



Celia Faris loves her Vespa GTS 250.



MOD Squad

The Vespa has been a style icon for decades. Yet, today, as petrol prices hit new highs and the recession introduces new lows, its practicality is an even bigger plus.

Words **Lee Suckling** Photos **John McCombe**

The Vespa is an icon. An Italian stallion. Defined as the first globally successful scooter, the Vespa has been a leader of style and affordable transport since its 1946 launch in Pontedera, Italy.

Vespa is the Italian word for “wasp”, reflecting from both the buzzing sound of its two-stroke engine and the shape of its rear haunches. The design is classic, and was popularised by Salvador Dali and Audrey Hepburn, Jude Law and numerous other celebrities. Now, the Vespa is turning into an essential possession for urban-style aficionados in New Zealand.

With parking in Christchurch becoming increasingly difficult, and petrol prices hindering many from getting from A to B, Vespa riders are laughing at the conveniences scooter life allows them. What is it, exactly, that makes life as a Cantabrian Vespa owner so attractive?

Jonathan Mackie fell in love with the Vespa after hearing stories of his mother’s “mod” days in London in the swinging 1960s, when the scooter first became a style icon. Like many riders, Jonathan has always been attracted to the story behind the Vespa.

“In the late 1940s, after the war, Italy was extremely poor. Cars were no longer affordable, and the Vespa was created as a low-price alternative,” he says. “There were also potholes all over the cities, so manoeuvrable vehicles were needed to swerve around them; cars no longer did the trick.”

Having bought his Vespa PX200 in 2005, Jonathan became an organiser of CanScoot, Canterbury’s scooter club. Members range in age from 20 to 60, and are mainly Vespa riders. Up to 20 of them at a

time meet for monthly rides, all keen to share a mutual love of their Italian two-wheelers.

“We all love the Vespa brand for what it is, not what it appears to be,” Jonathan says. “We’re not concerned about what others think about us as Vespa riders. They are not about being showy. We don’t own Vespas because we feel the need to prove ourselves; we own them because they serve a purpose.”

Jonathan attends CanScoot’s monthly drinks and scooter chat at Poplar Lanes’ Vespa Room, where members share their affection for the Vespa among classic memorabilia. As well as the gatherings and short monthly rides around Christchurch (and often over Banks Peninsula), CanScoot also organises an annual three-day ride during Show Weekend. Members travel about 1000km around the South Island together. Last year they traversed the Canterbury Plains to Mount Cook and then rode down through Central Otago.

“I love our convoy rides,” Jonathan says. “The feeling of riding in unison is amazing, like you are one body. That buzz of riding in a pack like a swarm of wasps is incredible.”

David Killick, editor of *The Press’s At Home*

Owning a Vespa means having Italian style and reliability. Who would have thought that was possible?

David Killick

supplement, is also a Vespa enthusiast. David bought his Vespa LX150 three years ago after a long-time lust for one.

"The Vespa brand, for me, is all about style, heritage, and history," David says. "It has a natural sense of style, but it's also an iconic product; it's not just generic transport."

With his eye for aesthetic beauty, David describes the lines of the Vespa as "perfect".

"That design has hardly changed over Vespa's 60-year history, and it has really stood the test of time," he says.

David adds that owning a Vespa is one of the only options for those who are desperate for classic Italian style, but do not want a temperamental vehicle, like many of the automobiles born in Italy.

"Vespas aren't unpredictable, at least not like Italian cars." Unlike a Ferrari or a Lamborghini, Vespas are not just an image or a label. They have the performance and dependability factors going for them as well, he says.

"Owning a Vespa means having Italian style *and* reliability. Who would have thought that was possible?"

There's more than just elegance and trustworthiness in the Vespa; it boasts practicality and low running costs, too.

"It takes me 10 minutes to get into the city, and there are no parking issues – I just slot it into the bike sheds," David says. "And it only costs me \$10 a week in petrol!"

Canterbury Vespa owners form a bit of a boys club, as most riders are male, but Celia Faris is an exception.

"So many women come up to me and say 'I envy you for having one of those'. I don't know why they don't just go out and get one," she says. "I love the feeling of being on my Vespa [GTS 250]. It's so liberating. It's such a good blow-out after a stressful day."

Celia believes more women need to get on these Italian stallions, and they do not need to get a motorcycle licence. The 50cc Vespa models



Jonathan Mackie, organiser of Canterbury's scooter club, CanScoot.

can be ridden with a car licence.

Celia and her friend, Nellie, a fellow female Vespa owner, traverse town and country on their scooters.

"They're fast and grunty, but we feel safe on them," Celia says. "I'd never feel comfortable on one of the lower quality scooters. Vespas have such an edge, while the others are a bit legless."

While the recession has caused scooter sales worldwide to boom, the price of a Vespa still impedes many potential riders from becoming



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owners in Christchurch. Vespas with 50cc engines start at \$5200, whereas comparable 50cc models by Asian brands often straddle the \$2000 mark. The priciest standard Vespa in the New Zealand range is the GTS 300 Super, at \$10,300.

Brent Ladbroke, of City Scooters, Christchurch's Vespa dealer, believes the price reflects Vespa's quality.

"There are Taiwanese brands, like Kymco, which offer scooters that are almost as good as Vespas, but they will always lack in the refinements," Brent says. "Vespas are made with a pressed-steel body, with the highest quality suspension and mechanics," he adds. "They are the pinnacle of comfort and handling."

Brent has many dedicated customers, some of whom own several Vespas.

"They're not just a commuter for most owners," he says. "They're a lifestyle, whether they are daily transport or reserved for Sunday drives."

Vespa owners in Christchurch share a common viewpoint; the Italian scooter is the one iconic vehicle owners can really use in New Zealand. Jonathan Mackie describes it best: "We all love our Vespas because they can be pushed to their true potential. Ferraris go to insane speeds, but

you can't drive them that fast in New Zealand. With a Vespa, you can really floor it, and really enjoy everything it was designed to do."

Can they be used as everyday transport? "Most Vespa drivers have access to another vehicle, but it is possible," Jonathan says. "I've lived on mine as my primary transport for years now – I make it work for me. I pull on the wet-weather gear when it's raining, and can easily do the weekly shopping. I even once transported a tropical fish 50km in the glove box and it survived. I figure if I can do that, what else could I ever need?"



Vespas en masse at AMI Stadium for the All Blacks v Italy match.



Celia Faris believes more women should ride Vespas.

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