

Soi impressive!

Words JOANNE CARR

Soi

Greta Point, Evans Bay, Wellington

Photo TANIA SILADI



Photo TANIA SILADI



Photo TANJA DOVE



Photo LYNDA GARROD

There are some days when Brent Wong is so busy, he takes Soi Café and Bar's sweeping panorama of the Wellington harbour for granted - but not for long. "Every so often you come in to work and it's a gorgeous day - a still morning and it just always blows you away." Whether Wellington's weather is strutting her stuff a la last summer or hissy-fitting with a dramatic southerly, Soi is the perfect place to dine and watch the capital' natural elements at play.

The waterfront restaurant seems as though someone has effortlessly placed it, just so, floating on the shores of Greta Point. The delicately zen name, Soi, is an exotic reference to its beautiful surroundings (it means "water" in Cantonese) and a cultural nod to siblings' Brent and Tania Siladi's Chinese heritage. It is, after all, how they found their footing in the restaurant business. (how?)

Tania and Brent are the second generation in a dynasty of successful restaurateurs. Their father, Donald Wong, established two of Wellington's oldest and most well-known Chinese restaurants,



the Yangtze (then, in Willeston Street, now on Willis) and The Jasmin (in the James Cook Arcade).

Tania remembers, as a six-year-old, the opening night of the Yangtze (“Mum curled my hair for it!”) and as a twenty year-old, running The Jasmin for eighteen months whilst her parents took some well-earned time off to travel.

Brent says his start in hospitality had humble beginnings, washing dishes at his father’s restaurants and gradually working his way up.

When brother and sister were alerted to the sale of the former restaurant, they jumped at the chance to make their own special brand of unique dining on the Wellington hospitality scene, after years of practice at their family’s establishments.

“I always thought the location was really special,” says Tania of Soi’s setting, which offers an immediate 180-degree vista of Wellington’s Evan’s Bay. “I’ve lived in many harbour cities and every one had amazing waterfront dining,

but Wellington didn’t have anything that made a showcase of the harbour, which it is famous for.” And she would know. Tania studied fashion and design at the prestigious course offered by (what was then) the Wellington Polytechnic (alumni from her class include Kate Sylvester and Robyn Mathieson). Deciding to move to Hong Kong, Tania became a full-time model followed by working in public relations for a European fashion company. She then swiftly found herself in the ‘va-voom’ position as Calvin Klein’s Director of Public Relations in Asia Pacific. She based herself in Hong Kong for ten years, over-seeing public relations, marketing, product launches, fashion shows and store openings, jet-setting between major metropolitan cities and doing her fair share of wining and dining clients, supermodels and the big man, himself.

Brent never strayed far from the hospitality scene, though he strayed from its scene in New Zealand. After deciding that “office work would bore me to tears”, he worked towards his chef qualifications and was eventually lured to Hong Kong once he got wind of his big sister’s lifestyle, camping out

on her couch for a couple of months. Bar and restaurant management saw him globe-trot to some of the world’s biggest and busiest social centers, from London and Dublin to... Yangoonin Myanmar.

“Yeah, it was a six month job to open a club, but it turned into two years. When I got there, it wasn’t even built!” laughs Brent. “So I had to over see the whole set-up. I was doing things from the ground up, like designing and ordering glasses, which was fun, but not always, in a country run by a strict military regime!”

Maybe that’s what drew him back to EnZed. Tania followed not long after. “I had children and there are certain things that money can’t buy,” she admits. “Sure, I could earn a lot of money and do amazing things, but you can’t replace time with family, a healthy lifestyle – you can’t buy it.”

Opening Soi meant Tania could still lend an expert eye in design. Out went the old pink and sea green of the existing colour scheme (“We literally ripped it all out,” says Tania, with no regrets), and replaced with clean lines and dark wood, creating an uncomplicated and effortless intimacy in a large space. “We wanted something that could be dressed up or dressed down – something that suited every occasion. An interior that was flexible and that complimented the fantastic sea view and surrounding environment.” she says.

