



ABOUT A HOUSE

A NEW BOOK CHARTS THE ILLUSTRIOUS HISTORY, DECLINE AND REVIVAL OF A GRAND NEW ZEALAND HOME RECENTLY VOTED THE WORLD'S TOP INTERNATIONAL HIDEAWAY. BY PATRICK SMITH.

World visited Otahuna Lodge a year or so before the first Christchurch earthquake hit the region. We called the story we wrote after our stay “A Grand Obsession”, a reference to the love – and many millions of dollars – its American owners, Hall Cannon and Miles Refo, had lavished on the historic Tai Tapu house since buying it in 2006.

We were shocked and dismayed, then, to learn in September 2010 what 40 earth-shuddering seconds had wrought on the pair’s meticulous restoration of the 115-year-old building and its magnificent gardens.

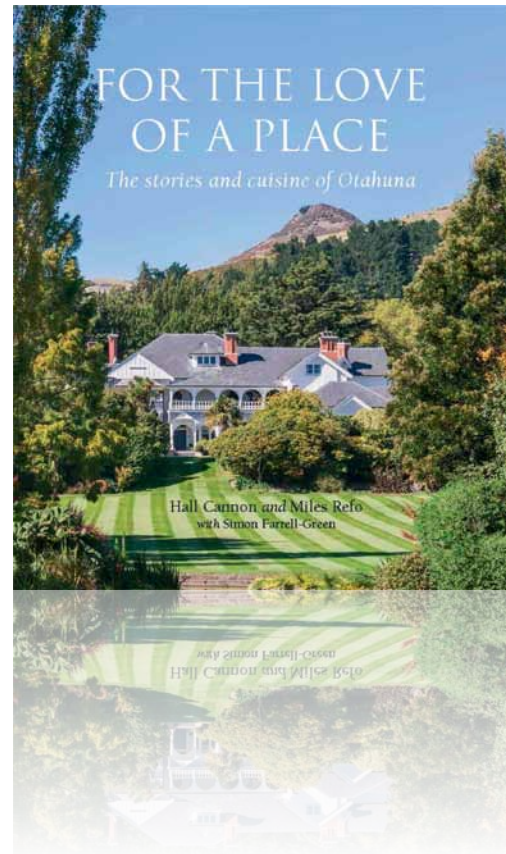
In his foreword to a lavish new book, *For The Love of a Place – The Stories and Cuisine of Otahuna*, Cannon talks about arriving at the lodge to a heartbreaking scene following the 7.1 quake. The house’s 11 towering brick chimneys had all come

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down – some smashing through the roof. The foundations in the drawing room and ballroom had split and bowed. Three walls of the wine cellar had collapsed onto the collection of fine New Zealand vintages. Broken pipes and sprinklers had sent water cascading through the house, ruining delicate wallpapers, furniture and original mouldings.

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Cannon’s worst fears did not come to pass, if only because of the owners’ sheer determination to keep their dream alive. That and through the loyalty and hard work of the Otahuna team, who, he says, “have shown that it will take more than the shifting of tectonic plates to destroy the dreams that have led Miles and me, and those before us, to this place”.

The job of rebuilding and repairing Otahuna after the quake began within days and became Canterbury’s largest ever restoration project of a private heritage building. At times 60 to 80 tradesmen were at work on the site, fighting against time to have the lodge ready for the summer tourist season. It opened four months later, on 11 January 2011 – just six weeks before the second, lethal earthquake hit.

