

Otahuna Lodge



History & THE HIGH LIFE

We take a look at the first wholly inclusive tariff lodge in New Zealand

The lush green pastures dotted with grazing sheep present an idyllic picture of New Zealand rural life on the 20-minute drive from Christchurch airport to Otahuna, a luxury lodge in Canterbury's bountiful farming and viticulture region.

A haven for gourmands and wine lovers, Otahuna is a dream destination for a weekend away or three-night stay while on a longer tour of New Zealand's South Island. With attentive service, superb food and fabulous wines, this seven-suite lodge is the only one in the country with a wholly inclusive tariff, including breakfast, pre-dinner canapés and drinks, and a five-course dinner matched with fine New Zealand wines.

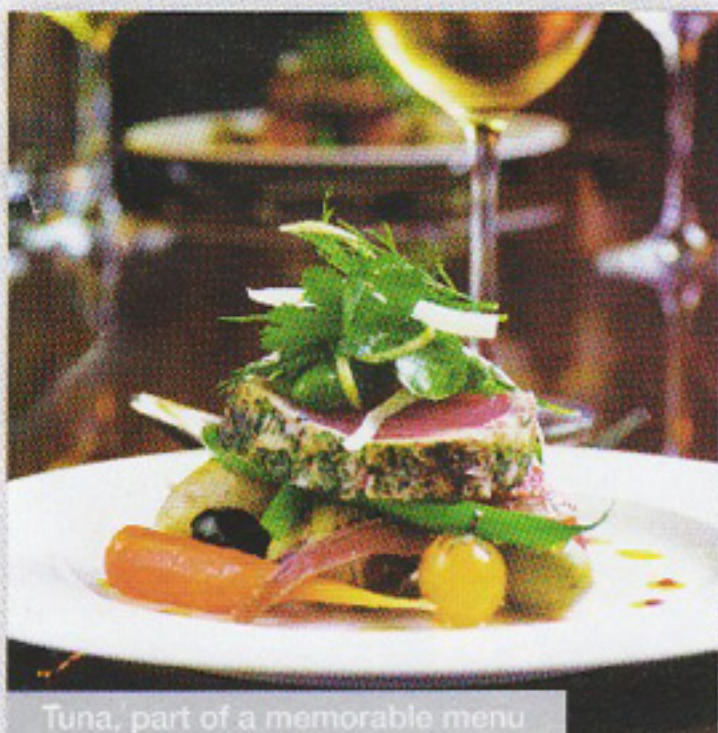
"Our goal is to make it as much a gracious home as possible," explains Hall Cannon, a

31-year-old former New Yorker who owns the lodge with partner, Miles Refo. "And 95 per cent of guests check out without signing for a single thing because we've taken care of it all ahead of time. We think it's a much more elegant travel experience than having to pay for each and every individual item."

Nestled in the gently rolling hills of Banks Peninsula, Otahuna was built in 1895 as the grand homestead for a 2,000ha property owned by New Zealand parliamentarian Sir Heaton Rhodes. At the end of a tree-lined gravel driveway that curls through sweeping lawns and manicured gardens, the magnificently appointed Queen-Anne mansion has undergone extensive restoration under the direction of Auckland-based designer and historical conservation expert, Stephen Cashmore. No expense was

spared with the decor and finishing touches that imbue the house with a terrific level of sophistication and every modern comfort. The largest private historic residence in New Zealand, Otahuna has a Category 1 listing with the New Zealand Historic Places Trust.