Brent found that the experience of building a restaurant from the ground up in Myanmar came

Photo TANJA DOVE



Photo LYNDA GARROD



Photo LYNDA GARROD



Photo TANIA SILADI

in handy – but, “You now have free reign to realise your own vision, without having to cater to what someone else wants.” (Tania’s not the only one with a creative streak – Brent designed and set-up Soi’s website!)

He now works closely with Soi’s five chefs, planning the concept and direction of the menu. “I’ve always had a passion for food and the refinement of it,” says Brent, adding, “Dad still gets involved too...then Tania comes in and makes it all look good!”

Soi Café and Bar is open seven days a week for breakfast, lunch and dinner. And here’s a crazy idea – on public holidays, they do not have a surcharge (file that away for the next public day off). If that’s not an incentive to dine at Soi, then maybe this will: Brent describes their cuisine as an international menu. They offer a range of light and main meals for dinner, such as Ravioli made on site with Feta, Gruyere and herbs or the traditional Crispy Asian Pork with Asian greens. The menus have something for everybody, with a wide range of tastes.

“We like to keep the flavours simple and honest, but with a modern twist. Whether it is in the presentation or in an unusual take on the flavour, we don’t like to over complicate things.”

Soi is a strong supporter of fresh, local produce, and uses organic and free range sourced ingredients. Fruit and greens are supplied by the local green

grocer, free range eggs sourced from Houghton Bay and they use local, organic milk, Supreme’s Free Trade Organic coffee and organic sugar, so you can eat with a clean and healthy conscience. Nearly all Soi’s salad dressings, sauces and condiments are made on site, and they marinate their own feta and olives in a citrus and herb infused oil.

“We recycle as much as possible; all cardboard, paper, glass, plastic and the oil from the deep fryer. We are part of a local community initiative which will be involved with trialing the councils “kai for compost” scheme, explains Tania

Seating 130 people in the restaurant, Soi is never short on diners, thanks to some savvy marketing, PR and branding on Tania’s part. It is the perfect venue to wow clients, visitors or the apple of your eye. The past eighteen months have flown by for the two of them - they have hosted weddings, magazine launches, fashion parties and charity functions. “Last summer was crazy for us!” Tania laughs. “Christmas started for us in November and went right through until February/March largely due to the great summer and all the wedding receptions we hosted.”

As a venue, Soi has achieved what previous restaurants at the same site have found difficult to establish. “Our private function room is used regularly” says Tania, walking through the foyer and opening a door which leads to a dining room, which they call the Soi Room, with its own

harbour view and already set for a private dinner to be held later in the evening. “It used to be this pokey room, used for storage and an office.” With a wall or two knocked down, and Tania’s eye for design, it is now an ambient and private room, which can be used for meetings, presentations, seminars and, of course, dining.

The restaurant’s close proximity to the airport means that it sees its fair share of diners dropping in for a meal before seeing friends and family off, or after picking them up to show off a bit of Wellington. Corporates often want a sophisticated location to take clients, especially if they are day-tripping.

Soi has three private parks and if it’s a busy night, you won’t have to go far to find a park on Evan’s Bay Parade. The venue is so accommodating in this manner that if you are feeling so inclined, you can take advantage of its free boat parking, where you can dock for a relaxing meal, survey the majesty of the surrounding bays, then sail off into the sunset.

“Our father has a big influence on the place,” says Tania. “Dad is always found in the kitchen helping for all our special events and weddings. We incorporate many of the recipes he has created in our dishes and he regularly attends our menu development sessions with our chefs. Mum helps us out quite a lot too. They don’t have to, but I think they like to.”

This is a family bonded by a love of food and a belief that family and friends are drawn together over mealtimes. Biggest brother Anthony strolls in, ready to collect his son, Cameron, who works in the kitchen, a member of the third generation, putting his hand to the family business.

Speaking of family affairs, tomorrow is Mother’s Day and Tania says they have so much to do - Soi is fully booked with families who wish to woo their mums with relaxed dining and one of the best views in Wellington. 🍷