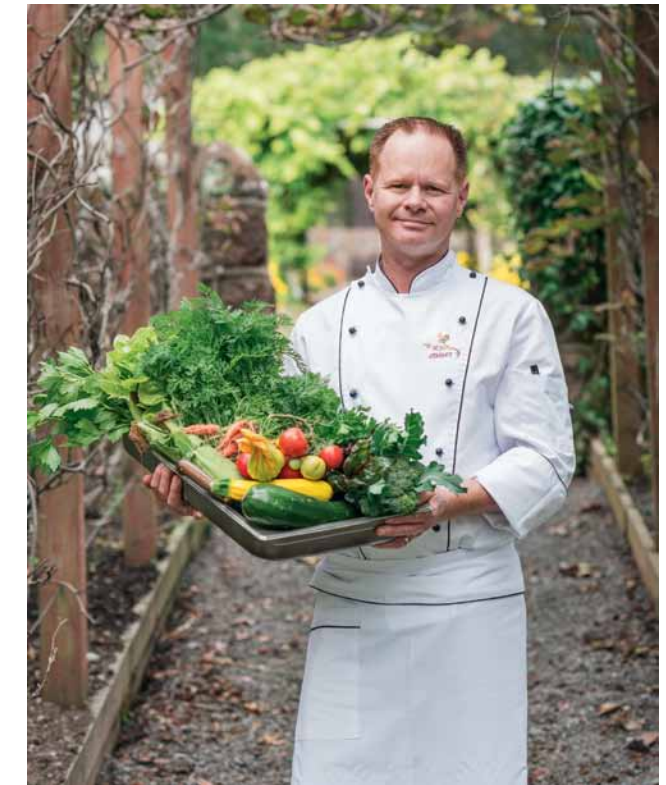
While Otahuna, now seismically strengthened and with other structural improvements, fared better the second time around, hundreds of surfaces had to be repaired and repainted and new wall coverings hung. The lodge closed again, opening, after another four months of intensive refurbishments, in July that year.

The owners’ tenacity and uncompromising attitude towards heritage and hospitality were most recently rewarded by being voted number one in the world’s “Top 20 International Hideaways” for 2015 by readers of America’s influential *Andrew Harper’s Hideaway Report*. The seven-suite lodge was also voted the 14th best food and wine resort in the world.





For *The Love of a Place* is full of recipes from the Otaihuna kitchen, presided over by executive chef Jimmy McIntyre (opposite and below), who revels in the fresh ingredients from the estate's farm and gardens.



For Cannon it was “a stunning confirmation for a fantastic team that works harder than anyone to show off the wonders of Canterbury... Americans in particular are absolutely in love with New Zealand and this latest listing confirms for us that we are providing a destination that leaves a great, lasting impression in travellers’ minds”.

For anyone who has stayed at Otaihuna Lodge, intends to stay or is just curious about this historic house – once New Zealand largest private home, built by Sir Heaton Rhodes in 1895 – you’ll love *For The Love of a Place*. Written by Cannon and Refo with author and food critic Simon Farrell-Green, it’s full of stories and pictures about the house and its history, its beautiful grounds and fabulous gardens, the guest experience – and its food.

In fact over half the book’s 288 pages are taken up with “Recipes From the Otaihuna Kitchen”. Executive chef Jimmy McIntyre has worked at Otaihuna since before it changed hands and continues to revel in the diversity and quality of the ingredients that come from the estate’s farm and gardens. The large potager garden provides the lodge with “more than 120 varieties and cultivars of fruit, vegetables, nuts and even mushrooms”. Lamb is brought to the table via a small flock of Perendale sheep, while the chefs make their own *coppa*,

prosciutto and other cured meats courtesy of the lodge’s Wessex Saddleback pigs.

Instead of waiters, the chefs themselves present and explain each of the courses to diners, while a host introduces the matching New Zealand wines.

The recipes in the book, divided into chapters such as “Breakfast in the Kitchen”, “Picnic in the Grounds”, “Afternoon Tea in the Drawing Room” or “Private Dinner in the Wine Cellar”, were chosen by McIntyre as “ones I enjoy cooking and which guests really respond to”.

But he says the best part of his job at Otaihuna is not the cooking but the people – the guests – he meets and engages with every day. “I get to cook the food and take it to the table and explain it to every guest,” he says in the book. “You develop this unique relationship with them. It’s like they are coming into your home.”

The book itself is an invitation into a New Zealand home; one of great distinction and one that’s likely to be around for a long time to come, thanks to a couple of former New Yorkers committed to its survival and to sharing their “grand obsession” with others. **M**

For The Love of a Place – The Stories and Cuisine of Otaihuna is published by Godwit, \$80. www.randomhouse.co.nz

