishes peppered with novel ingredients such as smoked maple and foraged beach spinach.

Emett's most popular dish, crayfish éclair, merges fresh crayfish and sugarless choux pastry glazed with a syrupy cayenne-spiked bisque. Another, a playful clash of high and low, is fried chicken topped with oscietra caviar. It's no longer on the menu, but is available by request. And while other venues may have long ago banished soufflés for being too fiddly, a raspberry version remains at Onslow, individually cooked to order.

Such intricate offerings evoke the decade Emett spent as a protégé of Gordon Ramsay, leading the kitchens at hotels such as the Savoy Grill and Claridge's in London. Helen, his wife and business partner, informed the sophisticated vision of the restaurant, too. Without being too intrusive or formal, Onslow's waitstaff are highly attentive. Guests are pampered with the old-fashioned theatre of tableside service: a succession of trolleys deploying Martinis, freshly carved salmon gravlax, cheese and desserts. "I don't think people want that style to die," says Emett, "and I don't either."

MISTER RIGHT

Michael Meredith at his acclaimed Auckland restaurant Mr Morris in the Britomart precinct.

GOLD STANDARD
A Whisky Sour at Onslow in Auckland, the buzzy eatery helmed by Josh and Helen Emett (left). Above: Chef James Pask at Atlas in Wellington, and his dessert of sweetcorn ice-cream.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY LIV KIRKPATRICK (THE EMETTS), JONO PARKER (ONSILOW COCKTAIL), RYAN DOMENICO (ATLAS) & ANNA KIDMAN (MEREDITH)



LEADING LIGHT
 Chef Monique Fiso at her trailblazing Hiakai restaurant. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Hiakai's smoked eel toast, fried cassava, snapper collars, Bluff oysters and albacore crisps.

MONIQUE FISO

While Māori chefs such as Hemi Tahu and Rex Morgan in Wellington, Charles Royal in Rotorua and Jeremy Rameka in Napier have long showcased New Zealand's indigenous ingredients, nowadays Monique Fiso leads the charge. Her Wellington restaurant, Hiakai, is typically booked out weeks in advance. It offers sublime tasting menus built around indigenous myths and concepts such as a children's story by Māori author Patricia Grace, set in Porirua East where Fiso grew up as the daughter of a Samoan father and a part-Māori mother.

Fiso's cooking distills her classical French training, her seven years working at New York restaurants including The Musket Room, and her devotion to food that speaks of Aotearoa. On days off, Fiso and her life and business partner, Katie Monteith, go foraging for the wild plants to be used fresh or dehydrated, pickled or brined for winter. Besides the eucalyptus-like kawakawa and the fiery horopito, Fiso seeks the elusive kōnini berry, in pursuit of which she famously set Gordon Ramsay clambering up a tree.

Some native elements are tapped in wholly unique ways: the bark of the manono (coprosma) tree, used by Māori to dye clothes and treat cuts and bruises in pre-European times, is made into a bright yellow ice-cream that some customers mistake for honeycomb. While seasonality and

regular supply are ongoing issues for wild ingredients, Fiso also relies on cultivated vegetables such as kamokamo, an heirloom squash, and heritage potatoes for her memorable menus. She even has a source for the ultimate Māori delicacy, tīti or muttonbirds. In the meantime, the trailblazing chef has attracted international acclaim for her singular approach to rethinking home-grown gastronomy.

THOM MILLOTT

Australian chef Thom Millott moved to Wellington in 2020 with Tashie Piper, his New Zealand wife and business partner, to establish Amok, an offbeat boho wine bar, named in part for an Atoms for Peace album, where the bar in the downstairs dining room is fringed with piano keys and the menu on the wall is handwritten on brown paper.

