

# THE FIXER

**IN THE PAST 10 YEARS, WELLINGTON ON A PLATE HAS GONE FROM A SMALL-TIME EVENT TO A 17-DAY, REGION-WIDE CULINARY EXTRAVAGANZA. SARAH CATHERALL TALKS TO FOODIE-IN-CHARGE SARAH MEIKLE.**

**JUST OVER A** decade ago, Sarah Meikle was presented with a challenge. Then head of marketing at Wellington's tourism agency, she was told to "fix August".

Wellington was awash with tourists at other times of the year, especially over summer. However, August was dead. Many restaurants closed their doors or ran winter hours as the chilly weather kept locals indoors.

Instead of hiding away from the cold, Meikle decided to embrace it with a winter food festival. She didn't have any experience, but had frequented food festivals overseas and had good contacts in the hospitality industry. Her father, Simon Meikle, was a restaurant pioneer who'd opened Dockside on the city's waterfront when there was nothing much there and also helped found two eatery chains: One Red Dog and The Loaded Hog.

That idea to plug a gap in the city's calendar has grown into the country's biggest culinary event. Over the past 10 years, the 42-year-old has taken Wellington's food festival from a small, 30-event affair featuring 43 special Dine Wellington menus to an adventurous gastronomic feast boasting 148 events and 213 participating restaurants.

Sitting in a Wellington eatery, Meikle bites into a fish sandwich. "For some Wellington restaurants and eateries now,

August is busier than Christmas," she says. Last year, 36,000 special Dine Wellington menus were consumed, and more than 8000 event tickets sold; festival-related businesses in the region also experience a 41% boom in business over August – all thanks to Visa Wellington on a Plate.

As CEO of the Wellington Culinary Events Trust – a non-profit organisation established in 2014 that owns and manages the event – Meikle has what seems like an enviable job. Her research involves travelling overseas, touring global food and wine events, tasting new menus and eating at top restaurants. So it's apt we rendezvous in a restaurant, as she does most of her meetings over food, although she admits that does have a downside. "It's very hard to maintain a regular weight. I've got a dog; that was a great investment. As they say, though, 'Never trust a skinny chef.'"

You have to be a foodie to do this job. Meikle knows who's hot in the global food scene before the rest of us do. Her holiday destinations are planned around restaurants and culinary events, she says: "Every meal I eat anywhere

is research, don't get me wrong."

Some of those meals have been so memorable she salivates talking about them. A few weeks ago, she dined at Osteria Mozza, the celebrated Italian restaurant in Los Angeles, where she also met the chef, Nancy Silverton. When she ate at Les Belle Perdrix de Troplong Mondot in Saint-Émilion, France, Meikle sat at the table with 10 friends and attempted to chow through the 10-course degustation.

"It's one of the only meals I've cried over, only because I was so full I couldn't finish it," she says. "Every bite was absolutely mouth-watering."

For Visa Wellington on a Plate, she and her team take about 18 months to organise the 17-day festival. "I get asked all the time, 'Wow, is that a full-time job?' Just think how hard it is to organise a dinner party... Times that by 267 and this is what you've got."

**LOOKING BACK** on Meikle's life, it's no surprise she has ended up running New Zealand's biggest dinner party. She was born in Wellington; her grandfather built the James Cook Hotel, and her father was an entrepreneur whose job took his family around the world. When she was a baby, her parents shifted to Sydney, later relocating to Los Angeles and then Queensland, where her father was involved in harness racing.

When they returned to Wellington in 1986, Meikle was enrolled at Samuel Marsden Collegiate, a private school for girls in Karori. Around that time, her

**SARAH CATHERALL IS A NORTH & SOUTH CONTRIBUTING WRITER. PHOTOGRAPHY BY VICTORIA BIRKINSHAW.**



father began setting up restaurants, and she babysat for his friends – restaurateurs Mike Egan and Martin Bosley – and washed dishes at Dockside.

After studying tourism and marketing at university, she got a job in Tourism New Zealand's mail room, before shifting to a junior role in the agency's media team, hosting overseas media. When she started studying Spanish at night school, that led to an opportunity in South America, where Meikle acted as a translator for a tourism executive on a reconnaissance trip. "It was just ridiculous because I couldn't speak good Spanish," she laughs.

But that opened another door, and she was promoted to a role as Tourism New Zealand's manager of emerging markets. Meikle was just 23 when she became responsible for the entire South American continent, along with India, the Middle East and South Africa. "I spent my days walking into travel agencies, trying to warm them up, and saying, 'Hi, have you heard of New Zealand?'" Literally. These were countries we didn't market in."

When the government allocated money for a tourism office in India, Meikle set it up, flying back and forth to India more than 20 times a year, and

To people who ask Sarah Meikle if running an event like Wellington on a Plate is a full-time job, she tells them, "Just think how hard it is to organise a dinner party... Times that by 267 and this is what you've got."

falling in love with the local cuisine. With many more stamps in her passport than others her age, she spent a decade based in London as Tourism New Zealand's marketing manager for Europe, promoting New Zealand at events like the Chelsea Flower Show and the America's Cup in Valencia.

In 2007, it was time to return home; she scored a job running the marketing

department at Positively Wellington Tourism. Seven years later, while juggling the job with running Wellington on a Plate, Meikle quit her full-time role to work as a contractor for the food festival and to head the culinary trust overseeing it. “I had so much faith this thing was going to work, but it was a big risk giving up my full-time salary.”

