



VISION OF GRANDEUR



Jo Bates visits the beautifully restored historic Otahuna Lodge in Canterbury for a stately five-course dinner with the lodge owners and their friends

Photographs by STEPHEN GOODENOUGH

Manhattan to Christchurch is a path least travelled, particularly when your destination is preceded by three months zigzagging New Zealand from Invercargill to Cape Reinga. But for two self-confessed hotel junkies from the United States who were looking to create their own luxury lodge experience "that exceeds your expectations", it was all in the name of research. They found their opportunity when they visited Otahuna, an historic Canterbury icon, built in 1895 for political identity Sir Heaton Rhodes and his wife Jessie.

Located at Tai Tapu, 20 minutes from Christchurch, Otahuna reveals itself as a vision in white at the end of a stately, tree-lined drive. The grand homestead was built in the Queen Anne style that was popular in the late 1800s and is considered to be the finest example of this architectural period in Australasia.

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"It's definitely a place with a wow factor and that very much attracted us to Otahuna. There's so little like it in the rest of New Zealand, certainly from an hotelier's standpoint," explains co-owner Miles Refo. "Most of the top hotels in New Zealand have been built in the last 15 years, so to have something with age and architectural importance is quite special."

Owners Hall Cannon and Miles (originally from Memphis and Boston respectively) have sympathetically restored the magnificent home, garden, orchard and grounds to give Otahuna the exclusive "wow factor" for which it is now renowned. Coupled with a unique dining experience, they've wooed the likes of legendary food writer, critic, author and editor, Ruth Reichl. While chefs the world over quake at the thought of the highly influential editor-in-chief of *US Gourmet* simply setting foot inside their restaurant,



Opposite: Otahuna lamb on a potato and parsnip gratin. This page: Miles Refo, above, is one of the lodge's convivial hosts.



menu

Leek & potato soup
with hot-smoked salmon
& pickled lemon

Otahuna butternut
pumpkin ravioli with herbs
& pine nuts

Rack of Otahuna lamb
with potato & parsnip gratin
Autumn vegetables
Walnut & sage pesto

Otahuna pinot noir-poached
pear & hazelnut tart with
pinot noir pear sorbet

Selection of aged cheese
served with port

Wine matches from
Kaituna Wines,
Canterbury

Miles and Hall knew they could rely on executive chef Jimmy McIntyre and his team to serve sensational food.

Much of the produce used comes from Otahuna's own organic garden and orchard, and Jimmy recalls – almost with a sense of nonchalance – what others would have considered a harrowing prospect. He smiles and says: "Really, you can do simple food that is well appreciated. The key is not to be too clever."

Passion is probably the key ingredient for this Auckland-born-and-raised chef who travelled and worked extensively before settling in Christchurch. Peppering his descriptions with "magical" and "amazing", Jimmy's enthusiasm for his work is obvious. He lives and breathes food and

explains that over time he has learnt the beauty of simplicity and quality.

"It's wonderful here because we grow so much and we have things you wouldn't expect, such as hazelnuts and walnuts. We have our own mulberry tree, porcini mushrooms, and things like zucchini flowers. To go down and pick them fresh, then stuff them with goat's cheese is just magic."

The leek and potato soup, served with hot-smoked salmon and pickled lemon on this evening's menu, is made with vegetables fresh from the garden. "What makes it so special is that you don't have to do much to it, just treat it simply. A lot of my soups are straight purées," he says.

Another facet that brings guests even closer to Jimmy's wonderful food is having

Opposite page: Lodge owner Hall Cannon. The meal started with leek and potato soup with hot-smoked salmon and pickled lemon. **This page:** Executive chef Jimmy McIntyre serves a ceviche canapé to guests then, at the table, explains each of the five courses and wine pairings, which personalises the experience.



him explain each of the five courses and wine pairings. "People love that – they get a true understanding of what we are trying to achieve and it makes the food more personal. We always ask guests what they don't like or don't eat and we work around that. Most of the time, guests don't know what the menu is – it's all a surprise."

That said, if a guest requests a Mexican banquet, as they did recently, that is exactly what they will get.

While there's definitely anticipation over the gourmet delights to be served in the formal dining room this evening, it's the lodge itself that makes the guests stary-eyed when they arrive. It's clearly not uncommon for visitors to stop and take several moments to absorb the majesty of their surroundings. The hand-carved kauri staircase, rimu panelling, leadlights and commanding artworks are just some of the features that capture the imagination.

