



HISTORY CLASS

Despite tough times and devastating quakes the historically rich Otahuna Lodge has been lovingly restored to its former glory – and then some.



HEATON RHODES NEVER did things by half measures. Canterbury's ultimate gentleman farmer, "The Squire of Tai Tapu", built a grand country house at the neck of a Banks Peninsula valley and proceeded to fill it with the best his considerable wealth could buy – elegant wallpapers from Japan, dining chairs covered in elephant skins, an ornate carved sideboard so magnificently imposing that as subsequent owners sold off the original furniture it stayed behind, too heavy to shift.

The sideboard remains, gleaming at the end of the dining table as a succession of lavish dishes arrive from the kitchen. Otahuna Lodge does everything well, but top of the list is food, much of which involves produce grown on site. On this evening, we are treated to a five-course degustation meal that almost overshadows our 1890s heritage surroundings. Almost.

The Canterbury earthquakes hit Otahuna hard. Eleven chimneys came down – some through the roof – there was extensive cracking to plaster and some slumping. Twice the lodge was forced to close for restoration work, closely guided by heritage experts, before reopening in July last year. Apart from a new terrace made of bricks retrieved from all of those deposed chimneys, however, you'd never guess at the damage done by the quakes.

It is a magnificent house of 41 rooms, built of rimu and kauri – a lifesaver in September and February when so many masonry buildings collapsed – with grand staircases, elegant verandahs and quirky touches such as the Japanese-style turret room, which like the wallpaper was inspired by Heaton and Jessie Rhodes' honeymoon in Japan.

Rhodes, who inherited his fortune but was never a feckless heir and served as a long-term parliamentarian and minister in Massey's Reform cabinet,

HEATON RHODES

Previous page: the House and the Frog Pond. This page: Polo Suite (right); Spa (below); Verandah Suite (below right); chocolate torte (bottom).



wanted Otahuna to make a statement about the ability to live graciously in a colonial setting. He succeeded. And his vision has been honoured by current owners Hall Cannon and Miles Refo, who fell in love with the property as guests in 2005, then bought Otahuna 16 months later after deciding to settle in New Zealand.

“We were gobsmacked by its uniqueness,” says Cannon, explaining why they decided to take on a heritage property with some daunting challenges. “Otahuna is quite different – we’ve been around for 117 years. We have these fantastic gardens. And we are passionate foodies, so the ability to grow so much organically on site was something we couldn’t duplicate anywhere else.”

During the past five years the ex-New Yorkers have refurbished the house and restored and developed its nationally significant gardens, bringing Otahuna back to life while also boosting its credentials as five-star luxury accommodation. They have also revived the original owner’s tradition of opening the place on the first weekend in September for the public to view Otahuna’s famous fields of daffodils and wander the grounds.

As well as being a keen stockbreeder and philatelist, Rhodes was an expert horticulturist who took a hands-on approach to his garden. Designed by Kew Gardens-trained landscaper AE Lowe, it’s the kind of garden in which you can easily lose several hours exploring.

From the house a wide lawn descends to the lake, from where a series of intimate walks head through thick woodlands towards the orchard and potager garden that supply Otahuna’s kitchen, and on to a formal “Dutch” garden of hedged pathways and exotic trees. According to Cannon, this part of the garden hadn’t been touched in half a century and had to be extensively rehabilitated and replanted. It’s magical, especially just on dusk.

After which, Otahuna tradition dictates that you make your way to the drawing room for canapés and cocktails, before moving through to the dining room for another elaborate and wonderful dinner. If it all sounds a bit *Brideshead*, even starchy, it shouldn’t. From the moment you pull up in the driveway, the atmosphere at Otahuna is warm and welcoming.

“There’s always lots of staff interaction, which we want and encourage,” says Cannon, adding that he and Refo feel “incredibly lucky” to be custodians of Heaton Rhodes’ legacy. “We want our guests to know that when they stay here they couldn’t be anywhere else in the world but at Otahuna and in New Zealand.”

STORY MATT PHILP