

BearLion

real food is good food

By **Anne Gastinger**

Christchurch organic eatery BearLion Foods was recently awarded Hellman's Best Suburban Café in the Canterbury regional section of the Meadow Fresh New Zealand Café of the Year Awards. It's not totally surprising, given that its head chef and co-owner, Alesha Bilbrough-Collins, has two decades of international experience behind her, including stints in Gordon Ramsay and Ottolenghi restaurants overseas.

For the loyal and growing fan base who frequent Alesha's New Brighton delicatessen and café or its satellite food stall at the Saturday morning Christchurch Farmers' Market, industry gongs and glowing CVs are not the decisive factor. What they value is BearLion Foods' nourishing and healing array of vibrantly colourful salads, baked goods, cereals and preserves, all produced with innovative flair. The business name comes from the nicknames of Alesha (Lion) and her husband and business partner John (Bear).

Alesha's philosophy is boldly stated on the café noticeboard: 'Creating magic and love with organic, local and seasonal produce, good fats and natural sweetness. Made (not manufactured) in Canterbury,

New Zealand. Striving to always be eco-friendly.'

The dietary options on offer include gluten-free, dairy-free, egg-free, vegan and paleo, and no refined white sugar or flour is used. Alesha sources her ingredients from suppliers such as Christchurch's urban farm, Cultivate, which shares the same commitment to organic, environmentally responsible practices as she does.

How did Alesha become dedicated to organics and to providing for a diverse range of diets? It was her own experience of serious health problems while establishing her business that was the catalyst that set her firmly on this path.

Alesha first began to experience heart arrhythmia and panic attacks four years ago while living in Melbourne. Medical authorities attributed these symptoms to stress and depression.

"I knew that wasn't the case," Alesha recalls. Undeterred by her health issues, Alesha and her husband John returned home to Christchurch in order to set up BearLion Foods. Alesha was excited about the opportunity to put into practice what she had learned overseas, but her health issues continued to snowball. She was now also experiencing insomnia, food intolerances, brain fog, acne and fatigue. "There were days I couldn't leave the house. I didn't know what was going on. It was horrible as I was trying to get this place open."

Time management and multitasking are vital skills in any kitchen working environment. "Having been easily able to juggle 100 things at once, now doing more than one thing at a time was impossible. I thought I was dying or had a brain tumour," Alesha recalls.

Alesha's turning point in recovery came after visiting Dr Matt Tizard, who has been treating people affected by chemical poisoning for many years. He diagnosed glyphosate poisoning and treated Alesha with homeopathic drops, high-dose vitamin C, and oxygen via a decompression chamber. Within a week Alesha's skin had cleared up and her blurred vision was once again crisp and clear.

Having this glimpse of feeling amazing



Above: Alesha Bilbrough-Collins: "If you know something isn't right, keep asking, keep searching, find people who believe and support you. Never give up! Everyone has the right to feel fantastic." Photo: BearLion Foods

was the inspiration she needed to believe she could get better. Recovery was not an overnight event, nor was it linear. Sadly, chemical exposure has left its imprint on her health. Alesha stills needs to avoid exposures to chemical cleaners, perfumes and the like. "I've become extremely sensitive to smells. Even perfume on clothing sprayed days before affects me; it feels like I can't breathe."

"It was John, my husband who was the legs that carried me through this nightmare," says Alesha. "He always believed in me and supported me, even attending Christchurch City Council meetings to ban Roundup when I couldn't be there."

The CCC has an official policy that excludes the use of glyphosate in and around Christchurch, but John says: "Just the other day we saw men spraying in and around New Brighton, so their vote to stop using it obviously hasn't been fully passed and implemented."

Inadvertent exposure to harmful chemicals (such as glyphosate-based herbicides) is bad for everyone, not just those who are clearly sick as a result of exposure. Some people, as a result of



Above: BearLion is all about organic, fresh, seasonal and local food. Photo: Anne Gastinger

Green tahini

Delicious and nutritious as a dip, dressing, on fish or roast vegetables.

¼ cup tahini
¼ cup water
3 large garlic cloves, peeled
2 lemons, juiced
3–4 handfuls mint, coriander, kale, miner's lettuce, chickweed and/or nasturtium.

Salt and pepper to taste

1. Blend all ingredients together. Add the greens in gradually if necessary.
2. If you want a dressing or a thinner mix, add more water. If you want a thicker mix or a dip, add more tahini.
3. Store in a sealed glass jar in the fridge. Green tahini will keep for at least a week.



Photo: Anne Gastinger

their initial chemical poisoning, develop multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS). Though not yet fully understood, MCS is viewed as a congestive disorder – the body's detoxification mechanisms have in some manner been compromised as a result of exposure to various environmental toxins (see sidebar).

Alesha's kick-ass, can-do attitude and focused approach has helped her work through her own daunting health issues and keep her new business on track. She shows courage and conviction to be the change she wants to see, and admits it's hard. "We live in a toxic world. I never thought I would be talking about this, when all you want is to feel good." Her goal – to be able to offer people a variety of different ways to get

nutrition into their system – makes this prize-winning café so special.

Alesha shares her health story with the students who attend her cooking classes at BearLion Foods. The students learn about using high quality, nutrient-dense ingredients, raw food tips, uncooking, and cooking with 'weeds' such as stinging nettle and chickweed.

BearLion Foods is more than an eatery, catering service, cooking school or food stall; it's a meeting place that attracts people who care about the planet, and their own health – a portal into a real good food culture. 🍀

Anne Gastinger is a researcher and writer living in Christchurch.

What is MCS?

Multiple chemical sensitivity is a health condition in which a person experiences multiple adverse health symptoms on exposure to minute amounts of chemicals found in pesticides, solvents, perfumes, new carpets, food additives and preservatives, household cleaners, medications, formaldehyde-impregnated products, treated timber etc.

MCS was first described in 1954 by Dr Theron Randolph. Medical recognition and treatment of this condition remains disparate amongst Western nations, resulting in many sufferers being misdiagnosed. In 2000 Halifax, Nova Scotia, introduced city-wide

fragrance-free voluntary policies in public spaces such as schools and libraries. Other institutions such as the Canadian Human Rights Commission and some Canadian hospitals have an enforced fragrance-free policy.

Though MCS is still not included in the World Health Organisation International Classification of Diseases, Germany formally recognised it in 2000, followed closely by Austria, Luxembourg and Japan (csn-deutschland.de/mcs_disability.pdf).

The primary treatment for MCS is RADD: remove, avoid, desensitise, detoxify. See also Dr Sarah Myhill's protocols at bit.ly/2kR8iwP.



Above: BearLion's stall at the Christchurch Farmers' Market. Photo: Anne Gastinger

BearLion Foods

- **Shop 3, Carnaby Lane, 78 Brighton Mall, New Brighton, Christchurch**
- **Open Weds–Sat 8.30 am – 2.30 pm, Thurs from 5.30 pm**
- **03 382 3951**
- **Christchurch Farmers' Market, Deans Bush, Saturdays 8.30 am – 1 pm**
- **Cooking classes resume mid-2017**
- **www.bearlionfoods.co.nz**