



Mother and daughter team, Michelle and Sandra



The freezer packed with nutritious frozen meals

Frozen dinners to go, just the treat from ‘my sweetie’

Mon Bichon in Auckland’s Farm Cove, doesn’t just have a French name, it also has lovely Gallic-style décor and ambience along with several authentic French dishes on a list of increasingly popular frozen meals.

Owned and operated by mother and daughter team, Sandra Farrell and Michelle

Harding, with the assistance of two staff members, the café/delicatessen and catering business opened in July last year after several months of planning.

“We wanted a French name to tie in with our French Provincial style. ‘Mon Bichon’ which is an affectionate term translated as ‘my sweetie’ fitted perfectly,” Michelle explains. While Sandra has many years experience in the food industry, Michelle was a schoolteacher for 10 years, but happily changed career tack. “We’re both real foodies and the love of cooking as well as the skills have been passed down to me,” she adds.

The mother and daughter team work well together and also share a love of travel. With Michelle’s twin sister based in Italy, they make regular trips to Europe.

When the two women launched Mon Bichon it was designed to cover four components. They envisaged its main role would be as a delicatessen, the next as a café, while the catering arm and supply of frozen foods would follow in priority.

“But, it really hasn’t worked out that way,” Michelle says. While the delicatessen and catering sides of the business do well, it has been the café and Mon Bichon’s innovative line of frozen foods, which have been particularly successful.

With its attractive décor and courtyard setting outside, the café quickly established a reputation for its fine coffee and the food, which is prepared onsite each day. It definitely has captured the atmosphere of a stylish European neighbourhood café and has many regulars who call in every day.

The café cabinet is always stacked with delectable-looking salads, pastries and a whole range of sweet food, which is constantly changing. Sandra is in charge of the cooking and she prepares a varied assortment of food depending on what she fancies preparing or what’s seasonal and up-to-date.

The range of takeout frozen meals is also amazingly varied with at least 10 different meal options available each day. “We cover the whole spectrum including vegetarian and gluten-free meals. Every day we offer a chicken or beef dish, which always comes with a

carbohydrate option such as rice, potato mash or a gnocchi dumpling,” explains Michelle.

The meals range in size from a small serving (a cup and a-half size) designed for the elderly up to large meals to cater for a family of four or six. Prices vary from \$9.50 up to \$28.50 and most meals are served in an environmentally sustainable ceramic dish. “We are well aware of the implications of reheating plastic and this means the dishes can be heated in the oven or microwave. We charge \$5 for the dish, but this is refunded when it is returned, while regulars simply swap it for another. Each frozen meal is carefully labelled with the contents, instructions for heating in the oven or microwave and an expiry date.

“This is proper wholesome food without stabilisers or thickeners. Many elderly people in the area buy our frozen meals as their dinner on a regular basis – some every day. They’re also very popular with busy business people, who just don’t have time to cook and others buy the meals to give as gifts – particularly for a busy new mother, when people are moving house, are ill or have suffered bereavement or simply as a thank you token.”

It’s a hearty, traditional English meal, Steak and Guinness (made with Guinness, tasty cheese and top quality beef), which sells the best in the range of frozen foods, but lasagna – both regular and vegetarian – are also very popular options.

For the Francophiles, frozen foods on offer include Daube (a stew), Coq Au Vin and Bouef Bourguignan, while there are also Asian, Indonesian, Italian and Middle Eastern dishes made.

Frozen soups are also available and when *food2Go* called the soup of the day was kumara, ginger and coconut.

The delicatessen is well stocked with a comprehensive range of international foods ranging from vanilla pods through to infused olive oils and sea salt. The catering team at Mon Bichon cover the whole gambit of functions – from intimate home-based dinner parties through to large weddings.

On Saturdays, the regulars at the Farm Cove shop have become used to some very special dishes emerging from Mon Bichon’s kitchen. That’s when Sandra likes to have a change from the standard rolls and wraps, producing exciting food such as home-smoked salmon, pates and terrines and Asian pork belly, which, like the frozen meals, can also be taken home to savour. – *Robyn Yousef*