

## The Interview



Whitebait head chef Khan Danis, restaurant manager Ian Carnegie and owner Paul Hoather outside the Clyde Quay Wharf development.

# Paul Hoather & Khan Danis

Twenty-one years after opening The White House on Willis Street (and later Oriental Parade), chef and restaurateur Paul Hoather is changing direction again. With the help of his wife Louise's brother-in-law, Khan Danis from Sydney, he is determined to create the seafood restaurant that Wellington has been missing. He's calling it Whitebait and he and Khan met with **Dan Slevin** to talk about their lives in kitchens.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CLIVE PIGOTT

Paul Hoather used to be able to look out the window of his White House restaurant on Oriental Bay and watch orca feasting on stingrays in the water off the band rotunda. The White House was good to Paul — and it was good to Wellington, too, over 21 years and two iconic locations. But 'things change' as that old Sicilian proverb reminds us, and it's time for the Hoathers (Paul's wife Louise is a critical part of the business) to move their kitchen a little closer to town — and a little closer to the water.

The new restaurant is called Whitebait — "we're taking *something* from The White House" — and is the restaurant centrepiece of the luxury Clyde Quay Wharf development beside Chaffers Park. All things being equal, it should be open by now and serving lucky patrons, but on the crisp spring morning of our interview it was full of tradies performing their own brand of alchemy, turning raw materials into finished fixtures, and opening day seemed a long way off.

Whitebait is going to be focused on seafood, Paul tells me:

*PH: Well, we sort of want to complement what we're doing at Charley Noble [Paul's other operation in the Huddart Parker building in the CBD]. We've got the wood-fire grill down there, so we're wanting to leave the big, heavy proteins to Charley. [Whitebait is] by the sea, and personally I love seafood, so it's a great thing to work with."*

The big surprise to me is that Paul, whose demeanour is as far removed from the classic stereotype of a first-class chef, has decided to let someone else run the kitchen. It's a choice that's typical of a softly spoken man who appears to have little or no ego and is more than content for others in the team to get their due ahead of himself. The Whitebait kitchen will be led by Khan Danis, most recently to be found at Neil Perry's Rockpool Bar & Grill in Melbourne:

*KD: I worked for Neil for about 20 years, the last six or seven at Rockpool in Melbourne, which is like a steakhouse, American style, but using fantastic produce from all around the country. There's lots of seafood, beef aged in house. They had a great beef ageing programme. You need lots of cool-room space with good circulation, between -1 °C and 1 °C, so it's really cold. You need great beef as well to start with — we had mainly grass-fed beef; there was some grain-fed beef as well*



*as wagyu, so it was a big programme with an in-house butcher.*

*Things used to come in on the bone, not in a bag full of its own blood. It was all proper dry-ageing like butchers used to do in the past, quite an expensive programme but with a great product in the end. And a really good seafood programme, sourcing directly from fishermen. Again, there was a full-time fishmonger, and you had dedicated fish cool rooms and all that stuff.*

Khan and Paul have come together at Whitebait through a family connection. They married sisters and Khan's wife Catherine is a pastry chef who will be supervising the baking and desserts at the new restaurant. The original idea was to open Charley Noble in the space — that's how long these plans have been gestating — but then the Huddart Parker location came available. The next thought was to up and move The White House, but changing trends and the integration of Khan and Catherine into the project meant it was time for something new.



*KD: I thought seafood was a bit of a no-brainer for a country surrounded by water. In Sydney at the markets we see so much New Zealand seafood—John Dory, snapper, and gurnard and scorpion fish. When the seas are bad in Australia, the go-to is New Zealand product. You actually see more over there than you do here, so I thought why don't we try tap into that and showcase what is available in this country.*

Seafood restaurants in Wellington haven't always had the greatest of reputations, of course. And for years Paul got to look out every day at the execrable Fisherman's Table opposite The White House, so he knows what he *doesn't* want. Khan has already spent a lot of time sourcing suppliers and making sure that he's got access to the best and freshest. The menu is likely to change with the weather.

*KD: That's the reality. I get a seafood update from Rachel at Yellow Brick Road Seafood. She brings in seafood from all around the country, and it changes from day to day and from week to week. The other day there were only two finned fish species, I think. Some days she's got five or six, so I think it's really going to be season- and weather-dependent and produce-driven: to try and bring a piece of protein or vegetable or grain and not change it into something it's not, and really present it in a natural way. Which is not being overly creative.*

*"I'm quite happy out the back there doing my own thing in the kitchen. That's why you don't see me on cooking shows."*

PAUL HOATHER

For a lot of diners, fine dining restaurants could be a little bit like going to the opera—an expensively acquired taste—and Wellington seems to be trending towards less formal options, but requiring no less flavour and no less craft.

Neither Paul or Khan completed formal training, preferring instead to head out into the world. Paul got the cooking bug as a Nelson kid with a sweet tooth.

*PH: Not having much money back then, if you wanted something you had to learn how to make it yourself, picking fresh strawberries and things like that. Everybody had a Kenwood mixer back in those days and it didn't take me long to figure out how to make a good strawberry smoothie! Even at college, Friday was like 'hobby day', and I was probably the only boy in my home economic class making scones and things. And I found it a good way to win over friends, making treats, sharing food.*

*I did half of my City and Guilds, and by the time I'd done the*



first half of it I was 19 and getting a bit bored with Nelson, so I went to London. It was either go to London or stay another couple of years and finish the other half of my City and Guilds course. I went and never looked back really.

I asked Paul whether he felt a chapter was ending with the end of The White House. Does it signal the end for fine dining in Wellington? Or have standards everywhere been raised so much that 'fine dining' doesn't have the same meaning anymore?

PH: I don't think so. Because of the choice that is out there with so many other restaurants. If you went back, maybe 20 years ago, it was all fine dining in Wellington with very few everyday places, and that's all changed with the number of people living in the city. Fine dining allows a chef to take things to a totally different level. Look at some of the best restaurants in the world and what they're doing and what they're reinventing.

Paul and Louise opened The White House in a tiny little colonial house on Willis Street that didn't have much room but did have good fine dining bones — Petit Lyon had opened there roughly ten years earlier. A rave review from critic David Burton after only two weeks gave them a jump-start, and the patrons and the awards followed. The business moved to Oriental Bay in 1999.

Despite handing over the reins ("I enjoy being in the kitchen. It's been my life and that's where I like to be, but it's going to be totally up to Khan"), Paul is looking forward to being a supporting player for a while. Indeed, he's so comfortable out of the limelight that when I arrive at The White House for this interview he's carrying a bucket and mop and can't shake my hands because he's been cleaning the toilet floors. I'm not sure that Gordon Ramsay still does that.

KD: We're going to need all hands on deck. We'll need everybody to be in there giving as much support to the project as possible. I know Paul wants to do other things, so hopefully, once we're established, he'll be free to go pursue those other projects that he'd like to go forward with.

PH: I'm quite happy out the back there doing my own thing in the kitchen. That's why you don't see me on cooking shows.



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