

to the manor **born**

It's hard to imagine two more contrasting environments than the concrete streets and skyscrapers of Manhattan and the manicured gardens and serenity of Otahuna Lodge. **By Jon Underwood.**

Six years ago, business partners Hall Cannon and Miles Refo swapped the former for the latter, investing more than NZ\$4 million in refurbishing the historic estate just outside Christchurch. A year after they reopened the place, UK society magazine *Tatler* placed Otahuna among the 101 best hotels in the world, vindicating the boys' decision.

As the electronic gates close behind you, there's an unmistakable feeling you're in for something a little special. When Miles greets you at the front door and offers to park your car, you know you're right. I'm assured it is standard operating procedure for Miles or Hall to greet every guest. It's just that kind of place.

"We put a lot of emphasis on the hosted nature of what we do," says Miles. "We want guests to interact with our chefs, gardeners and staff. We really try and imbue a sense of

personality into what we do."

Otahuna was built in 1895 by Sir Heaton Rhodes, by all accounts a good bloke and benefactor to the local community. The Lodge is widely regarded as the finest example of Queen Anne architecture in Australasia and is a listed building with the New Zealand Historic Places Trust.

But when Miles and Hall took over in 2006, it was in desperate need of a facelift. The original woodwork has been cleaned, polished and oiled while the house has been re-furnished with artwork, furniture, curtains, light fittings and upholstery. They've also restored the 12 hectare gardens.

"We thought this place was extremely different for New Zealand. It's basically an English country house plopped in the middle of the country. To buy something like this in the U.S. or UK would have been well out of our price bracket."

I'm shown to the Verandah Suite,

Main picture: The food at Otahuna Lodge is of the highest quality



so named because of the large balcony that overlooks the front of the house and a veritable suntrap in the afternoon. It's exactly how a large country house of the era should be, with squeaky floorboards and period furniture aplenty. Everything is perfect, although I do have to question the proffered bedside reading. *A Short History of Sheep in New Zealand* is no doubt meant to send you to sleep. I guess it beats counting them.

Dinner is a particular highlight as every night guests sit down to a five-course degustation menu created by executive chef Jimmy McIntyre. Nearly all the ingredients used in Jimmy's delicious dishes are grown on the

into a roaring open fire. First up is a multi-coloured cauliflower soup with scallops, salsa verde and cherry tomatoes. It's rich, creamy and totally yummy. A scrumptious Banks Peninsula beef fillet follows, before my favourite course of the evening: a delicious Whitestone Windsor blue cheese. The feast ends with poached pear in an almond meringue and vanilla bean ice-cream.

Each dish is complemented by a hand-picked wine (make sure you get Emma to give you a tour of the wine cellar). Otahuna is in great wine country so they're all good, but my favourite was a 2007 Alpha Domus 'The Navigator'. Robust, spicy and very drinkable.

In Christchurch these days it's



Left to right: The homely kitchen at Otahuna; the 18th green at Clearwater; the gardens at Otahuna; Executive Chef Jimmy McIntyre; canapés before dinner; the 16th green at Clearwater

property so freshness is guaranteed. Guests have the choice of eating with fellow visitors in the lavish dining room or finding a favourite nook or cranny within the house for a more personal meal.

"The main focus of our cuisine is on what we grow in the garden. We grow 120 different types of fruit, vegetables, nuts and mushrooms organically every year. Sometimes our chefs won't pick their ingredients until 4 p.m. on the day they are cooking with them. Guests will often go down with the chefs and help them pick the produce for their meal that night."

On my first night, I'm dining in the impressive library, gazing dreamily

almost impossible not to talk about the recent earthquakes and Otahuna didn't escape. The first one brought down all 10 chimneys on the main building (the bricks now reused as an outside dining area) and they had only just finished repairing the damage when the second one hit. Thankfully, no one was hurt and the Lodge is now fully operational.

Fireplaces are a major feature at Otahuna and there are 15 spread throughout the building. I could just imagine relaxing in my historic bathtub with a glass of wine and a fire glowing in the grate.

And that's exactly why a stay at Otahuna is a panacea for the mind,

OTAHUNA ON A PLATE

Kiwi Jimmy McIntyre (below left) has worked in many of New Zealand's best kitchens, arriving at Otahuna Lodge as Executive Chef in 2003. With most of the ingredients he uses grown on the property, Jimmy is seldom lost for ideas.

"I get to do things with food that I would never otherwise have the opportunity to do. I can cure my own meats, pick my veggies how I like them and see foods I have never used in a restaurant before.

"I am constantly learning and I have probably learned more in the past nine years I have been here than in my whole 35 years."

