



**J**OHN PALINO's no Gordon "effing" Ramsay. He chooses his F words way too carefully. "Call me a fixer," the polite Mr Palino says, "a restaurant fixer." Righto.

Palino is also a chef, born and raised by Italian-American parents in New Jersey — hence an accent that wouldn't sound out of place on *The Sopranos* — and fronts TV3's new show, *The Kitchen Job*, a Kiwi version of Ramsay's *Kitchen Nightmares*, where 10 struggling restaurants are given the culinary equivalent of CPR.

His credentials are impressive. He's been working in the industry since he was 13 — when he worked 12-hour shifts most weekends catering weddings for his father's business — and now owns three Auckland eateries: the Italian-themed Sal Rose (named after his parents and featuring his mother's recipes), Starks, and the Soup Kitchen.

**IN SHORT**

**What:** The Kitchen Job  
**Where:** TV3  
**When:** Tonight, 7.30pm

"As a kid I used to miss basketball games and football games because I was working. I remember once getting an award for something at school and not being able to go and collect it — my mother went instead — because I was doing a wedding. But I loved it. I wanted to make money. I wanted to buy my own car when I turned 17."

At 20, he was running a restaurant with 150 staff.

Palino came to New Zealand 12 years ago, following a Kiwi woman he met in one of his bars. The relationship didn't last, but his love of food and, especially New Zealand's seafood, did.

"The seafood here is as fresh as you can get. It's straight off the boat. In New York, you can get 20 different types of oyster, 30 different species of fish, and all sorts of crab, but it's been shipped in, and from who knows where. The only thing that's imported here are the prawns and some squid. The rest of the fish, and, sure, there's only a limited choice, but you know it's fresh."

Unlike *Kitchen Nightmares*, where Ramsay turns up, gets lippy and simplifies the menu, *The Kitchen Job* goes the whole hog. Palino works from the bottom up —



mucking in to help with everything from re-branding and redecorating to redesigning menus and re-educating staff.

Most of the owners had never been in business before. Some had worked as waiters, others had romantic, but “completely unrealistic” visions of what it would be like to work in the hospitality industry.

“To be honest, a lot of them were on their last legs.

“They were in a huge amount of debt, and when people are really desperate they do desperate things and it ruins them.

“A lot of the owners just had no idea how to save themselves. The food was horrible, the atmosphere was horrible. There was just no character.”

One he helped fix was Harleem’s, in Auckland. It was losing \$12,000 a month, and “that was despite the fact his food was absolutely fantastic. Harleem’s problem was that his decor — both inside and out — and the service was crap.”

The polite chef takes a breather, laughs, notes the Ramsay-ism, and forges on.

“If people want to come in and try your food, they will. But if they don’t want to come in to begin with, you’re stuffed.

“You need to be able to go into a restaurant and immediately feel comfortable. The food is secondary — and Gordon and Marco Pierre White are also always on about this as well. It is not just about the food going through a restaurant, but the whole experience.

“I always thought it would be great to have a restaurant where your core menu never had to change, where the dishes became traditions, but, of course, you have to change them, and as much as you have to change the food, you also have to change your decor.”

He can’t emphasise enough the importance of being a good host, pointing out that of the 1500 or so restaurants and cafes opened in New Zealand each year, at least half will be closed within 18 months.

“Treat your customers as though they are guests in your home,” he continues. “If someone comes in the front door you say hello — you don’t ignore them. If you ignore a customer for even 30 seconds, to them it feels like an hour. They might not walk out but they definitely want to.

“First impressions only happen once.”

Kitchens getting the Palino treatment — “Give me a dive and within a week I’ll make it a winner” is his motto — include Auckland’s ageing White Lady takeaway; River View, in Helensville; Greytown’s Wakelin House, and Red Tomatoes Pizzeria and Cafe in Kelburn, where owners and friends James Lewis and Paul Greenbrook have been struggling to improve flagging patronage and cope with debt.

“I met some great people,” Palino says, “but sometimes I just wanted to cry. I can only hope they listen.”

Expect one eatery — and Palino’s not giving away any names — not to succeed.



**Down to business:** James Lewis, left, and Paul Greenbrook, owners of Kelburn’s Red Tomatoes Pizzeria and Cafe, with John Palino