

TRAVEL

by John Bishop

Cooking up a storm in the Big Apple

Three Kiwi chefs are making their mark in New York, where keeping diners happy is no mean feat.

FOne night I had Robert De Niro sitting here with Bruce Springsteen," says Kiwi chef Matt Lambert. "How much better can it get?"

Lambert is a big lump of West Auckland transported to New York, perhaps a bit bewildered by his success, although he has worked hard for it and there's no questioning his talent. He's one of several Kiwi cooking entrepreneurs making their mark and a decent living in New York, a city they all agree is one of the most challenging in the world in which to be successful.

The three – Matt Lambert of the Michelin-starred Musket Room in the rapidly gentrifying area around Houston St in Lower Manhattan; Mark Simmons of the Kiwiana Cafe in deepest Brooklyn; and Pauli Morgan from Nelson Blue in the fashionable South St Seaport area of Lower Manhattan – all wear the cloak of ambassador for New Zealand and our special style of food. But defining the cuisine is less straightforward. For Morgan, it's fresh food, freshly cooked. And the ingredients are special: wonderful white fish, lamb, whitebait and the like.

"It's such a new country and [there's] so much social irreverence that the cooking is a mash-up. For 15 years the prevailing view was that we were about fusion cooking," says Lambert.

Simmons says the debate isn't over. New Zealand may not have a distinct cuisine, but the trio generally agree ingredients make the difference, combined with innovation and ingenuity. Each makes New Zealand-sourced food and Kiwi presentation a point of difference; each talks passionately



about showcasing the country to the locals.

The iconic pavlova features strongly. Simmons' cafe sells 200 individual pavlovas a week, having trained someone to do it.

Lambert lauded his steak and cheese pie in a *Forbes* interview, but he also presents a deconstructed pavlova. Morgan used to serve them, but doesn't now.

Simmons' business model is a neighbourhood concept. "In New York, people in small apartments don't or can't cook. They eat out or

take out. I have people who come in two or three times a week, sit at the same table and order the same dish every time. Others work their way around the menu."

He has included Kiwi touches for four years. "I express myself in my cuisine. I want to show Americans what New Zealand is about. I do traditional Kiwi dishes. We serve green-lipped mussels, whitebait, pork ribs with Marmite and manuka." One reviewer described this black stuff as "scraped from the belly of hell". Rather than driving customers away,



Clockwise from top left, Matt Lambert of the Musket Room; his deconstructed pavlova; Kiwiana Cafe's Mark Simmons; Nelson Blue's Pauli Morgan; his corner pub/restaurant; inside the Musket Room; one of Simmons' top-selling individual pavlovas.

it boosted trade, making it "my best-selling dish for four years", he says.

"I thread New Zealand nuances into something that is not completely different." He cooks new sweet potatoes in soil in the oven to give them a more earthy taste.

He has lots of New Zealand wines and more than 20 Kiwi beers on his drinks list. Roaring Meg pinot from Central Otago is available by the glass. "Been doing that since we opened."

Originally from Matura in Southland, Simmons displays his mother's

teaspoon collection on the restaurant wall. He gets a lot of expats, and Kiwi visitors to New York seek him out.

The term Kiwi often connotes a working-class populism distinct from the more stylish and sophisticated. He agrees. "My stamp is nostalgia; make them feel like they are back home."

Having got his first Michelin star four months after opening in 2013, since renewed in March, Lambert is hankering after a second one.

He has planted a kitchen garden with at least 30 boxes, trays and planters full of herbs, plants and adornments. It connects him to his New Zealand roots, he says.

The kitchen is in the basement of the building – a stepdown in New York parlance and "a disconnect from the dining room ...

"Sometimes someone from the kitchen, one of the chefs or me, will take a dish to the table and explain it to the customer."

So, what's popular? "Lamb, and so is the venison tartare. Venison is a bit wild and exotic and has a unique ingredient. Salmon also. Ours is New Zealand salmon, which has a different taste from the North American product and a higher fat content. It's done either with sunflower seeds, herbs and citrus or quinoa and watercress."

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A former forest ranger, Morgan came to New York in the 1980s after working at the James Cook Hotel in Wellington and clubs in Australia.

Armed with a letter of recommendation, he got a job at a place in Long Island. Now he's an American citizen – all have American citizens as partners – but "I'm proud to be a Kiwi".

He started Nelson Blue in 2007, got wiped out by Hurricane Sandy in 2013, but is now back in business. It's more pub than restaurant, and his biggest seller is slow-cooked lamb sliced like pastrami on a baguette with onions smothered with a fontina cheese sauce.

Lamb pie and mash, chilli squid and green-lipped mussels also feature along with fresh john dory and tarakihi, sauvignon blanc and pinot noir.

His is the only bar in New York serving Speight's. "I had three guys who used to fly in from Denver, drink Speight's all weekend, then fly back tired but satisfied."

There are differences between New Zealand and New York. Simmons identifies two. He put fresh whitebait patties on the menu, but found they didn't sell.

"Americans didn't understand the term patty. I consulted the whanau of New Zealand chefs. We changed the name to latke [a Jewish fish cake] and they walked out the door.

"New Yorkers keep you honest. If a dish is not up to standard, they'll tell you and demand a refund. But they will come back. Kiwis don't say anything, but they never return." ■