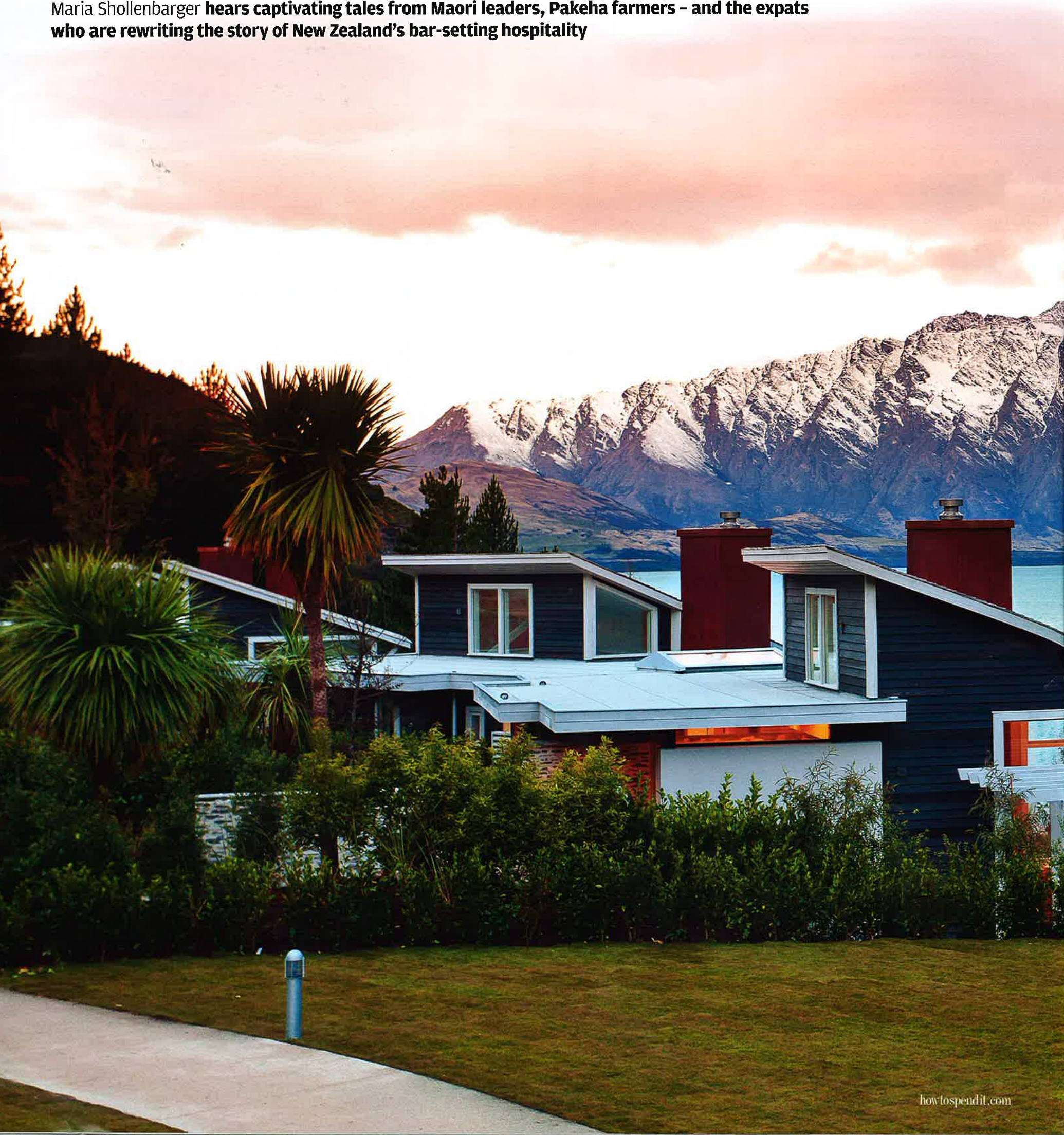


RENEWED ZEAL

The land of the long white cloud holds more than legendary landscapes and world-class wines. Maria Shollenbarger hears captivating tales from Maori leaders, Pakeha farmers – and the expats who are rewriting the story of New Zealand’s bar-setting hospitality



What is the story of New Zealand? There are many more than just one; it is a country comprised of two main islands and an infinite number of narratives. Some are familiar to us: the story of its staggering natural beauty, for instance (latterly – almost inescapably – immortalised by the geniuses at Weta Digital in the Tolkien trilogies); or its bountiful natural resources and unique flora and fauna – from kauris to kiwis. And, of course, the more prosaic (and cannily plied) ones of its fine food, even finer wines, and high adventure quotient.

