

THE BEST MEAL IN NEW ZEALAND

An Auckland Eatery is Redefining NZ Cuisine

THE NEW ZEALAND ISSUE

EATS

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Photo by MATTHEW ANKENY AND JEREMY BERGER



Bob Steiner does the ceramics. **Troy Goodall** the photography. Down in Blenheim, there's a hunter who shoots wild boar, deer and other meats. The fish is long-line caught. Josh Helm and Tom Hishon, the co-proprietors, go foraging for wild herbs and watercress weekly. Hishon's family owns a vineyard, **Mountford Estate**, which finds its place on the wine list. The two boys make all the furniture. They're installing a grow wall on the back patio. Local bees provided the honey until just recently, when the hive was struck by a disease. Hishon points out the empty hive, sitting on the roof over the kitchen. "Next couple of months, it'll come back", he says.

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If you’re looking for the new wave of localized cuisine, **Orphans Kitchen** is it. In the heart of Auckland’s hip Ponsonby Street, Orphans is doing things exactly as its two loyal, local proprietors like to. “I tell staff to look after people like they are an old friend”, Helm says. It’s a place that isn’t about pretension; it’s about good, local food.

“This restaurant started as a silly rag. And it’s still evolving”, says Helm, who runs the front of house. Tom Hishon, the London-trained chef (he came up at **Tom Aikens** and **Wild Honey**), defines it more clearly. If Helm is a charismatic yet unintentionally aloof character, Hishon is hyper alert, deliberate. He’s careful with words and actions. One can see how Helm handles the casual aura of the restaurant, while Hishon labors over **finely tuned techniques** in the kitchen.

More New Zealand



“When we first opened up Orphans Kitchen, I really struggled to sort of define what cuisine I was doing”, Hishon says. “Now, it has become more apparent to me that modern New Zealand dining and cuisine is what we are doing here.” Modern New Zealand cuisine, though, is an amorphous category. This is a young country. They’re still figuring out what Kiwi food looks like.

“What I really try to do is showcase the produce as best I can without taking away the beauty of it”, Hishon says. “I try to be creative and use technique where it is applicable, but I don’t want to put all of these random flavors together and make something that tastes like it could be from anywhere.”

What Hishon means is that on **an island**, flavors are restricted. He sees the limitation as a strength. “The best thing about being a super isolated country is that we really only can work with what grow ourselves”, he says. “And that’s pretty cool. It makes you more in tune with what is around you. If you are given less you actually have to be more creative than if you are given the world.”



“I have always, always been cooking for New Zealand”, he adds. “That’s it for me. I’ve never been to another country where I have wanted to live and own a restaurant.” The local sensibility is reinforced in what Orphans Kitchen is doing with the food, ambience, decorations. And, they’re doing it phenomenally well, which only becomes fully apparent when Hishon puts together a wagyu brisket from nearby Hawke’s Bay. The outside is crispy, even a touch dry. But the vegetables on the plate compensate for that touch of brittle texture, and the chef’s intention resonates when all the items are taken together as one bite.

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It rivals the work of Matt Lambert — a fellow Kiwi now living in New York and heading up the Michelin-starred Musket Room. Which prompts questions of **cooking on a world stage**. At some point, all the locality is nice, but there has to be a temptation to establish yourself to the toughest critics. And, acclaim like that is something that’s definitely within grasp at a place like Orphans Kitchen, if only illustrious resources like the Michelin Guide would expand to Oceania.

“People come from the other side of the world”, Hishon responds. “And they come dine here and they are kind of blown away, and they are like, ‘this is some of the best food we have eaten, and it is up there with the best restaurants we have been to.’ That’s pretty cool for me”, he says. Then he pauses for a second, thinking. “I mean I totally understand where Matt is coming from.” He pauses again. “It would be cool to have a Michelin Star, you know.”











