

Rachel is dedicated to making the kind of artisan bread found in continental Europe. "The flavours should open up in the chew, like a fine wine," she says.

GOURMET GODDESSES

Top-notch bread, cheese and chocolate are divine to eat – but making them, for these three Kiwi women, is a life's passion. Meet the baker, the chocolatier, and the cheesemaker...

RACHEL SCOTT, BAKER

Bread, says Canterbury artisan breadmaker Rachel Scott, happens by a kind of magic.

"It's like alchemy," she says. "I love that you can take flour, salt and water and get a myriad of textures, flavours and tastes."

Rachel now works from her home-slash-bakery in Amberley, northeast of Rangiora. In the art deco-style building (it is, unbelievably, a former garage), tall French doors lead from the main living space into the bakery proper. Rachel's clean and simple working space is made up of two long, white rooms with large ovens running the length of one and long racks for bread in the other.

"I love big cities but here in Amberley with the sea and the mountains and the vines being so close, it's very peaceful. I need that serenity to bake."

But Rachel came to bread almost by accident. Intending to be an architect, or maybe to paint, she →

started studying architecture at Canterbury University. But at the end of the first year she decided to visit her partner in London and, seven years later, was still there. A chance meeting saw her working in a restaurant alongside a world-class baker who allowed her to learn about breadmaking. From that point she was hooked.

“She took beautiful ingredients and enhanced them without clouding the flavours. The simplicity of her approach gelled with what I loved about architecture.”

In an unusual sort of work experience, Rachel went on bicycle trips through France to talk with artisan bakers.

“I was able to really see what bread could be. I could work out the breadmaking process by looking at the bread, tearing it and smelling it. I found that inspiring.”

When she returned to New Zealand “the cafe scene was opening up”. So she took the plunge, did a business course and started baking. In April 1995 Rachel produced her first bread: Pain au levain, a French sourdough.

As orders grew she began making ciabatta, a soft Italian bread. Then came seasonal breads, like fougasse, a French flatbread with thyme and olive oil; pain aux noix, a walnut bread; and pain de seigle, made of rye.

“I suppose I’m inspired by French and Italian breads,” she continues, “but they have all been my own recipes. I’ve taken classics and refined them to my own palate.”

The latest addition to her range is paraoa moana, a savoury bread made with karengo, a type of purple seaweed. It took two years and many variations before reaching the final product. “I wanted a bread which spoke of land and sea and of New Zealand.”

The ‘star’ ingredient, karengo, is harvested in Kaikoura, and the purple wheat comes from Lincoln University. This bread goes well with seafood, she adds.

“It’s quite a French idea, matching bread with food. In the oyster season they use rye bread. Pain au levain is eaten with quite robust dishes, while baguettes are used with more delicate flavours.”

Rachel appreciates that she has never had to do the ‘hard sell’ with her bread – word of mouth has made her baking popular. “My business has grown in a way I never would have imagined. I take orders from Auckland to Invercargill and everywhere in between.”

And no wonder. So dedicated is Rachel to producing excellent bread, she would rather continue running her business alone than risk compromising product quality through expansion. She even hand moulds each loaf.

“There’s something about the baking process. I find it quite a contemplative time and I still enjoy doing it on my own. It means I know exactly what’s gone on with each loaf and I can feel happy putting my name on it.”

French toast with caramelised apples and crème fraîche

This is perfect for a weekend breakfast treat.

SERVES 4 (OR 2 GENEROUSLY!)

250ml milk
50g sugar
1/3 vanilla pod

2 eggs
1 Tbsp sugar
8 slices artisan bread



Knob of butter
3 apples, Granny Smith or similar
80g sugar
40g butter
Crème fraîche to serve

1 Bring milk, sugar and vanilla pod to a simmer in a saucepan, take off heat and set aside to cool.

2 Whisk together eggs and sugar.

3 Soak each bread slice briefly in the milk mix, then dip in the egg. Melt butter in a frying pan and fry on both sides until crisp and golden.

