

A cafe that feels like coming home



Owner of the Tea-Tree Gallery and Cafe, Belinda White, who has created a quirky, memorable space in the heart of Portland.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #8F9F59;"] T
[/dropcap]here are not too many cafes in the main street of a town that have a huge front lawn and a century-old tree in the garden, but Portland is home to one such place.

And home is a perfect way to describe **The Tea-Tree Gallery Cafe** that is smack bang in the middle of Percy St, because that is exactly how the cafe looks and feels.

The single-storey stone building was built around 1870 as the Manse for the adjacent Uniting Church and even though it has

not been used as a family home for many years, it still has its most of its original layout, including former bedrooms and a non-commercial kitchen.

The garden is also expansive and dominated by a stunning Spanish cork oak tree that was probably planted as an acorn by early settlers.



Feels like home: the former Manse has been converted into a series of cafe rooms, each with their own character.

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[/dropcap]afe owner **Belinda White** made a conscious decision when she first rented the space five years ago to make the most of its homely appeal and turn it into an asset rather than a liability.

“So many cafes these days look exactly the same, feel exactly the same and all serve the same sort of food,” she says.

“We want people to come here and have a different experience,

to feel the character of the place and to know that is something they won't find anywhere else."

Belinda, who is a dental nurse who detoured into hospitality, has created a quirky, memorable space that is packed with art, collectables and the smells of home cooking – everything she bakes comes straight out of the oven rather than a bain marie.

"I have tried to create a space in which I would feel comfortable and that includes the smells coming from the kitchen, be it soup, or cakes or the aromas from a roast. It makes people feel at home – I call it natural aromatherapy," she says with a laugh.



Artist Tony Ashby (this work is entitled *Breakfast*) is a regular exhibitor at the cafe, that prides itself on promoting local artists.

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[/dropcap]isual art is also a critical part of the equation and Belinda, who is an artist herself, offers wall space to any local artist who is keen for the exposure.

“When I opened five years ago, nobody else was displaying art in cafes in Portland and that has since changed, which is a wonderful thing, because it is bringing art to a whole new audience in a non-pretentious way,” she explains.

Belinda likes to call it “accidental art appreciation”, where people enjoying lunch or a coffee notice the name of the artist whose work is displayed on the wall above their heads. And because they see the art hanging in a home environment, they can envisage it in their own home and are more likely to buy it, she says.

“We have sold a lot of art since we first opened...and I am happy to take a piece off the wall and walk it into a another room so they can see what it might look like in their own house,” she says.

Established artists **Tony Ashby** and **Brett Jarrett** are regular exhibitors, but Belinda is just as happy to support emerging and amateur artists.

“As long as the work is not violent or pornographic, you can do anything you want...it is about inclusion. We have had an 81-year-old exhibiting and we are about to have a three-year-old, who asked his mother if he could have a little show for his birthday.”

No wonder the cafe is such a hit with tourists, in particular, who have crammed the visitor’s book with positive comments about it being like nothing they have encountered before.

“I like to think that we are bringing back the art of hospitality. True hospitality is hard work, but I want to make the idea of going out for coffee, or lunch, to be special again, like it used to be,” Belinda says.



The expansive front lawn and gardens set the Tea-Tree Gallery and Cafe apart.

[box type="bio"] The Tea-Tree Gallery and Cafe is at 59 Percy St, Portland. Ph: (03) 5523 7376. Find them on [Facebook here](#) or visit the website [here](#). [/box]

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