



Garnet Station



Above: Lisa Prager and Verity George of Garnet Station
 Photos: Picture Finish Limited

Organic NZ talks to Verity George and Lisa Prager, the colourful owners of Garnet Station café in Westmere, Auckland

How did your café start up?

Having sold our house in Point Chevalier, we decided we wanted to work together so were considering buying a home/business out of town. Then one day on a dog walk we passed an unloved shop in Westmere and the fantasy began. I [Verity] have worked in hospitality for over 30 years whilst being an actor/writer, although knowing how much hard work it was I never wanted my own café. However we knew that between us we had the skills and vision to breathe new life into the run-down property. Being next to the dairy and the local primary school gave the concept of a café merit.

Why did you choose the organic path, and what organic food and drinks do you specialise in?

We've believed in the philosophy of a naturally sustainable lifestyle for a long time. It's common sense really, since you are what you eat, and it's clear that chemicals are toxic to the human body. Coffee is one of the most sprayed crops in the world so it was important to base our café on organic coffee, so too milk, meat and free-range chicken and eggs, coconut flour and oil. The popular red quinoa we use in the gluten-free roast vege muffins is organic (see recipe). We stock organic juices and wine too. Whenever possible herbs and greens come from our back garden, the weekend markets or are gratefully received from locals.

What else do you do sustainably?

Kitchen compost and coffee grounds are given to the neighbouring primary school, which has huge vegetable beds, and occasionally their rainbow chard ends up in our Green Goddess Soup.

Eighteen months ago we bought a Japanese made Kangen ioniser (see www.kangendemo.com) that through a process of electrolysis changes the pH of water. We create our own drinking water at 8.5 pH, and safe cleaning products that are simply water at different levels of acidity or alkalinity: at 2.5 pH water functions like a sanitiser (it's used this way for wound care in over 500 hospitals in Japan), like a glass polishing spray at 6.0, and spray and wipe at

11.5. Nothing worse than smelling cleaning products in a place that ought to waft with salivating aromas!

We also live on site, so have one of the smallest carbon footprints in Aotearoa.

What sets your business apart from others?

We are a unique creative couple who are constantly evolving things. When we opened in 2007 many people wondered if we were a campaign office for Lisa's mayoral bid against John Banks.

For the re-launch of Auckland's Pride Festival in February this year we turned the café lounge into an intimate theatre venue. The styling is eclectic rather than cookie cutter, most of the art done by [Lisa] Prager, and the place is enjoyed as a community axis. Loving what you do makes all the difference in the world.

How have you overcome any challenges?

This year the front of the shop was destabilised by the undergrounding of electrical wires, culminating in being closed for three weeks so the café could be rebuilt. Challenges are surmounted with unflagging positivity, integrity, lateral thinking, problem-solving skills, and a hands-on craftsperson's approach, which means we fix and make a lot of stuff ourselves.

What have been the highlights and successes?

Being recognised by Metro magazine as one of Auckland's top 50 cafés. Being one of only four Tamaki Makaurau cafés featured in *The Great NZ Café* book. Breathing new life into a heritage building. Designing and sculpting the new wood-fired pizza oven, known as Te Muka, or Maureen Shacklock! Embracing the diversity of our customers.

What are your future plans – any new directions?

The latest big dream is having a liquor licence so we are now open in the evenings, 5–10 pm from Tuesday to Saturday. Pizza is part of the equation alongside handcrafted Kiwi beer. The drinks list is fabulous thanks to the assistance of our consultant Tanah Jane Dowdle of Gourmet Joy. ☑



Above: The wood-fired pizza oven, Te Muka, aka Maureen Shacklock



Organic quinoa roast veg muffins

- 1 cup cooked red organic quinoa
- 3 cups cubed roast veg
- ½ cup cooked, drained spinach
- 3 T parsley pesto (parsley, olive oil, garlic, almonds, parmesan)
- 6 large free range eggs
- 1 cup oat milk (or almond or rice)
- sea salt and black pepper

1. Beat eggs and milk, gently mix in the herbs and quinoa.
2. Pour the mix into the roast veg, season and pour into medium-size muffin tins lined with squares of baking paper.
3. Cook at 170°C in a fan oven for 30 minutes. Don't handle until cooled down a bit, then take off the baking paper to serve with your homemade chutney.

Garnet Station

85 Garnet Road, Westmere, Auckland
 Open every day, 7 am – 4 pm
 and 5–10 pm Tuesday to Saturday
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