

## PROFILE

# Catherine Bell is a people person

“I was sitting at work one morning, having a coffee on my break. And I was looking out the window and enjoying the beautiful flowers in the planters on the street, a breeze was blowing through the door, there was Latin music playing—in that atmosphere, it felt like I was in Cuba. It was like I was on holiday and I thought, that’s how I want my customers to feel.”

Maybe it’s a good thing Catherine Bell felt like she was on holiday because, since taking over as new owner of

Zocalo’s Café

by Nancy  
Miller

and Gallery at the end of June, she’s hardly had

a chance to fit in coffee breaks, never mind vacations.

“I took over just before the first holiday weekend of the summer so it’s been pretty busy from the get-go. Some things were a straight-up learning curve and other things ticked along pretty well,” says Bell. “Taking over a business that’s already operating obviously requires a period of transition. Learning what to do and how to do it can be a lot of work but I have lots of experience to draw upon and I like a challenge.”

One look at her recent work experience makes that fairly obvious. Perhaps you recall her previous full-time gig—Member of Parliament for Vancouver Island North?

The Comox-born Bell ran as the NDP’s candidate in the 2004 election, narrowly losing to the Conservative Party’s John Duncan by 483 votes. She then defeated Duncan by 630 votes in the 2006 federal election and served as the NDP’s critic for natural resources while in parliament. The 2008 election saw her unseated by Duncan by more than 2,400



Catherine Bell, new owner of Zocalo’s Café and Gallery, loves the casual ambiance of Zocalo’s, as well as the endless opportunities to chat with customers.

PHOTO BY ERIN HALUSCHAK

votes.

In addition, the Cumberland resident has served as vice-president of the B.C. Government and Service Employees Union and served on the social justice committee of the B.C. Federation of Labour. She’s a member of the

Social Planning and Research Council of B.C. and volunteers with the World Community Development Education Society, Co-Development Canada, the Comox Valley Coalition to Save Social Programs and the Comox Valley Women to Women Global Strategies. (Whew...I’m tired just

typing that out!)

But less well-known is the fact that Bell also has a background in the food industry. “I’m a trade-qualified cook. I did it for many years before I got involved in politics,” notes Bell. “I had been looking for something for a while and, well, there aren’t a whole lot of jobs in the Comox Valley, so I thought maybe I should get into my own business. I have the time and I have the drive.”

When Zocalo’s became available Bell knew she had found the right fit. “I immediately saw lots of opportunities here for me. I wasn’t necessarily looking for Fifth Street, but when it came up I figured it couldn’t be better. I love the location and the feel and character of the building.”

Bell decided not to make any major changes in terms of both the atmosphere and products offered. It’s still an open air concept with art displayed on the ample wall space. Likewise, the theme of the establishment is the same—a comfortable place for people to enjoy food, art and music.

“I think the change was fairly seamless. Some of the staff stayed on, which was great, and I hired a few new people.”

Overall, Bell has found public response very supportive. “I think the reaction has been really good. I want everyone to come in and feel welcome. I don’t bring my politics into the work place. That said, if people want to come

in and talk to me about things, I’m happy to do that, too.”

So how does serving lattes and lunches compare with pounding the pavement around Parliament Hill?

“Well, it’s different—but both are a people-centered business, and I’m a people person. And in this job I get to talk with people all day long and I’m happy to do it.”

And if an election were to come up soon?

“I currently am the NDP’s candidate here, so if there is an election called I would run again, which would certainly pose another challenge in my life for the re-election period,” acknowledges Bell. “Of course, who knows when

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For now her main focus is to grow the business. With plans to expand the menu and include dinners, Bell wants customers to know that Zocalo’s offers more than a good cup of coffee.

“We are a café gallery, we have live entertainment in the evenings, and we do a great breakfast and lunch. I really want to increase the numbers of people who come for more than a cup of coffee. And that will happen over time. Right now I’m impatient, but we’ve been busy, there has been a lot of learning to do, so I know that this will happen eventually. I want to make sure I’m doing all the stuff right first.”