

Studio Visit: Handcrafted Footwear With One of New Zealand's Top Shoemaking Teachers, Lou Clifton of Shoe School



Lou Clifton · Photo: Bonny Beattie

This year marks Shoe School's fifth anniversary in Wellington. We visited the light, bright workshop space, where people flock to learn Clifton's contemporary approach to shoemaking, among colourful rolls of leather.

Words by SASHA BORISSENKO · Updated on 23 Jul 2022 · Published on 05 Jul 2022



Lou Clifton's fondest memories of being a teenager living on the west coast of the South Island are of tinkering in her dad's workshop.

“I’d shut the door, turn on music and work on ridiculous crafts – ‘dorky’ things like models of villas from the gold rush era,” she says. “I’d keep myself entertained for hours and that’s where I was happiest.”

When Clifton turned 30, she was at a crossroads. A photography graduate, she knew she wanted a career using her hands in a workshop but couldn’t picture working in a darkroom full-time.

Ten years later, she’s now one of a handful of independent shoemakers in the country, a short list that includes Waiheke Island-based Sue Engels and Auckland-based Eugene Gordon of Gordon’s Footwear. Clifton brings the craft to life at her workshop and teaching space, Shoe School.

Situated in the Wellington suburb of Newtown, the white-painted workshop features two large tables, an abundance of plants, and smatterings of yellow detailing throughout. On one side of the room, you can see leather of all colours, neatly stacked shoe boxes and vintage tools on the wall.

“I didn’t want my workshop to be dirty or cramped as that’s what people traditionally think they’re like. It had to be contemporary, fresh and inspiring.”

At Shoe School, you can learn to make impeccably-finished slides, sandals and sneakers in one day – or in four days, you can walk away wearing a pair of sturdy boots, decorated to your tastes.

Shoemaking wasn’t always on the cards for Clifton as, despite “always being obsessed with shoes”, there was nowhere for her to study the skill in New Zealand back in 2009, when her ambitions were taking shape.

Shoemaking by hand had been declining since deregulation in the ’80s, when production was found to be more profitable offshore, she says.

“It’s sad that making shoes – something that’s so necessary and fundamental – isn’t accessible anymore. When production went overseas, the equipment, talent and supplies followed.”

Coincidentally, she had stumbled across a second-hand book on shoemaking for beginners that proved profoundly inspiring. After making her first pair of shoes – a pair of felt slippers – she emailed the author who said she should go to Hobart, Australia for a 10-day course under Luna

“I had no money, so I sold the most expensive thing I had at the time – a Nikon camera – and decided to use the money to pursue shoemaking. It was symbolic because I was actively deciding that I wouldn’t be a photographer anymore.”

Learning from Newby’s nurturing, kind and patient approach, Clifton says she was in her element. Teaching also appealed to her, as it meant she could meet new people while continuing to develop her skills – and she knew she didn’t want to start a shoe line, as it was “too expensive to do [in New Zealand]”.

Returning home to Dunedin, Clifton found machines for cheap from the Otago Polytechnic School of Design and shoe forms from the factory of now-defunct label Minnie Cooper. She would hunt for antique tools at second-hand markets.

In 2015, after she had been delivering workshops in Dunedin for two years around a full-time retail job, Clifton quit her day job to offer workshops around New Zealand.

She flew to Wellington on a whim two years later, to view a rental property that would later become Shoe School. The site was perfect, she says, with its elevated floors and big windows so people could see directly into the space from the street.

“I wanted to create a space that was like a gallery filled with shoemaking paraphernalia, because people don’t get to see shoemakers in action or how shoes are made.”

This year, Lou will celebrate Shoe School’s five-year anniversary in Wellington. With more than 8000 Instagram followers, and teaching up to 20 people a week, Clifton has lost count of the thousands of shoes she has helped make over the years.

“I’ve learned so much! I’ve finally gotten my business to the point where I imagined it [would be] when I turned 30. I originally started a workshop to build the business and upskill. Now I get to teach, experiment and work on creative projects.”

There have also been lowlights – she found the early days of the pandemic stressful and scary, as did many people.

“Once I worked through the terrifying reality that I might lose my business, I realised that all this work hasn’t been for nothing. I wouldn’t lose the skills I’d learned. I wasn’t in the same position as I was when I was 30 – I had built something,” she says.

“I’ve gotten to the stage where I can legitimately call myself a shoemaker. I’ve worked through my imposter syndrome, and now I feel a little more comfortable.”

Where to from here? The pandemic gave Lou the breathing space to dream up more workshops. “I want to get into high heels. Personally, I don’t wear them, but I have friends who do, and they look fabulous.”

