

Coming up roses

Despite how isolated it is, this newly opened sustainability-focused cafe continues to flourish, thanks to the locals, writes Kathy Cumming.



Anyone who's been to Great Barrier Island in the summertime would be forgiven for wondering why Kiwis bother with Rarotonga and Fiji. Generally one or two degrees warmer than the mainland, with azure seas, an abundance of catchable seafood and a laid-back ambience, Great Barrier may be just 90km from Auckland, but it feels more like a million miles.

Perhaps in keeping with this other worldliness, cafe culture on the island has been fairly limited over the years, with Claris Texas on the island's east side the best bet for a caffeine fix. But what of the west side?

Wild Rose opened for business in Tryphena in June last year. Adjoined to the local grocery store and gift shop, the cafe is open seven days from 8:30am to 4pm and is also experimenting with staying open weekend nights during the summer. With a wrap-around veranda dropping off to a large lawn – all just metres from idyllic Pa Beach – it's the kind of locale most cafe proprietors can only dream about.

Wild Rose co-owner Pauline Bellerby, who's lived on the island for 28 years, says her vision was "to create a nice atmosphere, employ local people and use as much local produce as possible. And we wanted something that reflected Barrier food, that is healthy food that could actually see you through the day."

On the menu

Here's a sample of what was on offer one Saturday when I visited: Homemade Wild Rose Muesli, All Day Barrier Breakfast, Lentil Burgers and Corn-fed Chicken Salad. The counter is laden with freshly baked cakes and muffins, and a barbecue is planned for the evening.

Bellerby also has a thing for roses (she has 60 varieties in her garden at home) and it shows. They're bursting in the garden, fresh in vases on every table, and embossed on menus and crockery. If it sounds too cute, it's not. Certainly the gumboot-clad, bush-shirted locals don't seem to mind the floral bent. In fact it's been the popularity of the cafe among locals that's seen Wild Rose through a tough first few months.

On opening night, most of Tryphena was there (which is about 50 people). A waiata was sung and the first cups of tea – made from a blend of Rooibos with Kanuka tea-tree – were poured. The place has been a regular gathering spot ever since. "When we opened, all the locals brought in rose stuff – cushions, presents and little spoons. They were really excited to have somewhere nice to go."



Bellerby says there are two very distinct markets – Barrier residents in the winter and tourists in the summer. "It was a huge risk to open in the middle of the winter," she admits. "It was hard. But all businesses on the Barrier struggle in the winter. Fortunately none of us came here to get rich!"

Tea was a top priority from the word go. "We aren't coffee drinkers, so we really wanted to have nice teas. In town they just give you a teabag and a cup. All our tea is organic and loose leaf, and we serve it in real teapots, with real teacups." Indeed, tea-swilling regains its ritual status at Wild Rose. The lavish trays brought out would be just as well placed at one of Marie Antoinette's lawn parties as at Tryphena.

Chemical-free cafe

Bellerby and her business partner, Eve Woodward-Gray, are sustainability-focused. "We use organic where we can and don't use any chemicals." Wild Rose is one of only a few cafes in New Zealand trialling a non-chemical commercial dishwashing liquid. Bellerby says this was difficult to source, but she became committed to the concept when she discovered that the standard dishwashing product required its own toxic chemical truck for delivery.

She says eschewing commercial cleaning products means more "elbow grease" is required for scrubbing elements – "white vinegar is a big help" – and more time for things like backwashing the coffee machine rather than rinsing it with the usual product. But she says the Barrier is all about "clean, green living" and she wanted the cafe to reflect that. The island has no reticulated electricity, so the cafe runs off a generator.

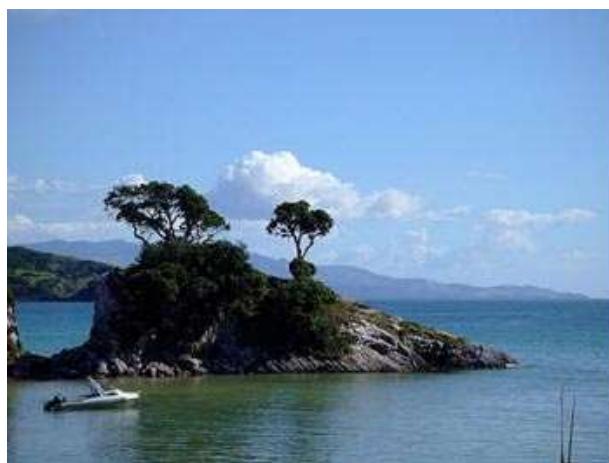
Sourcing food

While most vegetables are sourced locally, many provisions must still come by boat. Weather Gods permitting, it brings in supplies once a week. It's an expensive way to source food and a key driver for finding food locally. As well as a handful of part-time staff, the cafe employs two full-time cooks. One of them is Kat Belcher, who says the key is stocking up on supplies in case the boat is delayed. "Sometimes we have to just make use of what we've got."

All eggs used at Wild Rose are free range and mostly from the island. Meat is brought in from Auckland. As with many New Zealand coastal towns, there exists the cruel irony of not having easy access to fresh, cheap, commercially caught fish, despite its proximity.

Bellerby says the law requires all those buying fish from companies with quotas to have a fish receiver's licence and it's only really financially viable for big processors to have them. So, most fish caught commercially around Great Barrier goes back to the mainland to be processed. It may then return to the island for sale, but by that time you're paying full price, plus a premium for the food miles. Bellerby sometimes doesn't even know if the fish she ends up getting is Barrier fish.

Sliding the pitfalls of isolation aside, Bellerby says she's happy with the way Wild Rose is going. There's a "good vibe" at the cafe and most importantly, it's brought the community together.



Left: The ocean is just across the road. Right: the sign outside by local artist John Kjargaard. Above: Cook Kat Belcher

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