But there are also contemporary, individual tales. They come from Maori *rangatira* – descendants of chiefly families, some with the light eyes, freckles or surnames of Anglo-Saxon ancestors, who honour their traditions in roles as various as luxury tourism, winemaking and fund management. Or from Pakeha (European-origin) farmers, the great-grandsons of Scottish immigrants who still wrest livings out of the magnificent Southern Alps. And some also come from a handful of expatriates who are

increasingly helping to write the story of the country's bar-setting luxury hospitality.

Among these is Jean-Michel Jefferson, who owns and operates Ahipara, a Central Otago outfitter of bespoke travel experiences. Half-French, half-English and raised in north Africa and the Middle East before attending Rugby and Exeter, Jefferson's own New Zealand story is a love-at-first-sight trope: he moved here a few years after his first visit, leaving a lucrative career in aviation strategy and never looking back. He proposes a more profound than usual approach to the country – a slightly different set of stories.

Jefferson collects me in Auckland, whose early-summer viridescence is undiminished by overcast skies. We head for the Bay of Islands, in the balmy, near-tropical far north of the island. It is home to the Waitangi Treaty grounds, where, depending on one's perspective, a simple trade agreement or a full-fledged sovereignty accord was signed in 1840 between the Crown and a complement of about 540 Maori chiefs. (It has been an issue of contention since its 150-year term came up for review in 1990, with the consequent cash settlements paid to Maori tribes a regular parliamentary agenda item.) We're here to meet Hone Mihaka, who creates private Maori rituals for Ahipara clients – traditional

challenges and ambushes sprung upon delighted (if sometimes unnerved) fund managers and chief executives, in which Mihaka and 15 or so of his cohort breach opulent beachside dinners in massive war canoes or hurtle, shrieking, from deep forests into the midst of nature strolls, resplendent in full martial regalia.

Mihaka represents his tribe, the Nga Puhi, in government negotiations and is a recognised authority on Maori tradition on the North Island. He radiates *mana* – the word connoting personal power – whether invoking both our ancestors in a traditional welcome, braying with laughter at his own joke or welling up, as he does when describing the yawning chasm between the rich relationship with tradition his grandfathers cultivated and his own generation's far more disaffected one. He discourses with authority on Maoris' overrepresentation in prisons and domestic- and substance-abuse issues, but also about their preeminence in the arts, finance and politics, his own growing tourism business and his high hopes that his grandson will embrace his heritage. Mihaka's sitting room is being renovated when I visit his home, not far from Waitangi. On the temporary fibreboard panelling, his entire *whakapapa* – his ancestry – going back hundreds of years is extemporaneously chronicled, in a cramped scrawl.



This page: Matakauri Lodge by Lake Wakatipu

We ride into the birch forest. The bizarre call of the tui – half dulcet melody, half gear-grind – occasionally breaks the stillness



Clockwise from top: red deer hinds on Charlie Ewing's farm in Matukituki Valley. Otahuna Lodge, on the outskirts of Christchurch. The infinity pool at Split Apple Retreat, near to Abel Tasman National Park

How did he track them all down, I ask. Looking patiently amused, he tells me that he can recite from memory the lineage of over a hundred of them.

The higher country and chillier surrounds of Lake Taupo, though just over 300 miles to the south, are another world entirely. Vast eucalyptus and birch forests are separated by plains on which poplars stand sentinel. Our base here is Poronui, a lodge acquired in 2007 by the US Westervelt Company, which has augmented its sporting and luxury bona fides in equal measure. The stables hold – along with fine horses – a full-service gym, spa treatment rooms and a wine cellar with a dining table seating 24, where celebrity guest chefs routinely host tasting dinners. The most recently added accommodation, and the one to book, is Blake House, the five-bedroom former owner's cottage set on a plateau several miles from the lodge.

Poronui sits amid 16,000 acres, adjacent to a tract of 5,500 administered by Tom Loughlin, a Tuwharetoa Maori who leads bespoke cultural programmes here. His tuition in ancient modes of sustenance and spirituality has enlightened oligarchs, Bear Grylls and the odd English aristocrat, as well as local at-risk Maori youth. Loughlin has amber eyes and a demeanour that skips between pensive and playful as quickly as the clouds above us consolidate and disperse on the breeze during the day we spend together. As we hack across river ravines carpeted in spiky *harakeke* (flax), he describes how Maori weavers fashioned the plant into ceremonial capes and baskets as watertight as stone vessels.

