

# Culinary conversation

There's a rumbling in New Zealand's food community that's set to become a roar, if chef Giulio Sturla has his way. VICTORIA WELLS explains.



Food photography by Meredith Dyer

**I** don't think that New Zealand really has a [food] identity that's globally recognised," says Kiwi chef Matt Lambert, over the phone from his Michelin-starred New York restaurant, The Musket Room. "You can't point to any one thing and say 'That's Kiwi'. The things we do hold onto are special to us, but I don't think you could identify them as wholly New Zealand."

It's a debate that has swirled for years: what is New Zealand cuisine? And while lamb and sauvignon blanc are held up regularly overseas as examples of some of this country's best culinary offerings, things have moved on. Consider instead a syrah from Hawkes Bay's Gimblett Gravels, a truffle from North Canterbury, a Bluff oyster, or even our grass-fed beef. Fred Dagg really was onto something when he said we don't know how lucky we are.

The notion of New Zealand cuisine could become a lot clearer, thanks (somewhat ironically) to Chilean-born chef Giulio Sturla. Giulio has been in New Zealand for six years and, with his partner Christy, owns Roots Restaurant in Lyttelton – a 20-seat establishment that has just been awarded New Zealand Restaurant of the Year 2015. He has made it his business to know New Zealand's local produce, offering a degustation menu based on what's available from sustainable local farms, and foraged ingredients.



MATT LAMBERT

Giulio ignored the naysayers who told him a restaurant concept like Roots could never succeed, instead placing his faith in what he had seen while working at Michelin-starred restaurant Mugaritz in Spain's Basque Country, under head chef Andoni Aduriz. "He is so inspiring and he made me do this restaurant because he told me: 'People will go to you because of the food. No matter where you are. You just make the food – focus on that and you will get it.'"

Mugaritz was one of the restaurants at the forefront of the Spanish culinary wave that swept the world in the early 2000s, and it was here that Giulio saw how discussion could open up new discoveries and thinking. It was an idea he could see potential for in his new homeland after opening Roots in 2012. "We felt quite far away from hospitality in New Zealand. [I thought] 'I need to know who is here and who is doing something.' It seemed nobody was getting together."

In late 2014, Giulio emailed 100 people in the food industry suggesting they do just that. The groundswell of support he received from that initial email proved he was onto something. Five months later, in May of this year, Giulio and fellow chef Michael Meredith co-hosted the first day of ConversatioNZ talks in Christchurch for an audience of over one hundred people.

ConversatioNZ is a movement designed to connect all facets of the food community (chefs,

farmers, growers, suppliers, writers, researchers and scientists among them) through discussion, so they can explore, collaborate, and showcase New Zealand food and ingredients. It has a dual role: to take New Zealand cuisine to the world, but also to raise awareness of food production and access to food in New Zealand for the benefit of those living here.

Discussions on that first day ranged from developments in foraging, to sustainable fisheries, and opportunities for food tourism. Matt Lambert travelled from New York to speak at the event and says there is an amazing opportunity for the local food industry. "We have a really cool starting point because we're not so deeply rooted in tradition; we can get started in 2015 and create some cool shit. Half of what makes us who we are is the fact we aren't so tied to any sort of traditions."

The day ended with a resolution to create a New Zealand Food Manifesto: founding principles and values to guide their work going forward. "A manifesto," says Giulio, "that takes into consideration the people, culture, agriculture and economics, placing first our wellbeing and interconnection with the environment. From there everything will happen, because



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if you follow these things then we will go in the same direction."

