

TEXT JUDY SARRIS

# Luxury Lodgings

Otahuna Lodge makes the ideal base to explore the North Canterbury wine region, assuming you can tear yourself away from the first-class food and sublime gardens that surround the heritage building.



Only a few of what are referred to as the 'earthquake vintages' were saved.

The drive up the laneway to Otahuna Lodge is most spectacular in spring when thousands of bright yellow daffodils are in bloom in the paddock just below the massive, well-manicured lawn that sweeps down from the house. The white timber building constructed from local materials is one of the finest examples of Queen Anne-style architecture in Australasia with its elegant chimney stacks reaching up towards the gently undulating hills beyond.

The chimneys are replicas of the originals that tumbled down in the massive Christchurch earthquakes of 2010 and 2011, along with three walls of the wine cellar that decimated most of the lodge's collection of premium New Zealand wine. Only a few of what are referred to as the 'earthquake vintages' were saved and poured if their seals remained intact, despite missing or damaged labels.

Thankfully, much of the house remains as it was in 1895, when New Zealand politician, farmer and philanthropist, Sir Heaton Rhodes, built it for his bride Jessie. Sir Heaton was a keen horticulturist, and the notable garden planted with the profusion of daffodils was the final touch to the unforgettable and enduring gift to Jessie.

Sir Heaton lived in the house until he died in 1956 after which it took on a number of guises, including a Catholic Monastery and a commune, before reverting to private ownership. The current owners, Hall Cannon from Memphis and Miles Refo from Boston, acquired the property in 2006 and with time and talent turned it into a luxurious accommodation worthy of Relais & Châteaux rating. Conveniently located close to Christchurch and about hour's drive from the cool-climate Waipara Valley wine region, it's an excellent base for those keen to explore the cellar doors filled with highly sought-after wines.

Refo is in charge of the extensive gardens, while Hall runs the house - containing seven guest suites - which was overhauled with the assistance of Stephen Cashmore, one of New Zealand's few heritage interior designers. The refurbishment is sympathetic to the building's Edwardian heritage, yet incorporates every modern requirement. Dramatic and highly collectible New Zealand art by Peter Hackett, Fiona Gedson, David John and Brian McCracken decorates the walls, while original panelling and fireplaces have been restored.

The beating heart of the lodge is the enormous kitchen where chef Jimmy McIntyre and his team take inspiration from the orchards and potager garden for their dishes. With more than 120 cultivars of fruit, vegetable, nuts and mushrooms, there is an abundance of produce, which is apparent in the jars of pickles and preserves that line the

shelves. Otahuna even grows its own Devon black pigs who happily reside in their special section of the garden aptly named Oink-A-Huna, while the hens for fresh eggs are around the corner in Ota-Hen-A.

McIntyre cures his own coppa, prosciutto and other pork products, which are hung in the wine cellar opposite the kitchen. Housed in what was once the original fowl and game house, the cellar is partially sunk into the hillside and provides ideal conditions for the lodge's impressive collection of mainly New Zealand wine.

Refo is in charge of the buying for the cellar and has placed a strong emphasis on premium Canterbury and South Island wines, but there are plenty of current vintages from other regions. Running an eye over the racks you will spot favourites such as Pyramid Valley, Bell Hill and Pegasus along with Puriri Hills, Escarpment and Rippon as well as a decent selection of Champagne.

Much is made of the food and wine matching at Otahuna and the fact that even the locals like to book the main dining room for private gatherings bears testament to the high standard. A grand and convivial dinner in the dining room with other guests is a highlight, but a private dinner by the fire in the library, in the turret or in the wine cellar, which is, for obvious reasons, only recommended in warmer months, are enticing choices, too.

On the first night of our visit, we dined in the turret overlooking the front garden and the lake beyond. The menu had been created to represent the best of the local produce and began with crayfish, citrus, fennel and new potatoes matched with Quartz Reef Methode Traditionnelle Brut from Central Otago. Each of the courses are usually served by one of the chefs, providing opportunity to learn more about ingredients and techniques. In fact, if you're a keen cook, classes can be booked with the chefs in the kitchen, with lessons beginning with harvesting produce from the lodge's working gardens.

Homemade French onion soup with a 2014 Te Mata Gamay Noir from Hawkes Bay came next; it made for a spectacular second course. The Canterbury duck with parsnip purée and Otahuna spring vegetables washed down with another Hawkes Bay wine, the 2012 Alpha Domus The Navigator, was high on our list of favourite dishes and barely left us with any room for the local cheese followed by chocolate torte, chocolate mousse and pear sorbet.



**OPEN AIR**  
Breakfast is served  
at Otahuna Lodge.

Mornings are peaceful at Otahuna as you wake only to the sound of birdsong. After breakfast in the kitchen is a good time to tour the grounds taking in the 100-year-old Dutch Garden, whose linear shapes resemble a windmill, that has been lovingly restored by Refo and his team of gardeners. There are literally thousands of types of trees and plants softening and scenting the landscape including mature Wellington Pines, Weeping Cherry and New Zealand's largest strawberry tree. Wandering through The Woodlands you'll spot ancient rhododendrons and a frog pond, while the Great Lawn is fringed by majestic oaks under which you'll find mushroom gardens.

Don't miss the potager garden and its many and varied vegetables and herbs, or the orchard filled with heritage fruit and nut trees including quince, peach, fig, walnut and hazelnut as well as plenty of apples and pears. You'll also come across the lodge's pool area, and the gym and spa located in the original laundry and the tennis courts hidden behind a fence groaning under climbing roses and other vines.