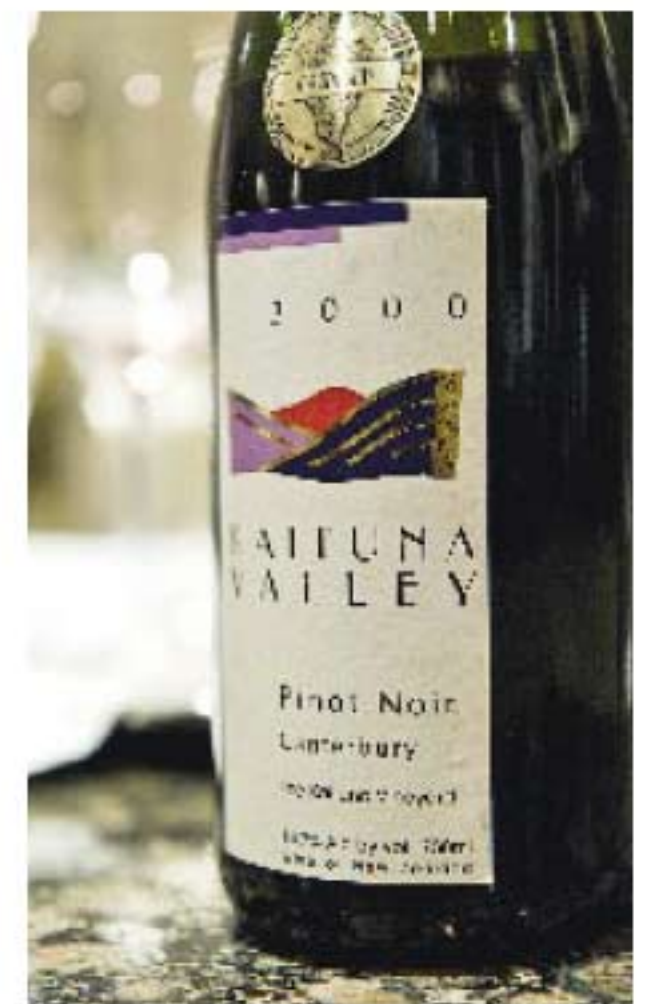
After drinks and canapés by the fire in the drawing room, the friends invited for this evening's meal proceed to the dining room where the light of the fireplace adds a gentle glow to the original embossed green

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and gold wallpaper – the only wallpaper to survive Otahuna's several incarnations. It's the perfect setting for vivid discussions about the stories surrounding this local icon, its previous owners and inhabitants. As Miles says: "There are a tonne of folks who have tremendous ties to the house and this can often be very rewarding for us."

It's also where hosts Hall and Miles are often asked "Why New Zealand?" and not elsewhere once the Big Apple's gloss began to lose its shine: "We first came to New Zealand for the scenery but we kept coming back for the people. I think it's something that a lot of New Zealanders take for granted but New Zealanders are an incredibly progressive, worldly, hard-working group of people. We are permanent residents now and we are very glad to have made the move from a very anonymous part of the world." Sounds like a happy ending – or at least another exciting chapter in the life of Otahuna.

See recipes over the page. For more information about Otahuna Lodge, visit www.otahuna.co.nz



Opposite page: Parmesan is added to the pumpkin ravioli. **This page:** Gracious dining in a gracious setting. Local Kaituna Valley wines accompanied the meal.

Pickled lemons

Pickled lemons are a fantastic condiment to have handy to add to your cooking or finished dish. The complex flavours intensify the enjoyment that guests will derive from your food. Due to the long pickling time, you'll want to make as many as you can. Simply adapt the quantities to your needs.

READY IN: OVERNIGHT, PLUS 3 MONTHS
MAKES: 1 LARGE JAR

24 lemons, medium sized and firm-fleshed, washed
2kg rock or sea salt
2 litres extra virgin olive oil (don't use the really expensive oil; you can often get a 4-litre tin from a good Mediterranean food store)

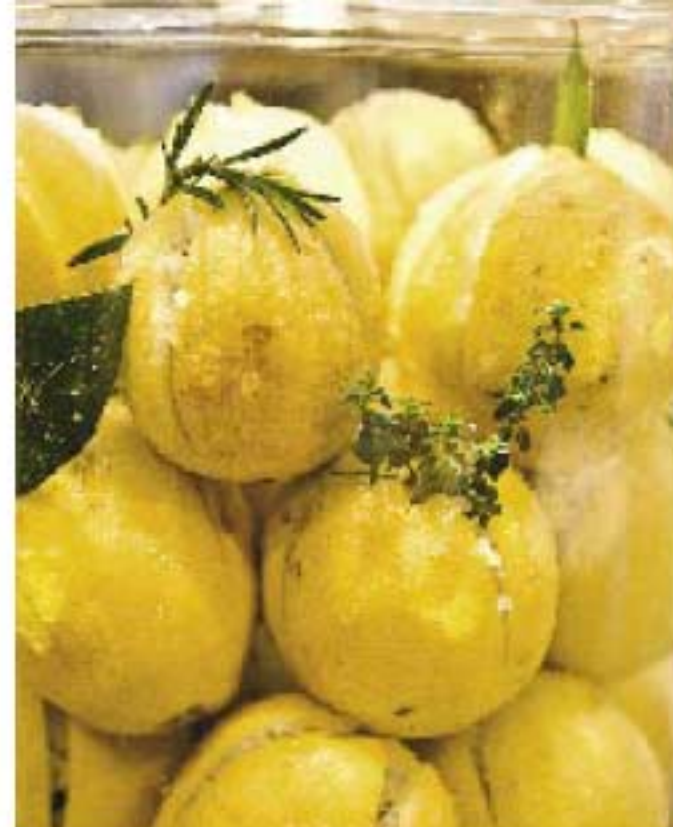
Aromatics (all optional)