We reach his cabin, 900m above sea level, in the early afternoon. Presiding over its patioed terrace are fierce

carved dieties: Tangaroa (the sea), Tane Mahuta (the forest) and Tane-rore (the air). On the patio is a *hangi* earth oven, for the Maori feast that's equal parts backyard roast and ritual of earth's plenty. In the kitchen we roll pork loin around chopped apricots; Loughlin preps an alarmingly pungent mutton bird – "Tastes like anchovy. You'll love it," he deadpans – while I wash *pikopiko* fern heads and slice *kumara*, the indigenous yams (apparently genetically linked to sweet potatoes in Chile – likely putting the lie to claims that the first peoples only arrived here from the Pacific islands in the past 1,200-odd years, Loughlin tells me). Everything is wrapped in *harakeke*, placed in an aluminium basin and lowered into the pit, which is lined with hot coals.

It will take hours to cook, so we ride up the spine of the mountain behind the cabin and into hushed, close birch forest. The bizarre call of the tui – half dulcet melody, half gear-grind – occasionally breaks the stillness; we pass a lean-to of branches, where Loughlin teaches a centuries-old bird-trapping technique. After a climb that leaves the horses glistening with sweat, we crest a bare ridge to find another cabin. We sit on its deck with icy beers in hand and consider the precisely etched landscape: sharp puce buttes, gently furrowed

hills, all shades of slate, alpine green and silver-grey. Tiny but utterly clear on the horizon is a cratered mountain. Hikurangi, says Loughlin. Or Mount Gisborne. How far, I ask. We consult a map: almost 70 miles.

Back at the cabin, the light is fading and the *hangi* is done. Steam billows up as we remove the baskets; a Hawke's Bay merlot is unscrewed. The pork is succulent, the *pikopiko* crisp and tart; my facial contortions upon sampling the mutton bird elicit roars of laughter.

We lope back to the gates and drive into Taupo under tangerine skies, heading to The Point, with its pair of private villas on the lake. The day before, Jefferson and I had spent the afternoon at nearby Huka Lodge, still considered the *ne plus ultra* of New Zealand luxury; its recently introduced Alan Pye cottage (pictured overleaf), a two-bedroom villa appointed to perfection by local design doyenne Virginia Fisher, is as chic as any hotel space I've ever seen. But The Point is where Jefferson puts guests seeking genuine off-the-radar status. There's little time to enjoy the infinity pool and dramatic lakeside situation, though; our flight to Queenstown leaves early the next morning.

The Central Otago landscape into which we descend is at once otherworldly and *déjà-vu* familiar: glacier-fed

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Above: inside the Alan Pye
cottage at Huka Lodge

lakes in improbable shades of chalcedony and periwinkle, valleys rich with flowering hebe and dracophyllum, and snowcapped monoliths that glow in the sun. Queenstown itself has acquired the burnish of conspicuous prosperity; it now sequesters a large Louis Vuitton boutique, a handful of design-conscious restaurants (including the fantastic Rata, manned by former Gordon Ramsay second-in-command Josh Emett) and Matakauri Lodge (pictured on opening pages), which is itself a reinvention along luxury lines.

Set on the shore of Lake Wakatipu just outside town, Matakauri was a mid-level adventurers' favourite for years before it was purchased in 2010 by US fund manager Julian Robertson (who also owns the five-star Kauri Cliffs and The Farm at Cape Kidnappers, on the North Island). He enlisted Virginia Fisher – she of Huka Lodge fame – who reimagined it as an airy, slightly exotic redoubt, its white wainscoting and pine floors layered in opulent textiles and rare wood finishes. Matakauri is small, just 11 suites, and can boast what are, without any hyperbole, some of the most breathtaking views in the country (not for nothing are the peaks it faces known as The Remarkables). The Robertsons are currently building a four-suite private villa on the estate, which will kick the already estimable indulgence factor up another notch later this year.