Shoe School

247 Riddiford Street,
Newtown, Wellington

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Book In for a Long Lunch With Boutique Gin and Wine Tastings at The Runholder, Martinborough's Elegant New Hospitality Hub



Photo: Courtesy Of The Runholder

The town's newest – and largest – cellar-door restaurant is

geared up to amplify everything the Wairarapa region has to offer.

Words by SASHA BORISSENKO · Updated on 12 Oct 2023 · Published on 05 Oct 2023



Five years ago, my last wine-centric Wairarapa trip saw me nursing a twisted ankle at wine festival Toast Martinborough. Regrettably, I'd worn heels – a rookie move that revealed my inexperience to fellow winery hoppers.

So this time, wearing better footwear, I jumped at the chance to salvage my reputation at The Runholder. The newly opened Martinborough venue is the new flagship for wineries Te Kairanga and Martinborough Vineyards, and distillery Lighthouse Gin.

Less than two hours' drive from Wellington, over Remutaka Hill, it's owned by Foley Wines – whose parent company also runs Wairarapa luxury lodge Wharekauhau, along with several other local and international wineries and brands.

Martinborough is a small town with no shortage of wineries, but The Runholder stands out thanks to its size (it's the largest cellar-door restaurant in the area) and its elegant design.

You can see straightaway that Christchurch's Nott Architects took inspiration from the region's woolsheds, mirrored in the high sloping ceilings and slatted wood. The building sits among Te Kairanga's vineyards, treating you to 180-degree views of the surrounding vines with your meal.

The building holds a 100-seat restaurant, private dining room, barrel hall and gin distillery – plus a tasting room where you can see Lighthouse Gin's 700-litre German still through a huge pane of glass.

Despite its open-plan, Scandinavian minimalism, the restaurant feels comfortable, with an open fire, sage green walls and soft lighting. Soundproofing means there's no need to shout across the table, and the sustainable, produce-forward meals are presented on carefully selected ceramics from The Alchemist's Table.

Currently on the menu are pizzas, charcuterie boards and sharing plates; come December, you'll be able to order à la carte bistro dishes such as Wairarapa aged Wagyu with foraged pistou, bone marrow jus and smoked salts, and whole line-caught fish. Don't let the polished surroundings fool you – head chef Tim Smith is keen to cater to a variety of tastes and budgets.

Before this, the Australian-born Smith worked in Indonesia for 10 years – including at Bali's Potato Head, which was included in this year's World's 50 Best Hotels. At The Runholder, he pays homage to Martinborough's history, produce and people, while working as sustainably as possible.

"I want to have full traceability of where all the protein is coming from – how each meat has been farmed, who farmed it, and how it gets here. We're going to treat each animal with absolute respect," he tells *Broadsheet*.

All the meats are cured in-house or smoked and grilled in a handmade charcoal-flame grill. Smith says that besides the pizzas, which he wanted to be authentically Italian, everything has a proud New Zealand focus.

Smith's passion for sustainability and amplifying local producers stems from growing up near an oyster farm in Tasmania. "You'd get into the ocean and catch oysters, and I fell in love with that. It's a great illustration of what I'm about – it's natural and delicious in its purest form."

One key supplier is Tora Collective, founded on the South Wairarapa coast by Troy Bramley and Claire Edwards. At Runholder, I try the pair's kingfish which is cured for a delicious starter with lime, shallots and crisped kumara, and their hand-caught salmon is seared and served on a bed of grains and poached tomatoes.

Bramley comes from a long line of fishers. He and Edwards want to change the face of the fishing industry by only taking from the ocean what's needed and delivering it straight to the restaurant's door. "The idea that small is not effective needs to change," Bramley tells *Broadsheet*.

To drink, there's an array of Te Kairanga and Martinborough Vineyard vintages. Te Kairanga's chief winemaker, John Kavanagh, uses traditional techniques with a scientific focus and says he prides himself on "celebrating the character of each wine".

Book in for a guided wine or Lighthouse Gin tasting experience and you'll take away much more than a full belly and pleasant buzz.

If you're keen to visit Martinborough's newest addition, the area makes for a charming weekend away. Book in at the historic Martinborough Hotel , and you'll be ideally situated for long lunches and leisurely tastings. After my day enjoying all of the above, I was ready to sink into my well-fluffed pillows at the 1882-era stay - and plot my next trip to this gem in New Zealand's small but mighty wine capital.

The Runholder

89 Martins Road, Martinborough

Hours:

Thu to Mon 11am-4pm

Tue & Wed closed

The Runholder's hours will be extended to dinnertime come summer.

therunholder.co.nz

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