

Soulfood Café

Organic NZ profiles a café in Wanaka that's part of a thriving organic shop

A world away from the main cities, Wanaka has a thriving organic community and a well-established organic store and café in the main street. Soulfood Café is just part of the business, with the organic store being the main focus, catering to a mix of locals and tourists. It has a warm, down-to-earth feeling. Beautiful wooden shelving displays an extensive range of goods, with local olive oil, honey, and produce proudly included.

Café-goers can sit in a booth inside, or step out the back into the haven of the Soulfood garden, where chunky wooden tables nestle amongst native plants and the fresh herbs that are used in the kitchen.

"I think we were one of the very first organic cafés in New Zealand," says owner Paul O'Hara. "We set up the shop in 1999, but I really liked the concept of a café where we could explore and share all these different ingredients."

When Soulfood moved to its present premises in 2003, the café side of the business was born. "It's not been easy. I've almost thrown in the towel a dozen times. It is such a labour-intensive business, making everything from scratch, doing it the proper way, with the best of organic ingredients."

Soulfood caters to the middle ground, keeping organics 'real, affordable and light-hearted'. Lunch costs no more than in any other café in town. Andy, Soulfood's chef, has lived in Argentina and brings a Latin style to Soulfood. The lunch cabinet is an extravaganza of nourishment, with things like black rice sushi with roasted kumara, grated beetroot and homegrown sprouts, and quesadillas filled with asparagus and sundried-tomato pesto.

Each summer they buy a freezer-load of local raspberries and blackcurrants, which go into the famous Soulfood muffins, a selection of which are baked fresh daily. A lot of people call in for takeaway food, especially the fresh juices and smoothies. Takeaway plates are compostable, made by Potato Pak; they use compostable PLA takeaway salad containers, and paper bags. Soulfood encourages customers to eat in rather than take away – it costs an extra 50 cents if you want your drink in a takeaway container.



Left: The garden out the back is a quiet haven

A little over a year ago, Paul made the difficult decision to sell the coffee machine, and 'redefine the café experience'. It has paid off. "We just weren't selling enough coffee to justify having a barista, so now we just do tea." This is an understatement: there's a selection of about 20 teas, all loose-leaf, which are served in teapots and enjoyed in proper teacups. And yes, they do still serve coffee for the die-hards, in stylish stainless-steel French presses.

Soulfood has become largely gluten-free. "We used to make our own bread, Soulbread we called it. It was popular – people loved it. We still have tourists ask for it." But so many people were wanting gluten-free food, and no one was catering for them.

"For me, it's more than just about whether the food is organic or not, it's more about the energy that goes into it," says Paul. "I used to be a die-hard organic guy, you know, everything had to be organic, I lived out of town, no power, no phone, not even hot water, and I believed that if the food I ate was organic then it must be good for me. I'm more discerning now. Some organic food just feels awful; you can feel the lack of love in it, like it was produced by someone or some company that is doing it just for the money."

Paul's philosophy is to follow his heart. "I don't always know exactly why I'm doing stuff. It's like with staff, I don't look at CVs; you can just feel when it's the right person."

It's 3.30 and one of the several teenagers that help out in the café arrives to help do the dishes. "I love seeing them learn and grow here," says Paul. Building a positive work ethic and communication are key qualities that are valued and encouraged here, with all the staff involved in serving customers.

Next time you're in Wanaka, visit this little café with a big heart! 🍷

Soulfood

74 Ardmore Street, Wanaka
 Opening hours:
 Monday–Friday: 8 am – 6 pm
 Saturday–Sunday: 8 am – 4 pm
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Photos: Maya Novak Sever, Mayjertales.com

Soulfood quesadillas

This gluten-free wrap recipe makes 8 quesadillas, and can be used to make wraps, enchiladas, pancakes etc. We've decided to fill these ones with local greens, caramelised red onion, sun-dried tomato pesto and – in spring – fresh asparagus, but you could fill them with just about anything. The 'quesa' part of quesadilla means cheese, but you could leave out the cheddar for a dairy-free lunch.

Sun-dried tomato pesto

- 100 g sun-dried tomatoes
- 75 g sunflower seeds (or any nut)
- 1 large clove of garlic
- 50 ml extra virgin olive oil
- fresh herbs e.g. basil, chives, oregano, parsley
- salt and freshly milled black pepper

1. Soak tomatoes in water until soft (1–2 hours).
2. Toast the seeds in a pan. Set aside.
3. Strain the tomatoes, reserving some of the liquid.
4. Place all ingredients in a food processor and blitz well.
5. Add reserved liquid to desired consistency.

The wrap

- 1 cup NZ green pea flour
- 1 cup NZ corn (maize) flour
- ½ cup tapioca starch
- ½ t turmeric
- ½ t salt pinch of black pepper
- 2 eggs
- 2½ cups cold water
- 1 t olive oil

1. Whisk all ingredients together in a large bowl until there are no lumps and the mixture is smooth and glossy.
2. Heat a well-oiled pan to a medium/hot heat. Ladle in a portion of the mix and quickly rotate pan to spread the mix evenly into a circle to fill the pan.
3. After a minute or so the edges should pull apart from the pan slightly to allow the cake to be turned easily. The second side will only need 20–30 seconds and should slide out of the pan. You should be able to make more without the need for more oil, unless they begin to stick.
4. Stack the cakes on a plate and cover with a tea towel to prevent them drying out.

To assemble

Spread the pesto on half of the wrap, top with your choice of fillings and grated cheese. Fold over to create a half-moon and toast in a pan on a medium heat until the cheese has melted and the outside is golden brown, about 2–3 minutes each side. Yum!