From here it's an hour due west to Charlie Ewing's farm (pictured on previous page) in the Matukituki Valley, at the base of the Southern Alps. Ewing and his family keep about 10,000 deer there, as well as cattle and sheep. In the past 15 years, tenure reviews by the government cut deep in these parts (the reviews, in simplified terms, saw high country grazing land under long-term leasehold from the Crown either converted to freehold at often controversial prices, or transferred to the Department of Conservation). Ewing, for his part, started Aspiring Helicopters, a now thriving heli-tour and -ski business he runs with his daughter Alex and son-in-law James. James is powering up one of the fleet when we arrive; we were due a quick jaunt over to Milford Sound, but the weather has closed in, so we tool around at lower altitude, riding ridge thermals, chasing chamois down a tawny hill and stopping in a foot of snow to skip stones on a glacial pond, before returning to early summertime down at the farm.

Many Ahipara clients with the lovely region of Canterbury on their agenda would opt to arrive by helicopter, but we load up Jefferson's Range Rover to savour the route across Mackenzie Country – famously among New Zealand's most striking. It doesn't disappoint; the Lindis Pass winds through treeless hills that look like giant beasts fallen irrevocably into slumber, their flanks blurred with spring grass and lupins. On the central plain, mountains the colour of wheat disappear into tablecloth clouds, dense as cashmere, for as far as the eye can see. The world is rinsed clean in the hard light.

Eventually, we descend into forested hills, then the manicured environs of Christchurch, Canterbury's largest city. Otahuna Lodge (pictured on previous page), set on its outskirts, was built by the stockbreeder/horticulturalist/parliamentarian Sir Heaton Rhodes in 1895. Conceived to

dazzle his new wife, it hewed to the most *au courant* trends of the day. In 2006 it was bought by Americans Hall Cannon and Miles Refo, who renovated it along precise historic lines and opened it as a seven-suite luxury lodge. The tragic earthquake of February 2011 undid a significant part of their work, but perseverance and creativity saw the property remade by the end of that year, and its Category I-listed gardens are now a destination in themselves. I tour the 30-odd acres of lush woodlands, daffodil fields and a "Dutch" garden redolent with bay, lemonwood and orange blossom. The kitchen garden – where over 100 varieties flourish – keeps the lodge supplied with produce. Otahuna is at once a devoutly maintained monument and a vibrant example of perfect 21st-century hospitality – the former influencing the latter, making it a self-contained microcosm of the country's more contemplative pursuits.

No such heritage connects New Zealand to Split Apple Retreat (pictured on previous page), located across the island at the base of Abel Tasman National Park. Also owned by expatriates (US doctor and nutritionist Lee Nelson and his Thai wife, culinary artist Pen Lee), the retreat is an entirely different proposition: an ultra-private wellness centre with Oriental design flourishes and culinary offerings that take their cues from the Mediterranean and Southeast Asia.

Nelson is a cancer survivor who attributes his current health in great part to diet; the retreat proposes exquisite cuisine that is also carefully calibrated against glycaemic indexes. Massage, acupuncture and private meditation are available, as are kayak and private yacht excursions in Tasman Bay, and hikes in the national park. There are just three suites, which leverage Zen simplicity; each has multiple terraces and Japanese baths with floor-to-ceiling windows.

Guests wear yukata from Japan, sip pomegranate juice from California and sleep under painted silk panels that date from the Song Dynasty – but the country, in its singular, ineffable beauty, surrounds and penetrates the place. The ease, generosity and openness with which guests are received owes as much to the national ethos of good living as it does to any putative Thai or US warmth. In short, Split Apple Retreat, though not in any way conspicuously or expectedly, fits right in here. It seems as appropriate – as authentically New Zealand – a place as any other to conclude this particular story. ♦

FANTASY ISLANDS

Maria Shollenbarger travelled as a guest of **Ahipara** (+643-447 3558; www.ahipara.com), which offers bespoke itineraries from £5,000, and of **Tourism New Zealand** (www.newzealand.com). The itinerary described above costs £13,290. **Aspiring Helicopters**, +643-443 7152; www.aspiringhelicopters.co.nz. **Huka Lodge**, +647-378 5791; www.hukalodge.co.nz, from £1,005. **Matakauri Lodge**, +643-441 1008; www.matakauri.co.nz, from £840. **Otahuna Lodge**, +643-329 6333; www.otahunalodge.co.nz, from £605 full board. **The Point Villas**, +647-377 8002; www.thepointvillas.co.nz, from £610. **Poronui**, +647-384-2080; www.poronui.com; Blake House from £700. **Split Apple Retreat**, +643-527 8377; www.splitapple.com, from £745 full board.