**THE FOOD FESTIVAL** serves as a social history of how Wellington’s restaurant industry has evolved and how New Zealand’s dining and food habits have changed over a decade. In 2009, the most adventurous festival event was a Richard Till kitchen tour of Logan Brown and Floriditas Bakery.

In that first year, 35 restaurants created special set menus: pear, pine nuts, portobello mushrooms and pumpkin were dotted on many plates, while seafood chowder was hugely popular, offered by five restaurants. Fine dining was still in vogue, and “small plates” were just arriving. There was no such thing as a food blogger, and social media was in its infancy.

Compare that with the creative offerings being served a decade later: Basque restaurant’s 2017 set menu was glazed spatchcock quail with parsnip fritos, green tea aioli, pancetta, orange, watercress and hazelnut.

In Miramar, The Larder chef Jacob Brown has become iconic for boundary-pushing meals involving offal and insects. He describes one of his 2018 events, “Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes”, as a “10-year-old birthday with a twist”. Sitting outside his restaurant before the lunchtime rush, Brown says the festival has made Wellington diners more adventurous; it also creates suspense. Led by the “hugely energetic Sarah”, he says, “people are willing to experiment with cuisine that might normally be too challenging for them, and it’s a really good vehicle for exposing what we’re doing”.

Boulcott Street Bistro has been part of the festival since the start; co-owner Mike Egan says it allows chefs and restaurants to experiment with food and menus. One of the festival offshoots is the burger event, Garage Projects presents Burger Wellington, where restaurants compete to create the best burger as decided by public vote. It came about after Egan gave Meikle a *New*

## **LAST YEAR, 112,000 BURGERS WERE GOBBLED IN 17 DAYS. THIS YEAR, 180 RESTAURANTS WILL COME UP WITH AN INNOVATIVE BURGER, COMPETING FOR THE OVERALL GONG OF CREATING THE BEST ONE.**

*York Times* article about the evolution of the burger. Meikle says, “Women were engaged in the festival but guys weren’t so much, and we wanted to get men out of the office at lunchtime.”

Last year, 112,000 burgers were gobbled in 17 days, accompanied by 67,000 matching Garage Project beers. This year, 180 restaurants will come up with an innovative burger, competing for the overall gong of creating the best one.

“This could potentially be bigger than anywhere in the world,” says Meikle. “When you talk to people overseas about that number of people eating burgers, it blows their minds.”

Thanks to the growing reputation of the festival, she’s now well-placed to invite popular chefs and foodies to come to New Zealand. Bringing out *LA Times* food critic Jonathan Gold last year was a coup. “It’s not just about attracting Netflix TV chefs, it’s about bringing talent that will help Wellington grow as well.”

Though the Dine Wellington menus are more financially accessible, the festival has been criticised for its event prices. For many, a \$99-plus ticket per head is out of reach, especially if a couple want to go, and might have to pay for a babysitter, too. “We work really hard to bring down the average price of events,” she says. “But events aren’t cheap. Food costs money, staff cost money, so do the lights.”

One of the special events has a female focus, leading up to the 125th suffrage centenary. Meikle is bringing out two expat Kiwi women chefs: Anna Hansen, a London chef who previously worked with Peter Gordon, and Analiese Gregory, a rising star in Tasmania. “There’s a lot of talk about women’s issues and of the challenges of being a female chef... If you want to have a family, restaurant hours aren’t very social.

But it’s neat to see women who are really succeeding and nailing it.”

Does all this focus on food and restaurants inspire her to open her own place? Shaking her head, Meikle describes restaurants as pressure-cooker environments, “small food factories”, where diners increasingly expect to be served Instagrammable dishes.

Having dined in some of the world’s top restaurants, how do we serve up? “We give ourselves a really hard time. But New Zealand has the best ingredients in the world. It’s okay that we aren’t famous for a food style. Food actually tastes like it should here.”

## **THE SIMPLE SCONE**

Asked to nominate a favourite recipe, Meikle says, “I love dates scones so much, my very talented cousin actually painted my recipe for me and it’s on my kitchen wall.”

### **DATE SCONES**

#### **INGREDIENTS:**

250ml orange juice  
2½ cups dates, chopped  
3½ cups + 1 Tbsp self-raising flour  
2 Tbsp golden syrup  
250ml cream  
2 eggs, room temperature  
½ tsp vanilla essence

#### **METHOD:**

1. Set oven to 180°C.
2. Warm up orange juice in a pot, but do not let the juice boil. Remove from heat. Chop up dates and add to the warm orange juice. Leave to soak for at least one hour (three hours is better). Drain juice from dates.
3. Sift 3½ cups of self-raising flour into a bowl and set aside.
4. In a separate pot, melt the golden syrup in the cream. Again, do not let the cream come to the boil. Add the eggs and vanilla quickly so they don’t cook, and whisk very fast. Add the cream mixture to the flour, then add the date mixture.
5. Mix to combine. Do not overmix.
6. Flour a clean bench with remaining tablespoon of flour and turn out dough. Knead to shape into a large square and cut into 10-12 scones.
7. Bake until golden on a lined tray. Serve warm with heaps of butter! +