1 bunch fresh rosemary
1 bunch fresh thyme
6 bayleaves and/or lemon leaves
2 Tbsp coriander seeds
2 Tbsp whole black peppercorns
1 Tbsp whole cloves
2-3 whole star anise
1 Tbsp cumin seeds

1 Cut each lemon lengthwise into quarters, leaving 1-2cm end piece intact to hold the lemon together.
2 Place salt in a bowl and stir in the herbs and spices. Spoon this salty mixture into the lemons and place inside the jar. Leave overnight. The salt will leach out the moisture from the lemons, creating a brine solution in the jar and removing the bitterness from the fruit.
3 Cover the lemons with olive oil and seal with a tight-fitting lid. Store in a dark, cool place for about three months. At the conclusion of pickling time, use the lemon peel, not the flesh. The flesh is very salty but the pickled peel is piquant and wonderful.

COOK'S TIPS

- * Use preserved lemon cut finely and curled over fresh cheeses as a canapé topping. It's great in marinades for olives or added to fish dishes, and is fantastic with Moroccan dishes, tagines and the like.
- * Use the oil from the jar of lemons for cooking and in salad dressings.



Pear & hazelnut tart

READY IN: 2¾ HOURS PLUS OVERNIGHT
SERVES: 12-16

5-6 firm pears, depending on size
1 bottle red wine or red grape juice
(we used Kaituna Valley Pinot Noir)
200g sugar
Icing sugar, for dusting
Pâte sablée (pastry)
1 egg
¼ tsp vanilla extract
60g icing sugar
250g plain flour
¼ tsp salt
180g cold unsalted butter, cut into 5mm dice
Hazelnut topping
250g soft unsalted butter
250g caster sugar
1 Tbsp flour
4 eggs, beaten with ½ tsp vanilla extract
250g toasted ground hazelnuts, skins removed before grinding

1 Prepare the pears a day or two ahead. Peel, halve and core the pears and place them in a pot with a tight-fitting lid. Add the wine and sugar. Cover surface with a circle of greaseproof paper (same size as pan), put lid on and place over a medium heat. When syrup boils, reduce heat and simmer for about 15 minutes until pears are tender. Allow pears to cool in the syrup.
2 For pâte sablée, put egg, vanilla and icing sugar in a small bowl and beat together. Put flour in a food processor with the salt and pulse a couple of times. Distribute butter evenly over flour and pulse until barely combined. Add egg mixture and pulse until just combined – don't allow pastry to form a ball. Knead on a lightly floured surface until smooth, taking care not to overwork the dough. Flatten into a wide disc, wrap in greaseproof paper and chill for about an hour. Remove from the fridge 10 minutes before rolling out.
3 Spray or grease a 26-28cm tart tin, preferably with removable base, and with 4-5cm high sides (or filling will overflow). Roll out pastry to 4-5mm thickness and line tin, leaving an overhang of about 2cm. (This will fall off when cooked, meaning tart base will come to top of tin, rather than shrinking away.) Refrigerate for at least 30 minutes.

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4 Preheat oven to 190°C. Line tart base with greaseproof paper or foil, fill with baking beans and blind bake for 10-20 minutes until the wall appears set. Carefully remove paper and beans. Reduce heat to 170°C and bake until well coloured, reducing temperature as needed to prevent burning. The pastry should be crisp and a pale caramel colour, and it should feel dry and sound hollow when tapped.
5 For hazelnut topping, whiz butter and sugar in a food processor until pale and creamy. Add flour then slowly add eggs. Add hazelnuts and process until well mixed.
6 Turn oven to 180°C. Drain pears, reserving syrup (see Cook's Notes) and place on a clean tea towel or absorbent paper towels. Arrange pears in tart shell to cover the base. Pour hazelnut mixture over pears and smooth out with a spatula. Return tart

to oven and bake for 45 minutes. Test by inserting a skewer – it should come out clean and dry. If it's not ready, reduce heat to 150°C and continue until cooked.
7 Allow tart to rest for 10 minutes before unmoulding onto a platter. Dust with icing sugar before serving.

COOK'S NOTES

- * The pâte sablée can be made ahead and frozen after kneading.
- * The pear and wine syrup can be churned in an ice cream machine to make an amazing sorbet. Alternatively, place over a gentle heat and reduce until it coats the back of a spoon. Cool and drizzle onto the plate around the tart. 🍴