A manifesto of this kind isn't new when it comes to food, and international examples show it's one with huge potential: in 2004 a group of chefs met in Copenhagen to create the New Nordic Kitchen Manifesto – a 10 point plan designed to give the region's food fresh appeal to local cooks, to celebrate its heritage and production and put it on the



ABOVE: Eel/buttermilk/hazelnut/plum from the first ConversatioNZ 'Cook Up' dinner series, a collaboration between Matt Lambert and The Musket Room at Roots Restaurant on 5th and 6th of May. OPPOSITE: Oyster/rose vinegar



Rabbit/onion/carrot/  
wild greens/linseed

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— MATT LAMBERT

global stage. Nordic food is now synonymous with cutting edge cuisine thanks to a concerted effort by its chefs and the flow-on effects of its success stories, such as Noma, the Copenhagen restaurant that has been voted World’s Best Restaurant four times since 2009. Its chef, Rene Redzepi, is famed for his innovative use of seasonal ingredients that capture the distinctive Nordic regions and has inspired a new generation of chefs.

In Peru, chef Gaston Acurio started his own movement, ‘Cocina Novandina’ (new Andean cooking), which brought local chefs together to learn more about the ingredients on their doorstep and to build relationships with local suppliers. In 2015, Peru boasts three

restaurants in the World’s Best Restaurants line-up.

The Nordic and Peruvian movements succeeded by securing demand for local produce, thus benefiting their agricultural sectors, and increasing in-bound tourism with the surge in global interest in their food, which also brought opportunities for local industry.

New Zealand has the benefit of chefs already passionate about local produce and Matt says it’s important to acknowledge their work. “You look at chefs like Martin Bosley, Geoff Scott, Michael Meredith, Jonny Schwass – these are guys who have all been using local ingredients in very unique ways for a very long time, but not calling it anything in particular, just doing it.”

Now, New Zealand has an opportunity to maximise its potential with a cohesive approach. With input from the culinary community, the ConversatioNZ team has created an 11-point Food Manifesto that promotes culture, biodiversity, innovation, pride and interconnection.

Giulio says Maori food heritage forms an important part of that discussion. “It’s about respecting what has been done already. Everything that is new needs to follow what has gone before.”

Matt agrees that Maori food culture is at the root of New Zealand cuisine and could hold the key to new discoveries. “I’m sure there are dozens of ingredients that are bountiful in New Zealand that we don’t know about because people were eating them to live, whereas now... you don’t need to grow that [ingredient] anymore because you can make more money from sauvignon blanc grapes. That’s going to take a little more research... you need historians from iwi who will know about what’s been grown in their respective regions.”

Serendipitously, the birth of ConversatioNZ has coincided with funding of the Tupuna Kai Project. Due to launch in late 2016, it will be an online national database of traditional Maori ingredients, with information on their benefits as well as how to grow and prepare them. Giulio says it is enterprises like this that will help progress their work, as long as they are aware of them. “I feel there are so many great projects around New Zealand that are not being communicated. The benefit will be for everybody, then we can get all this information about food.”

Funding will be crucial; the Nordic and Peruvian programmes had backing from their respective governments. It’s also interesting to note that The World Tourism Organization’s 2012 *Global Report on Food Tourism* acknowledged that: “The growth of food tourism worldwide is an obvious fact. It is one of the most dynamic segments within the tourism



MICHAEL MEREDITH

market.” In a country where the Prime Minister is also responsible for the tourism portfolio, will Giulio and his counterparts seek similar support for their ideas?

“We would like to have the government support because in the end it’s the people’s support,” says Giulio. “I want them to feel that it’s not about having just a private company sponsoring ConversatioNZ. I want New Zealanders to understand that this is for them.”

“We’re trying to bring people to New Zealand to eat good food,” says Matt. “Maybe forget about hobbits, because at some point people will stop caring about a movie. Plant the seeds for the future. Cheesy as it sounds, we’ve got the chance to create history, and I think that’s pretty special.”

As Giulio told the audience at the first day of ConversatioNZ talks: “Let’s envision New Zealand as the place to come and enjoy real food, with the best produce that this land and ocean can offer, choosing what is made here with honesty and respect to support local farmers and producers. This is the strongest step to support our economy, individuals, families, and businesses.”

There is now a framework, a growing community of support and a desire for progress. Further discussion and sharing of ideas and knowledge will be key to keeping this conversation going.

“It could be a really good thing for Kiwis, representing their food and their culture,” says Giulio. “This is such a great place to do things. We just opened a door, and everybody came in.” ◊

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