

Kai ambassador teaches New Yorkers to eat meat pies

BY ELOISE GIBSON

Gareth Hughes, New York baker, may be the only person in the world with a recipe for sushi pie. The English-born Kiwi invented it after somebody challenged his assertion that you can make a pie out of anything. ("What about sushi?" asked the smartaleck). Sensing a personal challenge, Hughes made a concoction of unagi (eel), miso and edamame and put it between sheets of flaky pastry. "It was phenomenally rich," he admits. "It probably wouldn't be a big seller. But it was good, you know?" Most importantly: "We proved the point."

Despite carrying an English passport, Hughes has a dogged dedication to the savoury pie that few other Kiwis could rival. In the seven years since he started DUB (Down Under Bakery) Pies in Brooklyn, he has learned that most Americans think pies should be filled with sweet apple, cherry or pumpkin – giving them a tendency to balk when presented with steak and cheese. Still, it is fairly common to see a New Yorker emerge from his corner eatery clutching a piping hot meat pie and a flat white (he does those too). "It (meat pie) is really not what they are expecting, but I'd say that nine times out of 10 we get someone to try it and they will be very pleasantly surprised," he says.

Customers have not been the only ones surprised. DUB Pies' wholesale business remains closed at the behest of the United States health authorities after they belatedly realised his pies were full of – shock! – beef, rather than fruit. Hughes had to switch his attentions to cafe retailing literally overnight, opening a cosy Vulcan Lane-style lunch bar. So tightly is the American food industry controlled that it is only now, seven years later, that DUB Pies is close to beginning the two-year-long audit needed to re-open the wholesale arm. Hughes has no doubt that running a bakery in New Zealand would be easier. But he has an American-born son to think of and, besides, he is up for a challenge. It may also help that this is not his first foray into sharing New Zealand culture. As a young temp agency manager working in Portland, Oregon, he introduced Flying Nun music to local college students via his own radio show, *Outnumbered by Sheep*.

Hughes' path to Kiwi cultural ambassadorship was a long one. He arrived in New Zealand in 1972, aged four, when his toolmaker father was lured from Liverpool by a Government scheme offering cheap boat fares and guaranteed work. After growing up in Glen Eden and New Lynn on a stereotypically West Auckland cultural diet (rugby, beer, cars, Pink Floyd), his horizons were broadened dramatically when he began studying at Auckland University. He was sitting on the balcony of the student union building one day when he was transfixed by a song playing on student radio station Bfm. Hughes can no longer recall the song, but its effect was transformative. "All of a sudden everything changed. I don't know what happened, but I started hearing the music and this enlightenment happened and my appetite for new music became voracious," he says. The bright 22-year-old followed his passion to then-thriving Ponsonby music venue the Gluepot, ending up living and working there as a bar manager. He became such a fixture that almost two decades later musician friends from the Gluepot days call in for a coffee and pie when they are in Brooklyn. (The Clean's Hamish Kilgour gave DUB



GARETH HUGHES

Pies its previous bold orange paint job, the remains of which can be seen peeking around the edges of the olive top coat.)

When the Gluepot closed in 1994, Hughes set off for the United States and a job as a corporate manager. He lived in Sacramento, California, Portland, Oregon and New York before growing sick of corporate life and taking redundancy. He was driving a New York taxi the day the Twin Towers came down; then worked for a time managing a call centre for people affected by 9/11. A year later he realised that he was thoroughly burned out. He was awaiting the birth of his son Daniel (now a seven-year-old amateur Michael Jackson imitator) and wanted more flexible work hours. He came back to New Zealand looking for inspiration – and fell into the habit of eating three or four pies a day. "They say you should choose something you're passionate about," he laughs, looking back. "The only idea that really made any sense to me was pies."



Gareth Hughes with journalists from Auckland University's alumni magazine

Against the odds, the idea was a hit. DUB sells, on average, between 2000 and 4500 pies, lamingtons, Anzac biscuits and other treats a week. Hughes – a tall, trim bloke who wears his wavy fair hair pulled back in a ponytail – is regularly called upon to be the face of New Zealand kai at international showcases and events. Paul Henry once tasted a DUB pie live on telly for TVNZ. This year, Hughes will make pies for 360 people attending a New Zealand Trade and Enterprise Rugby World Cup showcase in New York.

All this is from a psychology graduate who had never baked before he started his business. In the early days he couldn't afford to rent commercial kitchen space during the day, so he baked late at night in a kitchen attached to a nightclub (with the club raging loudly next door). It is a sign of how far he has come that today he has more commercial kitchen space than he knows what to do with. He wants to make better use of DUB's 3000-square-foot (914 metre) production plant by upping deliveries and opening several more cafes.

When *Food and Beverage Today* visits, Hughes is being interviewed about his success by a journalist from Auckland University's alumni magazine. These days he can talk passionately about the perfect pastry, which apparently needs to be strong, delicate and flaky in equal measure. Although he started out selling mostly to homesick Antipodeans, these days the majority of Hughes' customers are Americans. The quest to convert them has taken him in some surprising directions. There would not be too many eateries in the world offering a lasagne pie – Hughes' nod to New York's Italian-American populace. Unlike the sushi pie, it is a big seller, as is the all-American chilli and cheese.

Now Hughes is about to do something he has rejected on principle for the last seven years: He is going to sell a sweet cherry pie. "For the first while it was important to me, even at the risk of losing business, to keep the meat pies front and centre," he says. "But I think we've reached a level of success that we can add that dimension now." Apparently, even cultural ambassadors have to meet their public half-way. And if cherry pie sounds too American, you can always have a lamington – apparently they go great with a steak and cheese pie.

Photos by Carlos Luna