4 Peel, core and slice the apples. Melt together sugar and butter until beginning to colour. Add the apples and stir until tender and caramelised. Serve toast with apples and crème fraîche on top.

AGNES ALMEIDA, CHOCOLATIER

The cartoonist Leslie Murray once wrote that there were two types of people in the world: “Those who love chocolate – and communists.”

Agnes Almeida, chocolatier, is the former. A year ago she opened Xocolatl in Christchurch, a hot chocolate bar dedicated to sweet temptation. Xocolatl (Aztec for ‘drinking chocolate’) is just one of the specialties Agnes has perfected. She also creates her own chocolates (balsamic vinegar, tequila or pear fillings, anyone?), plus a range of cookies, cakes, and mousses. All with a nine-month-old daughter sleeping at the back of the kitchen.

Agnes grew up in Montreal, Canada, never thinking she would become a pastry chef. “But I studied French at university, and ended up perfecting the language just out of Marseilles during my late teens,” she says. “It wasn’t until I got to France that my culinary senses were awakened. I gained a real interest in food after watching the way the French respected it.” →

Agnes loves working with chocolate because it’s a very “forgiving” food – if you make a mistake, just melt and start again.



When she returned home, Agnes studied at the Pacific Institute of Culinary Arts in Vancouver. "My first job as a chocolatier was at Chocolats Geneviève Grandbois in Quebec, which I got without any specific experience in chocolate," she recalls. "But I fell in love with it."

Agnes started up Xocolatl when she moved to New Zealand with her Kiwi partner Ray. Alongside one-bite petits fours and decadent desserts, her Fendalton store offers hot chocolate drinks and flavour-laced milky delights – including sea salt caramel, orange ginger milk, and white chocolate cardamom. She uses only French Valrhona chocolate, including Chuao, the most expensive chocolate in the world.

As Agnes pours silky chocolate into a bowl, its shiny, smooth texture is enough to make anyone with a sweet tooth salivate. "Chocolate imitates the feeling of falling in love," says Agnes. She uses sight and feel, not thermometers, when working. "I never want to lose my love of chocolate by using anything but my senses."

Agnes uses chocolate made from between 64% and 85% cocoa. "The stronger the concentration of cocoa,

Very Kiwi jaffa hot chocolate

Use only dark chocolate in this drink if you want an extra-rich hot treat.

SERVES 1

- 200ml full-fat milk
- Pinch orange zest
- 25g milk chocolate
- 25g dark chocolate (70% cacao minimum)



In a saucepan, bring milk and orange zest to the boil. When it starts to bubble up, pour the milk quickly into a bowl with the chocolate in the bottom, and stir until melted. Return the mixture to the saucepan and whisk over a medium heat to froth. Pour into a big, beautiful mug and enjoy.

THAT'S NOT TO SAY THERE AREN'T DAYS WHEN I WANT TO RUN SCREAMING OUT THE DOOR! BUT I GET TO GIVE JOY, RAISE A FAMILY, AND WORK WITH CHOCOLATE ALL DAY LONG

the more intense the flavour. However strong, dark chocolate definitely doesn't have to have a sour-bitter taste like many people think it does."

Agnes believes chocolate's power to give pleasure is magical. "Chocolate also has amazing healing powers," she adds. "People want it the most when they're down."

Agnes' children – Taiga, two, and Viola, nine months – are very accommodating of their working mum. "They sleep through the mixers!" she says. "I have a passion for everything I do, so I make it work. Ray, who is a teacher by trade, has also taken a year off to run the chocolate shop with me while our kids are so young."

And Agnes says her customers' attitude definitely makes it easier. "People say the sleeping little one in the back is the star attraction to the shop. They come to see the chocolate baby!"

