

# SPICE GIRL

ONE WOMAN'S LOVE AFFAIR WITH  
EXOTIC FLAVOURS IS RATED A HIT IN  
MULTICULTURAL LYTTTELTON

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“IF YOU GRIND, IT KEEPS THE VOLATILE OILS IN THERE ... YOU CAN KEEP THE FRESHNESS AND FLAVOUR AND SMELL”



SOMETIMES THE SEA BREEZE above Lyttelton Harbour carries a whiff of Iran or Brazil or Sicily. Other days bring authentic Korean cooking aromas or the scent of freshly crushed spices from a Moroccan souk. Part delicatessen, part spice shop, part café and bottle store, Ground Culinary Centre is the exotic brainchild of well-travelled linguist Jenny Garing. Customers in the port town can buy gourmet goodies and meals or watch – and smell – while whole spices are hand-ground and blended on site.

The mortar and pestle are Jenny’s tools of choice, along with the weighty old two-wheeled sesame-seed grinder she hauled home from a Korean mountain town. When making baharat, a heady North African 12-spice mix, the big grinder envelops its operator in a perfumed cloud and triggers a kind of spice “high”. Using such rudimentary implements is a time-consuming process that verges, according to Jenny, on being economically unsound. “But the taste is just so different,” she says. “Most companies use blades which release the oils and make the spices go off really quickly. They will lose all vitality after a week. If you grind, it keeps the volatile oils in there ... you can keep the freshness and flavour and smell.”

These superior seasonings star in Ground’s take-home meals which change daily according to the seasons and Jenny’s whim. Lytteltonians on their way home from work might dash in to grab a Chinese red chicken dish made with star anise and cassia bark or an organic beef dish

built around the Ethiopian berbere spice mix. The culinary centre also offers cooking classes and provides lunches – sushi or vegetable wraps made with gluten-free tortillas – to all three of the local primary schools. And Jenny makes a point of buying vegetables and herbs from the town’s community garden, handing back all her kitchen scraps for compost. “It’s good for us to be part of the community. There’s a real village feeling here that you just don’t get in the suburbs. What I really love about Lyttelton is the huge cross-section of people, from port workers who’ve been here six, seven, eight generations to artists and writers and lawyers and bohemians and triathletes. It’s fascinating.” Jenny says supportive residents have proved invaluable as she grapples with the logistics of running a shop. “Retail is not my background at all. It is hard to turn a passion into a business but incredibly rewarding too.”

For tourists and visiting sailors, Ground offers a culinary touchstone from home or tastes from their travels. Spanish customers pounce on the air-dried Serrano ham and Arab customers rave over the house-made dolmades. “One day we made labne, cheese balls made out of yoghurt and salt ... the Middle Eastern guys were so excited.” Jenny can relate to this longing for familiar tastes; it helped launch the original spice business five years ago. She hankered after the food she had devoured while travelling or operating language schools and teaching university-level English in Japan and China. Her friend Vicki Martin felt the same way.

Frustrated by their inability to find some ingredients, the women began experimenting and mixing their own versions, which led to the creation of Ground Gourmet Essentials. They sold their spice blends and dips to specialty stores and chefs around New Zealand, lugging jars up and down stairs to the converted sleep-out behind Jenny’s hillside house. Vicki has since bowed out of the business to focus on her family. Last year Jenny decided the town’s newly thriving culinary scene was ready for a dedicated food store on its main street.

When NZ Life & Leisure visits, she is taking a break from the all-consuming shop and revelling in a quiet Sunday at home with marine biologist partner Graeme Inglis. Once a week the couple selects a destination and prepares an exotic brunch. On this day their taste buds are visiting Sudan which translates to a platter of salty cheese and a spicy fava bean and onion dish served with flat bread and boiled eggs. Even off-duty, food absorbs her days.

Thanks to her extraordinarily adventurous mother, Jenny was raised on foreign fare. “I was really lucky. When I grew up in the 1970s and ’80s everyone else was eating meat and three veges, all boiled. We had Chinese banquets on Thursday nights, French on Monday nights. Friends thought we were really weird. Mum would make her own tofu.” While Jenny’s Timaru schoolmates considered fried rice alien enough, a sympathetic Chinese neighbour offered old recipes and shared vegetables like bok choy from her garden. Together, mother and

daughter tracked down spices and unheard-of fresh herbs. Both parents have invested in the business and mother Juliet Adams is a regular helper in the shop.

Jenny says New Zealand has made great culinary strides in the last five years. Now she can find olive oil made from Banks Peninsula fruit and organic bread baked in Christchurch, while gluten-free orange and almond cakes are made up the street. Even the shop’s coffee is blended locally. True, most of her spices are imported from India and Sri Lanka and there is no substitute for the distinctive Sicilian wild oregano used in her spezie spice blend.

But her head is buzzing with new recipes that could utilize native New Zealand ingredients such as horopito and flax seed. Graeme is in on the act too. He has found a recipe for a black pepper and coffee bean spice rub that pairs beautifully with venison. His scientific background has been handy. While trying to perfect their toum, they have quizzed food technologist friends about the enzyme content in garlic, the unctuousness of oil and the acid in lemon juice.

Beyond science, Jenny says creating a divine spice blend requires a mix of experience and sensory awareness. “You need to get the mix of mid notes and top notes. Ras al hanout, for example, is a blend of sharp, earthy, floral tastes and scents. It’s like a painting where you need a bit more blue or red to get a balance. It’s like art or sex: one of those things you get very passionate about. You use all your senses to get that wow effect at the end.”

