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Historical Onehunga Library Restored to Feed the Soul and Palate

“It’s better than we ever imagined it would be,” says Debbie Leaver, of the innovative new café she and husband Ross opened six months ago in Onehunga’s old Carnegie Library.

Appropriately-named, The Library specialises in “delicious, nutritious food” and caters for everyone, including those with food intolerances and allergies. “You name it, we do it,” says Debbie. “We cater for gluten-free, egg-free, dairy-free, lactose-free, kid-friendly, pregnancy-friendly, diabetic-friendly, vegan and vegetarian diets.”

The idea for the café came about four years ago when Debbie was pregnant with their first child, and hyper-wary of contracting listeria. “I was being cautious out of choice, but it made me think about all those people whose wellbeing and, in some cases their life, depends on making the right food choices.”

Poignantly, this became Debbie and Ross’s story soon after when their young son had an anaphylactic reaction to nuts. “It was horrific but it gave us first-hand experience of food allergies and gave us a lot more empathy for our customers.”

Even though they knew the concept was a winner the Leavers have been bowled over by the word-of-mouth response from locals and out-of-towners. “We’ve even had customers who heard about us in France.”

As well as being allergy-friendly, the café is family-friendly. Staff are aware of the small but really important things and two play areas (one indoor, one outdoor) make the café popular with families and “mother’s groups”. “Our record is 14 prams!”

“It’s child-friendly but also parent-friendly,” emphasises Debbie. “We still wanted to create a sophisticated environment where everyone felt comfortable.”

The Library places huge emphasis on eco-sustainability, and with a predominantly organic menu incorporates seasonal and local produce as much as possible. “If there’s a healthy way to do it, we’ll do it.”

As well as the family-friendly dining room, the heritage building (built in 1912 and saved from the bulldozer by the local community and council) has an intimate lounge, fittingly called ‘the reading room’, with bookshelves full of reading material.

By night, the café is a function venue, a great space for weddings, corporate functions, and “of course book launches and signings”.

“By creating a public place where the community feels comfortable enjoying the books and the beautiful architecture, we feel we’ve brought this amazing old building back to its grassroots,” says Debbie.

“And in a way we’re educating people, just like Carnegie did, but this time it’s about good quality food and the fact ‘gluten-free’ can mean delicious!”

Read more about it at www.librarycafe.co.nz

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