

THE ART OF HOSPITALITY



Interior takes a jaunt through the hospitality back story of **Scott Brown** and **Jackie Grant**, founders of **Hip Group**, whose burgeoning hospitality empire includes a recently completed, design-led, roll-out of premises across Auckland City.

WORDS MICHAEL BARRETT PHOTOGRAPHY DAVID STRAIGHT



IT STARTED in luxury hotels for Hip Group's Jackie Grant and Scott Brown. Both spent time in Sydney (Brown is Australian; Grant a New Zealander), working independently, before returning to New Zealand in the same year. "We didn't know each other," says Grant. "Scott was at the Sheraton and I'd come back with the Regent, with the Intercontinental, and then that changed within months of me getting back here to the Stamford Plaza, and I hated it. The Sheraton was looking for staff, so I ended up there." As things sometimes turn out, they worked with each other for a couple of years, and then "decided that we quite liked each other".

Stints in Asia followed: the Indonesian resort island of Bintan, just 45 minutes from Singapore, then a year-and-a-half in Beijing, which was "incredible, involved, a great experience that I wouldn't ever want to do again," reflects Grant, with obviously mixed emotions. The upside of that sojourn was that it inspired an interest in the supply side of the foodchain, an aspect that was recently given physical form through the acquisition of a 10-acre block in Kumeu. Known simply as the the Farm, this landholding will, in the future, be a focus of the company's drive towards self-sufficiency.

To round out the travel narrative, Grant and Brown eventually returned home and enjoyed a year working at a luxury lodge outside of Auckland. At that stage of their careers, the luxury hotel gig had begun to lose its lustre.



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1. Jackie Grant and Scott Brown outside of Milse (pronounced mil-say), a dessert-only restaurant at Britomart. 2-3. Ortolana, designed by Cheshire Architects, is another of Hip Group's new Britomart premises.

Levels of service were falling, and these operators are unashamed in their pursuit of perfection.

"We like luxury, luxury, luxury – and the hotels in Auckland weren't quite luxury enough for us. So we went and did a luxury lodge for a while, which was lovely," says Brown. "We thought that hotels weren't for us because they had lost their focus, the fun had gone out of it. You know when you're not having fun. You've got to have fun with it, that's our philosophy."

It was time to shift focus and do something for themselves, and like many before them they made the cap-in-hand visit to the bank manager. Their focus was a small café near Kohi Beach. It was an "old, traditional non-designed café," says Brown. "It was filthy, and it was sitting on the most beautiful location on Kohi beach. Nothing else around, beautiful sunlight... you would go and order at the counter and pick up your little stick with the number on it, and go and sit down somewhere. It was that kind of place."

That kind of place kicked on for about three months until funds were secured for renovation, an excruciating period, says Brown, that was "in the top five of my worst hospitality experiences".

"The plan was to get resource consent for the hairdresser next door, knock down the wall and expand it into a brand new café. We did that, but it took us three months to do so, and it was quite awful. There was crappy furniture

and walls – but our service was good and our food was good, so people kept on coming, and that made it even worse, because we'd have an hour's wait for tables in the weekend, just trying to manage it all."

Thus began the first foray into architecturally designed space. Brown and Grant secured the services of a friend of friend, Guy Richards, then a set design designer turned architect. Eventually, the conversation turned to furniture. Options were shown. The price range expanded as cheaper models were eliminated... too flimsy... too materially poor, went the discussions.

"Then, one night, Guy put this beautiful chair in front of us," says Brown of his road to Damascus moment.

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The chairs, however, were just the tip of an ‘Architects White’ iceberg. “Then we ended up spending \$40,000 on Corian tables and benchtops. I still remember when we opened, people coming in and feeling it, and architects and interior designers, they couldn’t quite figure out what it was. They knew it was Corian, but they didn’t think we’d be foolish enough to put it into a café and use so much of it. ‘This isn’t Corian is it?’ Yep. ‘Is that Philippe Starck?’ But you’re just a little café in Kohi...”

In a statement that will be music to the ears of those in the business of selling furniture, Brown says: “We learnt then that quality lasts and it’s timeless. They’re still there, they still look beautiful, people still comment on them, they’re a classic. We haven’t had to refit Kohi because we’ve got this Corian and this Soft Egg chair. If we’d done anything else we would have had to refit five years ago. I mean, we should desperately refurbish it now, but we’ve been able to keep managing it through.”

Start as you mean to go on. The Hip Group’s recent ventures include a wealth of quality furniture, much of it from the Osso range, designed by the Bourellec Brothers. Brown first spotted the prototype in *Wallpaper*: “They are oak, quite robust and just crazily comfortable.”

You can see those chairs at the St Heliers Bay Café and Bistro, and the triumvirate of offerings down at Britomart: Ortolana, The Store and Milse.

Other Hip Group ventures are the Takapuna Beach Café, Rosehip in Parnell, which is awaiting a refit, and the Richmond Road Café in Grey Lynn, which was the duo’s first complete build.

