

working lives



Clockwise, from top left: the old Curator's Cottage at the Botanic Gardens. Tapas Variadas – a lunchtime treat. A family affair: Colin with baby Rosa, Noela, Javier, Jackie and son Carlos.



FROM TEA TO TAPAS

A Spanish lawyer and his Kiwi family bring a cosmopolitan air to an historic Christchurch cottage, opening a café where the garden is as considered as the food. By Sarah Quigley



When Javier García Perea, a lawyer in Madrid, decided to open a bar and café, he searched for the right premises for nine months without success. Deciding to take a break, he left Spain and headed for New Zealand where he intended to spend a few months learning English. Little did he know he would find the perfect café site here on the other side of the world – and much more besides.

Jackie Knight (now García-Knight) was a teacher at Christchurch's College of Education and remembers the day Javier arrived in her class. "He

was promptly demoted," she says with a laugh. Which was just as well because, as it happened, Jackie and Javier were to become not only co-owners of the Curator's House Restaurant, but also husband and wife.

After two wedding ceremonies, one in Spain and one in New Zealand, the couple spent a year in Madrid. During this time Jackie learnt to speak Spanish and Javier took a course in restaurant management. But Christchurch seemed the right place to launch their dream – and to raise a family at the same time. They now have two children, Carlos, 3½, and one-year-old Rosa.

In Christchurch, just as in Madrid, the difficulty was finding exactly the right place. In a city full of slick new bars, Jackie and Javier wanted something a little different, with character and style. Jackie's parents, Colin and Noela Knight, became their business partners and the four continued their hunt. At last treasure turned up.

The old Curator's Cottage at the gates of the Botanic Gardens had been a private residence for the past 20 years. But the lease had expired and a sign outside invited tenders. A friend of Jackie's told her about the cottage, suggesting it would be the perfect place for a new café. "We heard about it on a Friday," recalls Jackie, "and submissions were due on the Monday. It was a long hard weekend!"

Despite stiff competition, their proposal was successful – mainly because of its balanced and original vision. The idea was that the restaurant would be run alongside an eco-education programme which would cater for foreign students and tourists as well as locals. A large garden – along the lines of a traditional cottage garden – would be planted with herbs, a formal vegetable plot and olive and fruit trees. Through tours and gardening workshops, visitors could then witness the growing process first-hand.

This kind of demonstration garden can be found overseas (there is one in Madrid, in fact) but it was a new and exciting departure for Christchurch. The combined skills of the four owners guaranteed success. Javier had experience in hospitality and law, Jackie was a skilled educator and Colin and Noela both had strong backgrounds in horticulture and education. Putting the plan in place turned out to be a cooperative effort,