When I arrived there recently on a sunny afternoon, I felt a warm sense of welcome stepping into the superbly furnished entrance hall featuring kauri and rimu (indigenous NZ timbers) panelling and a magnificent hand-carved kauri staircase. Otahuna's hostess, Belinda Austin-Ballantyne, proudly showed me through the house (which has an extensive art collection), and then to my lavishly appointed suite, occupying a vast wood-panelled attic decorated with fishing and hunting memorabilia recalling a passion of



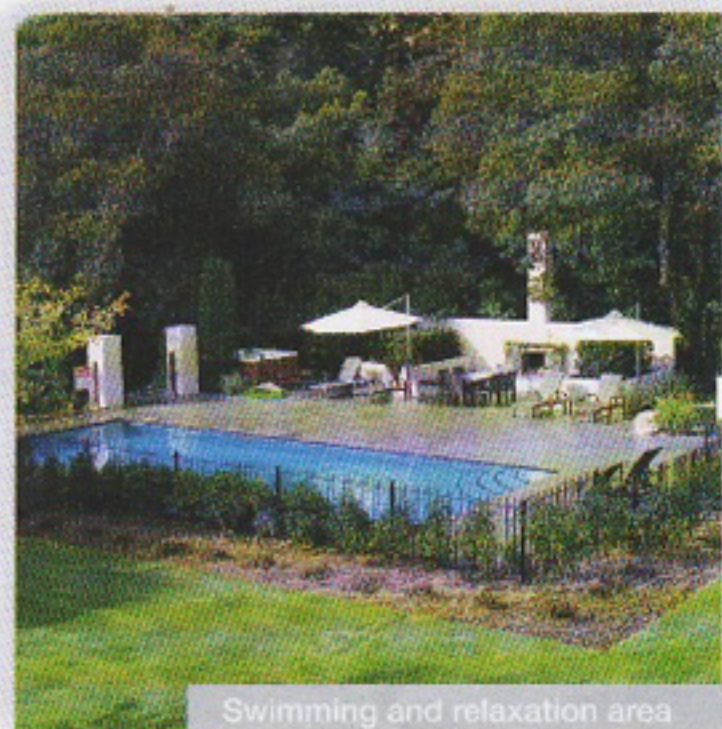
Tuna, part of a memorable menu



Spacious & stylish veranda



Wood-paneled guestroom



Swimming and relaxation area

"95 PER CENT OF GUESTS CHECK OUT WITHOUT SIGNING FOR A SINGLE THING BECAUSE WE'VE TAKEN CARE OF IT ALL AHEAD OF TIME" *Hall Cannon*

Sir Heaton Rhodes. Refreshingly spacious, all suites have super-king beds and fine bespoke linens, while the large bathrooms have deep tubs, separate rain showers and toiletries by Penhaligon's of London.

That evening I met other guests over drinks in the elegant formal drawing room with robin's egg-blue furnishings, a hand-carved fireplace and a magnificent grand piano from *HMS Renown*, on which the Duke and Duchess of York (later King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother) sailed for their 1927 tour of New Zealand and Australia.

Within minutes, the conversation reverted to who was staying in which suite. The Rhodes Suite was occupied by a couple from Sydney who were at the lodge to

celebrate his 50th birthday (they'd hosted a dinner for 40 people in Otahuna's ballroom on the previous evening), while a Brisbane-based lawyer and his wife were tickled pink to be staying in The Verandah Suite where HRH The Duke of York slept when he was a guest of Otahuna during his 1927 visit.

Superb dinners matched with outstanding wines are a highlight of the Otahuna experience, and two courses on that evening's memorable menu included a scrumptious pan-fried blue cod with globe artichokes and pickled lemon salad (matched with a 2007 Viognier from Alpha Domus in Hawkes Bay) and succulent slow-roasted pork belly and prosciutto-wrapped fillet with braised leeks (perfectly paired with Ormond Estate 'Vinoptima' Gewurztraminer 2004 from Gisborne).

Much of the produce used by executive chef Jimmy McIntyre is grown in Otahuna's organic vegetable garden and orchard. "Our chefs often escort guests to pick their own vegetables for dinner," notes Cannon. "This year we will harvest 91 different types of vegetables, 24 kinds of fruits, 18 herbs and three kinds of nuts."

According to Cannon, the most popular day trips from Otahuna include a drive to the charming French-inspired village of Akaroa or to Waipara Valley for lunch among the vines of Pegasus Bay Vineyard. However, guests not wanting to leave the magnificent 12ha estate can simply kick back and relax and stroll through the beautiful gardens that give Otahuna its very own personal take on idyllic New Zealand rural life.

Margie Blok