Says Grant: “It flows really well; every time I walk into it again today I think it really still has that cool factor. It has dated – but it hasn’t dated sensationally, and it’s still really functional.”

Hospitality is an unforgiving industry. Lower your standards and word gets around fast. And it is, after all, a form of retailing. Innovate or die is the mantra for that industry, and many have sought to enhance the retail and hospitality experiences by blending the two. This hybrid model includes record shops, laundromats, florists and motorcycle shops, and various other iterations, all doubling up as cafés. Hip Group’s founders are walking a different route, in fact, they are actually offering a walking route – a food network between the three related premises at Britomart. “It was always

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4-5. The Farm, a 10-acre block in Kumeu from which the Group hopes to supply a number of its restaurants and cafés. 6-7. The Store at Britomart, designed by Cheshire Architects.

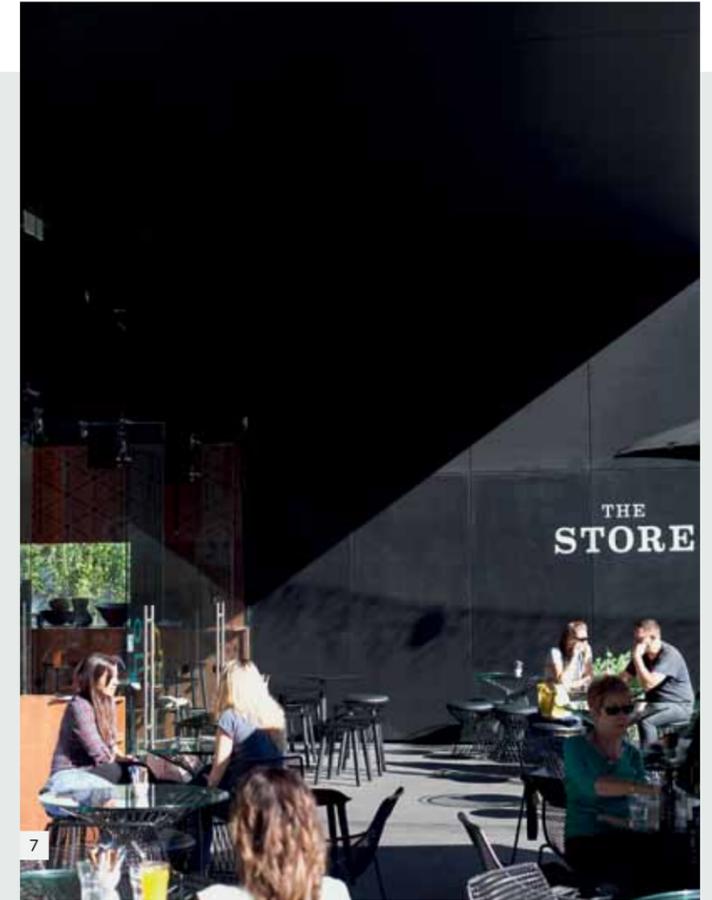


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part of the plan,” says Brown about opening the new venues around the same time. “It was a staggered opening – not all at once. There are two ends to The Store, there’s the takeaway end and there’s the dine-in end, where you sit in the beautiful garden courtyard. So we count that as two businesses. And then there’s Ortolana and Milse. They all flow on nicely to each other. There’s the early morning breakfast and patisserie offering from The Store, then you can swing around into Ortolana for the daytime setting, casual bistro, and then you can come through Milse in the evening for the dessert.

“They all need each other, they all feed off each other. So we get bread from over there at The Store, the sweets go over there from here [at Milse]. It’s great for the customer – I saw two separate customers last Sunday do all three throughout the day. They came and grabbed their coffee, walked the shops for a while, before having lunch at Ortolana. They wanted to come straight in here but ended up walking the precinct a bit more, before they came and sat here for another hour. Between 10am and 4pm there was enough around here to keep them occupied for six hours. And one of those two customers had two small children, which I thought was an amazing effort.”

As well as an outward journey, these cafés and restaurants also offer an inward, experiential journey, particularly at Milse. At Ortolana that



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experience is more traditional: lovely garden setting, interesting design great food. Visit The Store: the experience is enlivened by the aromatic sensory experience of bread and patisserie being baked. Milse is a culmination of all the above. It’s visual, olfactory and audible. It’s a cave of wonders sculpted from wood with patterned apertures that have been expanded or decreased depending on the proximity to a natural light source; it’s tiny, there are only 16 seats; there are the vivid colours of lemon curd, tamarillo, and the audible sensation cream being whisked, sugar stirred.

“The theatre of cooking – it’s become a trendy thing, so we’re on trend,” laughs Grant. It’s also trendy to go bespoke, and Brown and Grant are doing that too: plates by a potter (“Her plates are absolutely gorgeous but she’s on a learning curve, can’t fire them hard enough, yet,” says Grant), and they have also tried doing their own cutlery, and glassware – all in the quest for a better experience for the customer.

So, what’s next? Where to look for inspiration? Can this prodigious pace, venture after venture, be sustained without succumbing to that jadedness that is the inevitable affliction for those in hospitality?

