

THE DISH DOWN UNDER



Otahuna Lodge set a new gastronomic standard for New Zealand when it opened in 2006.

Photo by Jackie Caradonio



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My gastronomic pilgrimage had begun at Otahuna Lodge, a 120-year-old estate set on 30 acres of gardens and farmland just south of Christchurch. Adorned with a vibrant patchwork of stained-glass windows, gilded wallpaper, and kauri-wood paneling, the Relais & Châteaux lodge is a stunning revival of one of the country’s oldest mansions. The U.S. owners, Miles Refo and Hall Cannon, purchased the property in 2005 with plans to restore its Queen Anne–style manor, as well as its Dutch gardens, historic potager, and rambling daffodil fields. Upon opening in 2006, Otahuna (which means “little hill among the hills” in the Maori language) became a blueprint for New Zealand’s

culinary renaissance.

Behind the seven-room gabled mansion, I discovered an expansive garden covered in every imaginable hue of green, brown, and yellow. Ancient English oak trees shaded Jerusalem sunchokes and Tokyo Cross turnips, pumpkins and parsnips, and 20 different varieties of tomatoes. Daffodil fields dating to the estate's early days remained a vibrant carpet of 1.5 million blooming bulbs. In the mushroom crypt, porcinis and shiitakes erupted from giant logs, and in the melon house, fresh cantaloupes, kaffir limes, and pineapples grew fat and juicy. There was also a chicken coop, a 2-acre orchard, an herb farm, and a pigsty resembling a miniature open-air chalet.

In the kitchen, where jars of homemade jams, pickled vegetables, and roasted tomatoes lined the shelves, Otahuna's executive chef Jimmy McIntyre showed me a mound of fresh cauliflower that he intended to blend into a soup with seared scallops and truffled mushroom salsa for that night's dinner. From the meat cooler—nearly as big as a house—he procured prosciutto, coppa, bacon, and sausage, all from pigs raised on-site. “When you are raising your own stock, you have an obligation to use the entire animal,” he said. “Between the animals we raise and the fruits and vegetables we grow, we are almost completely self-sufficient.”

McIntyre's purist approach to ingredients extends to his cooking methods. “It's not about Michelin ratings. It's not about chopping everything finely,” he said. “Here, you can be a bit rustic with it.” Still, the night's five-course degustation menu—paired with wines from Lake Wanaka, Waipara, and Marlborough—displayed the kind of refined artistry and intense creativity that often lead to awards and stars. After the cauliflower soup and a salmon ceviche prepared with asparagus and pickled lemon and rocket, a perfectly tender breast of chicken arrived with a smattering of autumn vegetables and a slash of kumara-and-parsnip puree. Dessert was no less meticulous, comprising a simple wedge of Meyer vintage Gouda followed by a not-so-simple coconut-lime pudding served with a rum pineapple flambé and an appropriately rustic mango salsa.

Despite this final touch—which seemed more Caribbean than Kiwi—my dinner at Otahuna, as at Annandale, imparted a profound sense of place. Following my visit to the latter, I headed for the North Island and Hawke's Bay, a region known as much for its Cabernet Sauvignons and Merlots as for its trout-filled rivers and streams. Amid this idyllic agricultural milieu, the Black Barn winery and resort is cultivating a homegrown culinary experience of its own.

First established as a winery in 2003, the 25-acre property includes a fine-dining restaurant, a farmer's market, and a collection of luxury villas known as Black Barn Retreats. Kim Thorp—who co-owns Black Barn with his partner, the architect and former farmer Andy Coltart—can attest to the transformation that is taking place throughout his country. “We were very insecure for a long time because we lacked any kind of culinary identity,” he said over dinner at Black Barn Bistro. “New Zealand is really only a few centuries old. We don't have deep-rooted traditions that dictate the way