

# EATING THROUGH CHRISTCHURCH

*The Cuban. Photo: SUPPLIED*

By BEN MACK

Photos by SAM WALLS and BEN MACK

It's a cold day in Christchurch, but the autumn chill is barely noticeable thanks to a piping-hot espresso.

Food and drink may not be the first thing people think of when they contemplate the largest city on New Zealand's South Island, but Christchurch is experiencing a culinary renaissance – at least the way Black Betty café owner Hamish Evans tells it.

"It's hitting the next level," he says.

"More and more concepts are coming online, and the concepts are better. Not only a higher coffee quality, but a higher food quality."

That seems evident at Black Betty, a café and eatery located in the heart of the rapidly rebuilding Central City. Opened in 2011 just

three weeks before an earthquake destroyed much of the city, it has a no-nonsense menu of simple fare like ciabatta bread sandwiches, fresh salads and sumptuous omelettes, with an emphasis on locally-sourced and organic ingredients.

Black Betty uses 100% Grade A coffee that the company also ships to cafes throughout the South Island.

Minimalistic industrial décor offsets a dark-coloured exposed wood ceiling: "We're into contrast," Evans said of the clashing imagery, further emphasised by black-clad servers.

Contrasting imagery is also on full display at Roots, an intimate restaurant located in the petite, postcard-perfect nearby port town of Lyttelton. Founded in 2012 by Chilean-born chef Giulio Sturla and American partner Christy Martin, it was named New Zealand's Restaurant of the Year in the Cuisine NZ Good

Food Awards in 2015.

Using local, foraged ingredients, Roots' fixed menu isn't the cheapest around, but it's certainly one of the most authentic for visitors looking to experience Kiwi ingenuity first-hand. Garnering high praise for sustainability and localism, Sturla has long said it's all about making the most of opportunities and seizing the moment.

To that end, Roots' menu changes daily, making use of whatever seasonal ingredients are freshest from the on-site garden. But tomatoes, baby carrots, fennel, avocado, eggplant, potatoes and kale are usually staples; which can be combined with smoked eel, wild venison, black foot pawa, quail eggs and more. Paired with an extensive wine list – New Zealand is famous for its wines, after all – it's a must-visit for foodies and those who appreciate a fine meal, or who like to eat with

Black Betty. Photo: SAM WALLS



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a stunning view. But book well in advance – seating is limited, and all the accolades means the place is wildly popular.

An easier place to get a table is The Cuban, located in the rapidly gentrifying – and rebuilding – St Asaph Street in the Central City. Stepping inside this newish establishment that replaced the semi-legendary St Asaph St Kitchen – is like stepping into Old Havana, with vibrant colours, rich wood furniture and completely enclosed courtyard that, mercifully, has a heater at every long table.

The rich Caribbean décor is complemented by a menu that's as satisfying as it is adventuresome. Items such as banana salsa with jerk chicken, chocolate popcorn and fish sliders are all slightly out of the ordinary to what one might expect from food in a country with more than six times as many sheep as there are people. The food also goes well with

The Cuban's dizzying array of drinks, from flavourful mojitos to a selection of more than 60 rums and the restaurant's very own beer, a lager known as the "Cuba Lager."

Adventure is also the name of the game at The Lotus-Heart, which is perhaps Christchurch's most famous vegetarian restaurant. Located just a few streets away from The Cuban, The Lotus-Heart's sustainably-sourced and organic menu skews Asian. Dosa, dal and nori wraps (kimchee, salad, cashew mayo and spicy seeds wrapped in a toasted nori sheet) feature heavily on the dinner menu, while lunch leans more towards wraps and salads. Regardless of the meal, the food is great when washed down with fresh house-made cashew milk. As an added bonus, the bright interior décor is somewhat reminiscent of an old Mughal palace, once again tricking diners into thinking they're somewhere – or some time –

far away.

Kiwi café culture is dominated by the "flat white" – steamed milk poured over a double or single shot of espresso – and for an authentic experience look no further than the Caffeine Lab. Located among the vividly bright Spanish Mission-style buildings of New Regent Street near the Isaac Theatre Royal, Cathedral Square and the Re:START shipping container mall, what the café lacks in size it more than makes up for with quality sustainably-sourced coffee.

The interior is minimalistic, as is the overall menu. But that's perfectly fine – this place is a no-nonsense coffee joint that also offers among the most intimate settings around. While a raisin or cheese scone goes great with a flat white, they're also not bad on their own.





Black Betty owner Hamish Evans. Photo: SAM WALLS



C1 Espresso. Photo: SUPPLIED



Volstead Trading Company. Photo: SUPPLIED

Another café where the coffee is great on its own is C1 Espresso. Outspoken owner Sam Crofsky is a bit of a local legend in Christchurch, and it's easy to see why his Central City café – reopened in the old High Street Post Office after the original location was destroyed in the 2011 earthquake – has earned a cult-like following.

Retro chic décor like something out of an old New York City diner is one of the first things people notice, while the second is that sliders are delivered right to tables via pneumatic tubes. Call it 'retro futurism'. The drinks are also pretty good, with Colombian roast coffee great for cold days, and freshly squeezed orange juice the perfect solution for when the mercury rises.

Speaking of rising, Christchurch's bar scene is seemingly as ascendant as its cafes and restaurants. The flavour varies greatly, from

more upmarket establishments in the Central City to student-centric pubs near the University of Canterbury and bare-bones establishments like the Darkroom (which frequently has free live music from local and touring bands) near the industrial district.


Just west of the Central City in the suburb of Riccarton is the Volstead Trading Company, a smallish pub that's perhaps the city's most underrated nightspot. Founded by a group of locals with the goal of creating an environment for social interaction that contradicts the traditional bar scene and located in a converted garage, the Volstead's open, yet at the same time cosy, layout makes it the perfect place to have a great conversation and/or meet new people. That's especially helpful in a city like Christchurch, where locals are renowned for their friendliness and eagerness to chat up strangers. As an added boon, the

Volstead also has an extensive beer, wine and cocktail list. The cherry mint julip is especially recommended.

Less than a decade on from the earthquake, Christchurch is still very much a city in transition. But if the culinary, café and bar scenes are any indication, it's redeveloping quite nicely – with the trademark 'No. 8 wire' spirit of experimentation for which New Zealand is famous.

But Black Betty's Evans thinks it goes further than simply reinventing itself.

"It's paradise," he says. "We've got mountains an hour away, we've got the sea. It's incredible for adventure."

 *Fiji Airways flies to Christchurch from Nadi on Tuesdays and Saturdays.*