



sense of adventure

Melissa Stadler Restaurateur

Restaurant owner Melissa Stadler combines a strong entrepreneurial streak with a passion for hospitality. We catch up with her in Queenstown.

They say a change is as good as a holiday. And for restaurant-owner Melissa Stadler, holidaying resulted in changes that took her all the way around the world, from Australia to Europe and then back downunder to Queenstown.

Originally from the Gold Coast, like many young Antipodeans Melissa (known as Mel to everyone except her mother) embarked to the United Kingdom on her OE, armed with a nursing diploma and a business degree. However, while waiting for her nursing registration to come through, she made ends meet by working in the hospitality industry.

"It was great!" she says. "I was dealing with healthy people and having fun doing it." Then followed a jaunt to Spain, where she found herself managing a bar and restaurant. It just so happened that the owners had another establishment on the other side of the globe, in Queenstown. They offered her a job in New Zealand and she took it – that was 11 years ago.

The bar she was managing was eventually sold and, in October of 1997, she opened her own place – Surreal – with the aim of having fun and making the most of every second the doors were open.



"In the earlier part of the evening, it's a restaurant, with good food and a nice, relaxed atmosphere. Then, later on, we throw the tables out back, get the DJs in and become a night club until the early hours," she says. "It's a concept that goes down really well in England and that's been embraced down here as well."

In the early days, Mel says Surreal depended on a dedicated local clientele, but now a lot more tourists come through the door as well. Taking her cue from the ever-changing array of international patrons, she quickly saw the importance of evolving and embracing new ideas when it came to the look of the place. As a result, she carries out minor refurbishments of the restaurant every year.

"We do little annual touch-ups, and then a complete colour change and revamp of the interior design every two years – I get bored otherwise," she laughs. "When I first started, I went for blue, a grey-blue. Since then, I've begun experimenting with more neutral tones, like donkey browns and Spanish whites, and introducing other colours in the fittings and art."

Another work in progress is The Stables in Arrowtown, which is located in an 1863 historic building. When she purchased it a year ago, the restaurant had peachy-

apricot walls and a décor she describes as "a blend of pioneer meets '60s kitsch". The new interior features more neutral tones.

"We're slowly trying to lend it a true heritage theme," she says. "The plan is to create a more inviting old-world, cluttered look, all skirting boards and timber."

When it comes to her own personal living environment, though, Mel prefers a cleaner look. However, if she were asked to put together a scrapbook of design ideas, she admits it would be ridiculously varied. That's hardly surprising, given all the different cultural influences she's soaked up during her travels and thanks to the constant flow of visitors she meets.

"I like uncluttered spaces; a feeling of openness," she says. "My home is open plan with a sunken lounge. I used to be really into reds, blacks and whites, but recently I've developed more of an interest in art, so I'm moving towards neutral tones with feature walls to show off the works I like."

Amazing views – preferably of water – are another must.

And the future for Mel? Naturally, her plans include more travel to keep things fresh, but she also wants to concentrate on restoring The Stables and maybe adding another business at some point. **H**

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