Luck, hard work, and a supportive environment make Agnes such a wonder woman. "That's not to say that there aren't days when I want to run screaming out the door!" she laughs. "But I get to give joy, raise a family, and work with chocolate all day long! What could be better than that?"

SUE ARTHUR, CHEESEMAKER

Sue Arthur knows all about hands-on experience in the workplace. Her duties include plunging her arms up to her elbows into vats of curds and whey. It is, she vows, the most sensual tactile experience – and it doesn't get better than feta.

"Feta curd is the silkiest, softest curd: like a baby's hand," says Sue, cheesemaker and owner of the Over the Moon Dairy and cheese school in Putaruru, South Waikato.

Sue makes all her boutique cheeses by hand, so the business of dipping her digits in whey is a regular – and restorative – reminder of why she chose this career move at a later stage in life. "The very first time I did it I was hooked, and I still am."

It's the same for the people who attend cheesemaking classes at the school she set up. They get their hands all covered in whey – and their eyes just glaze over with delight, Sue says.

The former local body bureaucrat (she worked for the South Waikato District Council for close to 20 years) credits her father with sparking her initial interest in →

Sue's "semi-retirement hobby" has become a second career, and she loves her hands-on job.



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cheeses that please. “I can remember back to when I was four. For a weekend treat, my dad would get little cubes of cheese and wrap them in bacon and fry them. It was heaven.”

The “child of the 50s” was raised on dairy products: Chesdale cheese slices on white bread were another favourite. Now she has leapt to the other end of the spectrum, producing about 30 boutique cheeses and selling some 9000kg annually.

Today she’s got some “quite complicated” mixes underway. There’s the double delight, made of cow’s and goat’s milk. A vat of hard goat cheese is also in the making and, in the corner, a vat of cow and buffalo blue. She’s also in the process of making tomme – a goat and buffalo milk semi-hard cheese.

Just as the simple childhood cheddars delighted the young Sue, her creations enthrall her customers today. Cheese, says Sue, is an adventure. “It’s about exploring new styles and blends and tastes.

“I enjoy educating people’s palates, increasing their enjoyment and knowledge of cheese and encouraging them to venture out.”

Her own favourite is the Over the Moon’s OMG cheese – so called “because people say ‘Oh my goodness!’ when they first try it”.

Although very new to her new vocation – Over the Moon is just 18 months old – Sue has already won the highest possible praise for her creations. In March her Galactic Gold washed rind cheese took the top artisan cheese prize at the Cuisine New Zealand Champions of Cheese Awards. Her Venus – a soft, fresh marinated cheese – took out a silver in the same competition.

Once Sue wore corporate suits and high heels and commanded a hefty salary. Today she’s in factory whites with her hair in a net, and white steel-capped boots on her feet. The income may not be as generous as it once was, and the job that was meant to be a semi-retirement hobby has grown into a 100-hour-a-week commitment. But she couldn’t be happier.

Even when she’s away from work, Sue doesn’t really leave. When friends come over for dinner, she always starts with a showcase of her treasures. “I look at the cheese board sometimes and I think ‘That’s a huge range’... And then I think ‘And I made it all myself.’” ■

Port and New Moon pâté

This pâté can be whipped up with very little effort, and it preserves the integrity of this artisan blue cheese.

SERVES 4

55g butter or margarine
1 bunch spring onions, finely chopped
60ml port
½ lemon, zest only
125g New Moon blue cheese, crumbled
1 small bunch parsley, finely chopped
Freshly ground black pepper

- 1 Melt butter in a saucepan and gently sweat the spring onions until soft.
- 2 Add the port to the pan and simmer gently for 3 minutes.
- 3 Add the remaining ingredients and stir well.
- 4 Transfer to a blender and process until the mixture



has bound. Check the seasoning and adjust if necessary.

- 5 Divide between 2 ramekins (or 1 larger serving bowl) and refrigerate for at least 2 hours. Serve with melba toast or water crackers.