If you can tear yourself away from this bucolic paradise, head for Waipara Valley just an hour north of Otahuna. You'll find more than 30 wineries, 12 with cellar doors full of plenty of cool-climate pinot noir and riesling as well as other aromatics varieties, and chardonnay to try. During our stay, we headed off to visit Pegasus Bay where lunch guests are automatically treated to a very good tasting at the cellar door before heading to yet more beautiful gardens to dine.

Not far away, Black Estate provides sharp contrast to Pegasus Bay with its cellar door and restaurant housed in a slick black barn. Owned and run by the Naish family, this is just the spot to while away the rest of the afternoon enjoying the view over the vineyards as you sip on their bounty. Don't miss the Damsteep Pinot Noir. It's a cracker and named because the vineyard is just so damn steep. If you care to venture a little further afield to Waikari to visit Pyramid Valley Wines and Bell Hill Vineyard you won't regret it, but there again, you'll find bottles from both in the well-stocked cellar back at the lodge.

Otahuna Lodge, 224 Rhodes Rd, Tai Tapu, Christchurch, New Zealand, +64 3 329 6333, [otahuna.co.nz](http://otahuna.co.nz)  
Judy Sarris was a guest of Otahuna Lodge.

Besides winery visits, which are between 40 and 90 minutes drive away from Otahuna Lodge, there are plenty of other diversions. The lodge provides hybrid bicycles and walking maps for those who want to explore the Otahuna Valley. Heli-touring trips around the region can be arranged. Heli-skiing and fly-fishing are popular options in season.

## North Canterbury Wineries to Visit

### PEGASUS BAY

Owned and operated by the Donaldson family, this a great spot for lunch in the well-tended garden after tasting their excellent range of wines made from the estate's vineyards. Tastings and sales from 10am-5pm seven days and the restaurant is open noon to 4pm, seven days.  
263 Stockgrove Rd, Waipara, +64 3 314 6869, [pegasusbay.com](http://pegasusbay.com)

### BLACK ESTATE

A family-owned winery run by Penelope and Nicholas Naish who hand-craft a range of pinot noir, riesling and chardonnay. The cellar door and restaurant are open Wednesday to Sunday from 10am-5pm.  
614 Omihiri Rd, Waipara, +64 3 314 6085, [blackestate.co.nz](http://blackestate.co.nz)

### GREYSTONE WINES

Established by the Thomas family in 2004, Greystone has received many accolades for its wines from its vineyards situated on limestone slopes. The cellar door is open 11am-4pm, seven days.  
376 Omihiri Road, Waipara, +64 3 314 6100, [greystonewines.co.nz](http://greystonewines.co.nz)

### MUDDY WATER

The first certified organic vineyard in the region, Muddy Water is known for its pinot noir, chardonnay and riesling. Muddy Water shares a cellar door with Greystone Wines, 11am-4pm, seven days.  
376 Omihiri Rd, Waipara, +64 3 314 6100, [muddywater.co.nz](http://muddywater.co.nz)

### WAIPARA HILLS

Set in beautifully landscaped gardens with views across the Home Block vineyard you can taste a whole range of wines at the cellar door, dine at the café or participate in a winery tour. The cellar door is open 10am-5pm seven days with lunch in the café available from 10am-3pm.  
780 Glasnevin Rd, State Highway, Waipara, +64 3 314 6900, [waiparahillswines.co.nz](http://waiparahillswines.co.nz)

### TONGUE IN GROOVE

The team behind Tongue in Groove wines doesn't have a cellar door, but show their wines by appointment at their property, The Food Farm where they also grow their own produce.  
214 Mt Brown Rd, Amberley, +64 274 242 871, [tongueingroove.co.nz](http://tongueingroove.co.nz)

### TERRACE EDGE

A small family-run estate where fruit is hand-picked and hand-sorted and wine is made with minimal intervention often using wild yeasts from the winery. Open 11am-4.30pm, Thursday to Sunday. Call ahead to book an appointment if visiting from Monday to Wednesday.  
328 Georges Rd, Waipara, +64 0 27 487 8570, [terraceedge.co.nz](http://terraceedge.co.nz)

### PYRAMID VALLEY VINEYARDS

If you have the time, travel out to Waikari where you'll find Pyramid Valley Vineyards. This stellar producer is open by appointment only from October to March with winery tours that can be booked on Saturdays between 9.30-11.30am.  
548 Pyramid Valley Rd, Waikari, +64 3 314 2006, [pyramidvalley.co.nz](http://pyramidvalley.co.nz)

### BELL HILL VINEYARD

This top-rated winery established by Marcel Giesen and Sherwyn Veldhuizen in 1997 is not officially open to the public, but visits can be arranged by appointment. It's worth the effort.  
105 Old Weka Pass Rd, Waikari, +64 3 379 437, [bellhill.co.nz](http://bellhill.co.nz)



**ON THE HOUSE**  
Inside Otahuna Lodge.  
Centre: Black Estate.



## WINE TRAVEL

**FROM THE VINES**  
Black Estate's Home  
vineyard. Left: Dom  
Maxwell of Greystone.



If you can tear yourself away from  
this bucolic paradise, head for Waipara.



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF OTAHUNA LODGE, GREYSTONE WINES, BLACK ESTATE, PEGASUS BAY AND TONGUE IN GROOVE.



**WAIPARA WINERIES**  
Pegasus Bay. Right:  
Tongue in Groove's  
barrel room.

