

>> kiwi treat

**Impressive:** Otahuna Lodge, Christchurch, a haven for the decadent diner.



# South Island suite

Just out of Christchurch there's a homestead dream, writes **Zoe Skewes**

**D**INNER at Otahuna Lodge is a little like New Zealand's weather — impossible to predict and full of surprises.

Even chef Jimmy McIntyre rarely knows what his daily five-course degustation dinner will feature until each afternoon when he wanders Otahuna's sprawling organic vegetable garden and fruit-and-nut orchard.

In the summer months guests could find themselves dining on a sorbet of freshly picked summer berries; in autumn it could be Otahuna's own porcini mushrooms in McIntyre's ravioli; with winter comes five varieties of potato for homemade gnocchi; and in spring McIntyre is spoilt with a crop of new asparagus popping up from the rich South Island soil.

With 95 different varieties of vegetables in Otahuna's garden, the only limit to McIntyre's ever-changing menu is his imagination.

"Today for example I thought I'd go out and get leeks and fennel from the garden," McIntyre says as he takes a break from Otahuna's kitchen.

"But I found some baby peas instead, so I picked as many as I needed to go with the main course.

"And yesterday I picked chillies and I had no idea what I was going to do with them. I ended up stuffing them with prawn and salmon and serving them with a salsa made with the last of the summer tomatoes and avocado. The dish was the perfect blend of summer and autumn.

"That's the way it works around here. As a chef it's a wonderful way to operate."

A wonderful way to operate is in fact the perfect description for what life becomes for guests of Otahuna Lodge.

The opulent 1890s homestead is a 20-minute drive from Christchurch Airport. With ease, it redefines the notion of luxury accommodation.

Seven suites — including the 110sq m, four-room master suite — mean there is a maximum of only 14 guests at any one time.

And from the moment guests arrive up the sweeping driveway, it's clear the most taxing decision during their stay will be whether to dine with other guests in the



formal dining room or to opt for a more private dining experience in one of the lodge's many rooms such as the library, the drawing-room turret or the spectacular sunken wine cellar.

All options provide a decadent dining experience, thanks in part to McIntyre's cooking (with five courses each night, guests staying for four nights sample 20 of McIntyre's creations, including his own cured meats) and also to Otahuna's stunning renovation, completed in 2007 under the watchful eyes of owners Hall Cannon and Miles Refo.

Americans Cannon and Refo, both 32, traded their Manhattan lifestyles three years ago for the quiet of New Zealand.

They spent months in New Zealand looking for the right fit before falling in love with Otahuna.

Cannon and Refo couldn't wait to embrace their new life and, with the help of 40 tradesmen on-site each day and an \$8 million budget, the renovations were finished in four months before Otahuna Lodge reopened to guests in May, 2007.

"We love sharing Otahuna with our guests," Cannon says as he sits in front of a crackling fire in one of the two drawing rooms. "And we were so pleased to be able to bring this place back to life."

With 14 fireplaces, 35 commissioned

artworks by New Zealand artists and views of New Zealand's Southern Alps, Otahuna has most certainly been restored to its former glory.

Built in 1895 for high-profile Canterbury pioneer Sir Heaton Rhodes, the three-storey homestead is considered one of the best examples of unspoiled Queen Anne architecture in Australasia.

As luxurious as the interior of Otahuna is, the surrounding gardens are as impressive — particularly given the property was bare, unimproved land before Rhodes' time.

Now the 110-year-old, 12ha gardens are blessed with a breathtaking feature saved for guests lucky enough to visit in spring.

More than 10,000 daffodil bulbs are hidden beneath the grass on the property's main lawn, which becomes a sea of yellow every September as the bulbs bloom.

Rhodes was the first to grow daffodils in New Zealand in the early 1900s and the tradition is something Cannon and Refo are more than happy to continue, opening Otahuna and its daffodils to the public on the first Sunday in September each year.

As is the case with McIntyre's menu, surprises are around every corner.

**The writer stayed courtesy of Otahuna Lodge and Virgin Atlantic.**



## » THE DEAL

**Getting there:** Pacific Blue, Air New Zealand, Qantas and Jetstar fly daily to Christchurch. Pacific Blue flies direct from Melbourne. Fares start from \$189 one way. The airport is 25 minutes by car from Otahuna [www.flypacificblue.com](http://www.flypacificblue.com)

**Staying:** Otahuna Lodge, 224 Rhodes Rd, Tai Tapu, Christchurch. Double rooms from \$NZ700 a person per night in peak season (from \$NZ1100 for singles). Includes degustation dinner with wine, pre-dinner drinks, breakfast and use of all lodge facilities and equipment. [www.otahuna.co.nz](http://www.otahuna.co.nz)

**Nearby:** Otahuna Lodge is an ideal base for exploring Christchurch and the Canterbury region, touring Alpine peaks and glaciers or fly-fishing in the Waimakariri Gorge.

**more >** [www.christchurchnz.com](http://www.christchurchnz.com)

