

A Wellington chef is encouraging corporate clients to ditch the Danish and bolt down the buckwheat to boost brainpower. **Julie Jacobson** scours the menu.

RICE paper rolls, buckwheat muesli, orange and beetroot power shots . . . it might sound like something written into Madonna's backstage rider, given her status as leading celebrity food faddist.

It is in fact, off the Bolton Hotel's new corporate brainfood menu. Executive eat-your-greens, in other words.

Sarah Harris, the hotel's functions chef, came up with the idea more than a year ago, after reading Patrick Holford's *Optimum nutrition for a child's mind*. Since then she's been trialling items on her family – husband Steve (also a chef) and children Oscar, 10, and Amelia, 12.

"My mother brought me up eating good food, natural, preservative-free food, so I've always been interested in eating as naturally as possible," explains Harris. "Then, after reading Holford's book I got thinking about how the food my family was eating affected them in relation to their concentration and energy levels."

Cue that buckwheat muesli – developed from a sugar-free recipe a friend gave Harris years ago – miso, brown rice, nuts and seeds.

Eighteen months on and Harris says the entire family has noticed a difference. "The kids in particular. They are both very active, and it's been amazing to see the results."

At around the same time Harris was re-thinking her family's diet, functions manager Stephanie Archer, aware of how lethargic conference delegates would be by day's end, was considering a revamp of the conference menu.

"I started to really look at what people were ordering and at what time of the day they were ordering it."

The lunch break – when the carbo-heavy, calorie-laden buffet is often wheeled out – seemed to be the most problematic time. A helping of pasta, a couple of sausage rolls, and "that would be it for the afternoon. If you're going to have a long afternoon session, having a big, heavy lunch really counts against you," says Archer.

After more reading and research the pair roped in head chef Steve Morris, and under his guidance, developed the brainfood menu, believed to be the country's first "socially responsible" conference menu. Morris admits his initial thoughts were something along the lines of "what the hell?" The concept – which follows fairly closely the tenets of a macrobiotic diet, typically high in fibre, vegetables and grains, with an emphasis on seasonal organic food – was completely new to him, despite 30-plus years in the kitchen.

"The more I read about it, the more interested I became. Getting that nutritional balance of proteins, carbs and vitamins right isn't new, but it is something we don't always think about. The way we've put them together, in the right combinations, along with eating them at the right time of the day, just makes sense."

Holford is widely regarded as one of the UK's leading nutritionists, although his views on HIV and autism and dye, and the use of supplements – which he recommends – have aroused controversy. *Optimum nutrition for a child's mind*, a follow-up to *The Optimum Nutrition Bible*, draws on studies to show how certain foods affect brain function, behaviour and intelligence.

Harris points out, however, that the hotel's menu is about individual needs.

"Everyone is different. Some people need to eat every three hours, others are fine for five. For some people breakfast is really important, for others not so much, and then there's people who run



Power potions: Vege and fruit shots have replaced soft drinks on the conference menu.

Photos: MAARTEN HOLL

Feed your head



Mind food: Sarah Harris with her children, Amelia, 12, and Oscar, 10, and a selection of healthy snacks; right, her berry fruit muesli. Photo: ROSS GIBLIN

out of energy who, when food is put in front of them, will eat whatever is there just because they are hungry.

"And usually it's the unhealthy stuff. That's what we're trying to avoid here – it's about not hitting rock bottom, it's about sustaining the energy levels throughout the day."

So how does the brainfood menu differ from the Bolton's standard functions menu? For starters there's no sausage rolls, and no white bread club sandwiches. They have been replaced by seared beef, cucumber, carrot and spring onion rice wraps garnished with peanuts, mint and coriander, and a grain bread booster sandwich of dukkah roast chicken with tomato, mushroom, relish, and romaine lettuce.

Coke gives way to apple, carrot and ginger power juice, there's orange and



almond cake with berry compote instead of that Danish, while white flour and butter in Morris' "standard" muffin are replaced by wholemeal, oats and almonds, and sunflower oil in the brainfood version.

Of course going healthy generally comes with a cost, but Archer – who is

A LUNCH FOR THE BRAIN

- ▶ Salmon fish cakes with couli
- ▶ Spinach salad with hazelnut dressing
- ▶ Marinated mushroom, confit cherry tomato and herb egg salad
- ▶ Fruit platter with passionfruit yoghurt
- ▶ Cranberry flapjack
- ▶ Tea, coffee or green tea

kept not to sound too "hippyish" for fear of being labelled extremist – argues that's not the case. Quality hasn't been compromised either, she says.

"We'd all eat fresh, organic food if we could afford to, but often anything that is organic or is 'good' for you comes with a really high price tag.

"We have always used fresh, seasonal produce; that hasn't changed, the ingredients are still the same. We're prepared to wear any cost because we really want people eating this food."



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