Millott grew up on the outskirts of Sydney in Campbelltown, identifying with its typically suburban food culture of Chinese takeaways, burgers, fish and chips and a cornerstore Thai. At Amok, he views his cooking as an attempt to bring that nostalgia to modern food without being cheesy, and to make it more refined. Riffing on the suburban barbie, he cooks over a charcoal hibachi. From his Jospur wood-fired oven emerges a classic chicken ballotine, boned and filled with a farce spiced with juniper, sage and pepper, which he serves with radicchio and an allium cream of leek, onion and garlic set with gellan.

Pasta being a core part of Millott's food memory, he would not be without his pasta extruder, used to make the ragged spelt fusilli that accompanies oyster mushrooms and an extraordinary mélange of beer and a caramelised cake of yeast, sweetish but sharpened with lemon juice. While this sauce may owe much to his mentor Mat Lindsay of Sydney's Ester and Poly, for whom he worked at the latter for a year, Millott is definitely forging his own signature. Recently, he ingeniously paired paua, New Zealand's abalone, with potato rosti topped with a café de Paris butter. Amok's upstairs bar, meanwhile, is all about tempting snacks, such as fried cheese with cashew sambal and lime leaf, and convivial drinks.

JO PEARSON

Having entered the hospitality industry at the age of 15 with a job washing dishes, Jo Pearson is now a seasoned veteran. After 15 years as executive chef to Hipgroup's Auckland restaurants, she is soon to become a part-owner of Alma, Auckland's first Andalusian-themed restaurant. Three journeys of discovery to Andalusia

have established Pearson as the lead Auckland apostle of the southern Spanish region's fare.

At this rustic tiled restaurant in the Britomart precinct, the cooking is centred around the grill of an open hearth. The nearest thing they have to a frying pan is a perforated grill basket, and while they do have a deck oven and a conventional oven out the back, these are only used for bread, cheesecakes and flans. Authenticity is paramount: Ibérico ham sits at room temperature on its special stand, ready to be carved to order, and their Olasagasti anchovies, a milder, less salty version of the famed Ortiz brand, are specially imported. These anchovies go on to what appears to be the simplest dish from the menu, but which is the one that Pearson most loves to cook. A sourdough tostada is chargrilled, then spread with smoked tomato butter and topped with those special anchovies and heirloom tomatoes that have been dehydrated on a rack high above the fire for several days.

Moving forward, the chef intends to take Alma more in the direction of Andalusia's Moorish food from Morocco, with harissa, a lamb shank tagine and her own take on pastilla. Says Pearson, "The Moroccan approach to food resonates with my own values: simple, unfussy, delicious and enjoyed."

CASEY McDONALD

Up until a few years ago Casey McDonald was a culinary nomad, darting from Restaurant Gary Danko in San Francisco to The Square in London and to Cutler & Co and Cumulus Inc, as head chef, in Melbourne. What drew him back to his native New Zealand? The plum role of heading up the kitchen at Craggy Range winery in rural Hawke's Bay. At this swish eatery, diners can relax on the terrace drinking a glass of wine from grapes grown in front of them, while watching the sun set over Te Mata peak.

The views on the plate can be equally moving. Notable dishes include a pecorino soufflé, ravioli of smoked potato and egg yolk, and a 1.3kg Matangi beef rib-eye served with creamed greens and tarragon. A large part of McDonald's job is spent developing relationships with Hawke's Bay producers – market gardeners, orchardists and seafood purveyors – and persuading them to pick their produce early or late for him, or to go out and fish kahawai for a restaurant event. The gently chewy fish, once dismissed as overly oily and lowly, has been elevated by chefs such as McDonald to top raw eating status. He dresses his own with crème fraîche and pickled celery, previously steeped in lovage juice.

Last year McDonald entered into partnership with Craggy Range to open Mary's, a popular wine bar in Havelock North, and more recently Craggy has taken up the lease on a five-hectare farm. A gardener is employed as one of the kitchen staff, growing deliciously obscure necessities like lovage, sorrel and watermelon radish – not to mention the tarragon leaves that go into the chef's green mayonnaise for his unique take on beef tartare. ▀



PHOTOGRAPHY BY AMBER JAYNE BAIN