“We’re constantly trying to keep ahead of the curve,” says Grant. “We’ve got a great team keenly watching what’s happening around the world. We’ve got a friend working in San Fran, working for a food market”



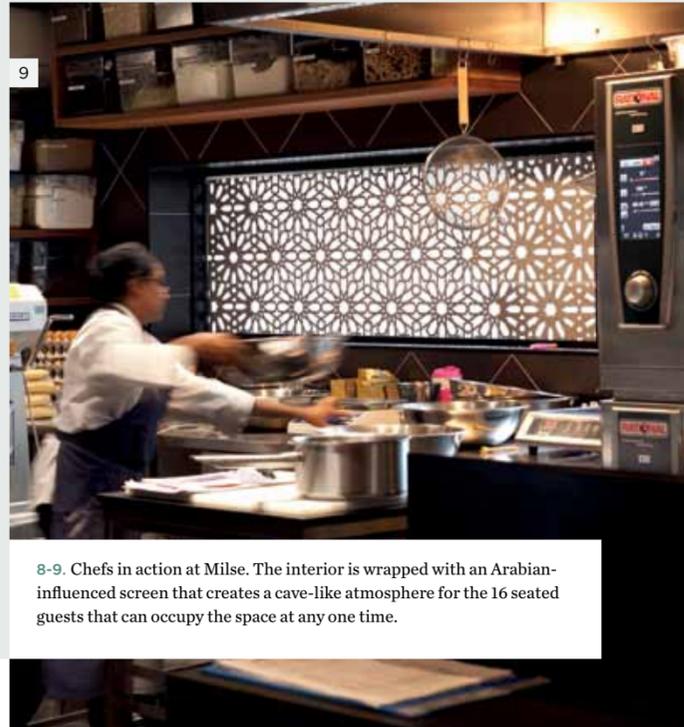
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MILSE: DESIGN NOTES FROM CHESHIRE ARCHITECTS

Scraped together from the trimmings and off-cuts of the neighbours, this site was until the last moment planned as a rubbish-holding room for the Britomart precinct. Its improvised footprint is a sort of slipstream, scheduled for demolition in five years. We were required to deliver of this site a large commercial production kitchen, a retail store, a dining space offering a singular richness and intensity of experience, and a lane-front bar serving the greater precinct. All but the latter were to be in the service of the highest dessert cooking in the country.

The plan bends its public spaces through the room, seeking to shape a few still eddies that might resist the slipstream. The idea is to deny a vantage of the whole room from any one point, tempting discovery and implying a perceptual volume that exceeds its physical constraints. Of and because of that tiny bent volume, we sought to deliver a diversity of experience through the manipulation of a singular element rather than the profusion of many. We then pursued the infusion of that element with a focused complexity that we hoped would live up to the cooking. We set out to shape a space of cave-like intensity, leavened with the fragility of a filigree screen. Most of our sweet tradition evolved out of ancient Arabia. The crystalline structure of their sugars is here folded together with the patterned delicacy of carved wooden moucharaby panels: a collective conceit for creating a world of quiet delight within a chaotic left-over geometry surrounded by service lanes and delivery trucks. Everything about that conceit is intended to support the mystery, intricacy and surprise of the dessert craft it celebrates.

The geometries of the moucharaby net were mathematically programmed with bespoke parametric systems assembled in the Grasshopper plug-in to Rhino. This enabled two key things: a free geometry that could fluidly absorb the chaos of the received envelope, and a variation of opacity via the relative dilation of its perforations. Collectively these enabled a singular element to act as wall, shutter, ceiling and light fitting at once. The universality of use, coupled with the direct outputting of the panels from architect to cutting machine, helped shape the entire public environment for the price of a gelato fridge.”
Nat Cheshire



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company... We sat around last night talking about what is happening in San Fran. San Francisco and California is where we look for leadership. It's a season ahead of us and has the poulation to drive change.”

And that acquisition of land in Kumeu, are they angling towards a more pastoral experience? “We want to gain control of our food chain,” says Grant.

“We're learning more about what we are doing and finding out more about what was happening with the food before it was coming to us. We do get very disappointed with people not putting their hearts and souls into their into businesses. We thought – let's get full control over what we're doing, let's get more involved in the story and experience we're creating, and have a bit of fun on the way. That's part of it. We also like the idea of growing things, and we had to get business longevity for ourselves. What are we going to be doing for the next 15-20 years? We can't just keep opening up a café and serving coffee and putting food on a plate – that wasn't going to cut it. It's all about expanding the business, creating opportunities for ourselves, opportunities for our staff, and creating another opportunity for our customers. With the Farm might come a restaurant, or a shop. The next step is the creamery, the butchery, the production kitchen, so we can start bottling apples. It's about getting that whole market to table flow going. It's a long-term plan, not a short-term plan,” laughs Grant. “It's not a race.” ♦

8-9. Chefs in action at Milse. The interior is wrapped with an Arabian-influenced screen that creates a cave-like atmosphere for the 16 seated guests that can occupy the space at any one time.