Guests are able to help Jimmy select ingredients for their evening meal as he takes them on a tour of the impressive gardens. The herb garden is right outside the kitchen window.

"It's just so fresh and within a matter of minutes or hours it can be on the plate. We try not to play with it too much. We want it to look beautiful but there are no fluffy garnishes or sugar towers. It's there for a reason. And what comes with that freshness is great flavour."

Jimmy loves the interaction he is able to enjoy with guests that wouldn't be possible in a restaurant.

"It gives people a fuller appreciation of what we're trying to achieve and 99 percent of them get it. We are so used to eating things out of tins. It's just getting back to that old way of having things straight out of the garden.

"I walked in today not really not knowing what I was going to do for dinner. It's a bit scary sometimes but it's amazing how once you get in the zone you can focus and concentrate. Sometimes you have good days, sometimes you have bad days but it changes all the time."



body and soul. It's a fantastic place to just relax and unwind, with a walk in the grounds or swim in the heated pool. There's not much else to distract you.

Unfortunately, golfers aren't renowned for their ability to sit still when there's a game to be had and Christchurch offers plenty of opportunities to scratch the itch. Most notable is Clearwater, which recently hosted the New Zealand Open. They were preparing the course for the tournament the day I played so I expected monstrously high rough, lightning fast greens and my score to rapidly approach three digits.

What I found was a course that was

firm but fair, with several tee options allowing golfers of all abilities to accept and manage the challenge it presents. It was in splendid condition, too, with tight fairways that were just a pleasure to play off.

"Most of the hazards are either on the ground or in the water," says club captain Barry Johnston. "Trees aren't a feature of this course, therefore it is quite exposed and the wind can blow here, and that creates a challenge. The biggest defence of the course is the wind."

After the first seven holes, you might be tempted to think Clearwater has more bark than bite. But from the eighth onwards, you'll begin to



Otahuna Lodge is a superb example of Queen Anne architecture

at a glance

Getting there: Emirates flies from Sydney to Christchurch. 61-3/9940-7807; emirates.com/au

Green fees: Clearwater, NZ\$50 members guest, NZ\$135 casual visitor, NZ\$80 NZ or AUS affiliated guest. clearwaternz.com

Tai Tapu. NZ\$20. taitapugolf.co.nz

Accommodation: Otahuna Lodge is an exclusive country estate offering five suites and two master suites. Each has ornate original fireplaces, carved inglenooks and stained-glass windows. All luxury suites offer super-king beds, fine custom-made linens, toiletries by Penhaligon's of London, deep bathtubs and separate rain showers. otahuna.co.nz

Rates: Prices vary from NZ\$1,450 a night for single occupancy in one of the five suites to NZ\$2,100 for double occupancy of The Rhodes or Verandah Suite. Price includes a five-course degustation dinner with wine pairings for each course, pre-dinner drinks with canapés, continental and/or full cooked breakfast, laundry services and full use of Lodge facilities and equipment. Rates quoted apply until April 30.

What else to do: Otahuna has a swimming pool and outdoor hot tub, tennis, croquet or petanque. Stroll through woodlands, go cycling and horseback riding. A visit to the harbour town of Akaroa, a trip into Christchurch or a heli-flight into the Southern Alps.

For more information, e-mail enquiries@otahuna.co.nz; otahuna.co.nz

realise what a challenge it can be. The hole in question is stroke index one on the card and presents water down the right and bunkers on the left and is particularly tough into the wind, forcing you to hit as much as a three-iron for your second.

Water becomes more and more a feature as the round progresses and is particularly in evidence on the par threes: the fourth, ninth, 11th and 16th are all about carrying the aqua. Barry nominates the 14th as one of his favourite holes – probably because he lives right next to it – but it is a cracking risk-and-reward par-five where you twice have to decide whether to take on a water carry.

Yet it is the final hole that most prove as one of the toughest they've seen. It's 407-metres off the back tees

with out-of-bounds right, water left, narrow fairway, bunkers, thick rough and almost always into the prevailing wind. Your basic golfing nightmare. Add a green that's surrounded on three sides by water and you have one dramatic finishing hole.

Clearwater is a championship course but if you've got a spare couple of hours and want to experience Kiwi country golf, head just five minutes down the road from Otahuna to Tai Tapu. It's a nine-holer with a couple of notable challenges, particularly the par-four seventh, a dog-leg right to left to a two-tier green. It's a great place for a friendly game and if nothing else it will help walk off one of those wonderful meals at Otahuna. 🌸

Pictures courtesy of Otahuna Lodge.