Walk into Plato and you’d be forgiven for thinking you’ve arrived at a secret local eatery for carnies when not at their beach fairground or perhaps the last refuge of a widow, who over a lifetime of waiting for her sailor to come home, accumulated an eclectic collection of knick-knacks. Pigs, ducks, heads, teapots, mice, I even spot one of Snow White’s seven dwarves jostling for space with a faded Pooh bear.

Fortunately frivolity gives way to the serious and award-winning task of keeping customers well fed and watered in the spacious dining area. As I tuck into my freshly caught fish, one of nine daily choices, I look around and think, yes, this is the flavour of Otago’s principal city; a blend of retro and modern, culture and eccentricity.

The Dunedin story is not one told in a chronological, orderly fashion – it’s one told with flair and panache, leaping from anecdote to anecdote, a bit like the views I encounter swinging around Tomahawk Drive from the airport to Lanarch Castle. The ocean swims into sight, first left, then right, like it’s playing a child’s game of hide and go seek as I travel along the spine of the Peninsula’s broad back. It’s like a big sheep, woolly, and just a little bit scruffy as it comes out of its winter coat.

Trees are bowed and stunted with the effort of holding themselves up against the seasons while low stone walls reveal the farming community that this is and always has been, a world away from the distinguished commerce playing out in the city centre. It’s what you’d expect from a city that juxtaposes austere business sense (perhaps gleaned from its Scottish forebears) with flamboyance.

The castle is much the same, flaunting neo-gothic architecture flanked with a colonial verandah and sweeping gardens. Built by merchant baron, William Lanarch, the tales of his three wives, his political and banking careers and eventual suicide could
give Shortland Street a run for its money. His tragedy started a lot earlier, with the start of the castle build in 1871. Leading me through a mere fraction of the 35 acres of grounds, Operations Manager, Judith Appleton is as familiar with the history and architecture of the building as she is with local weather, reminding me “red sky in the morning spells shepherd’s warning, red sky at night, shepherd’s delight.” I delight in the sound of those rolling Southern R’s.

It’s the outside of the privately owned Lanarch Castle that continues to hold interest and heighten a sense of disbelief. The gardens have been a personal project of Margaret Barker for forty years and from the moment you enter through a manicured deep green archway to be faced by snarling lions and stern eagles, you’re captivated. Look up there, in the tree, it’s a Cheshire cat. It really is - an Oamaru stone replica.

“Margaret’s idea,” says Appleton, “there are a few other quirky Alice things as you go through the garden”. Like the yellow-haired Alice firmly grasping a stone flamingo in the Petanque Garden, apparently one of the lady of the manor’s favourite passages in the book.

Weave around a golden roofed pagoda, track a doe eyed minotaur of sorts peeping through the undergrowth and there, deep in the back of a barred, arch roofed room (the former dungeon), squats a tiny man with real antelope horns. It’s as if an inner child has broken free to play in the grounds – so it’s no surprise to learn there is a kid’s brochure compiled by one of the tour guides for children to explore the castle and its gardens, finding creatures as they go.

Adults will be hard pressed not to keep an eye out too and I half expect a statue to come to life. A decorative antique bath, now weighted down with plants, disappeared then came back again. How? Appleton doesn’t know. “A local farmer found it in a nearby field and gifted it back.” It probably claw-footed its way after a white rabbit down a hole. Its twin can be seen inside the castle.

With only 24 hours at my disposal I bid farewell to the menagerie, doff a nod to the shaggy Highland cattle grazing in a field nearby and head back city side, to reality, or so I thought. A heartbeat later and I’m out of the country and into the past.

You can’t throw a stone on High Street without risking the elegant and restored stained glass window of a Heritage listed Edwardian or Victorian building. Whether private home or upmarket boutique bed and breakfast, they’re everywhere and so I find myself sipping tea and talking history with the talented and hospitable Rodney McDonald of Hilltop on High Street B&B.

Attention to detail peeks out everywhere, from the old-fashioned decorative telephone in the hallway to carefully selected antiques that somehow just work with the contemporary and bold interior design. Designed by local, James Louis Salmond, the former student and partner of the equally well known Dunedin architect Robert Arthur Lawson, Hilltop was built in 1904, after the death of the latter two years earlier. You’ll spot
FACT BOX
Plato Café - This 2010 Cuisine Restaurant of the Year Awards finalist offers fresh seafood right on Dunedin’s Harbourside. It’s not named after a philosopher, rather the telco who set up the initial connection. 2 Birch Street, Dunedin. Tel: 03 477 4235
Email: plato@platocafe.co.nz. www.platocafe.co.nz

Hilltop on High Street B&B - Built in 1904 for Dunedin jeweller and watchmaker Arthur John Shaw, this historic home is the perfect base from which to explore the city centre. 433 High Street, Dunedin. Tel: 03 477 1053
Mob: 027 249 4539. www.hilltoponhighst.co.nz

Lanarch Castle - With nine different interlinked gardens, New Zealand’s only castle displays Neo-Gothic architecture and a colonial verandah. 145 Camp Road, Otago Peninsula, Dunedin.
Tel: 03 476 1616. Email: larnach@larnachcastle.co.nz www.larnachcastle.co.nz

Mou Very - Bearing the claim to fame of Dunedin’s (and possibly New Zealand’s) smallest bar, Mou Very roasts coffee by day and ambience by night. 357 George Street, Dunedin. Tel: 03 477 2180. www.mouvery.co.nz

Sleep sumptuously at Hilltop on High Street.