

COAST



ORANGE
COUNTY

DIVE DEEP ■ INSPIRE INTELLIGENCE ■ DREAM





A TASTE OF OTAHUNA

STEVE BRAMUCCI VISITS OTAHUNA LODGE IN NEW ZEALAND'S CANTERBURY REGION AND REVELS IN THE JOYS OF SLOW FOOD AND SLOW TRAVEL

There are places on this earth that seem to attract a certain, frenetic breed of traveler—dashing from one sight to the next, ticking boxes on some internal checklist, cameras clicking rapidly.

New Zealand's Canterbury region, on the South Island, is not one of these places. By its very geographical nature—gently undulating hills, shire-like hamlets, and isolated, cliff-lined harbors—Canterbury demands a calmer, more contemplative pace. To rush would mean missing one of its greatest selling points: tranquility. So when I had the chance to visit last winter, I went unburdened by an itinerary. I had nothing more than a reservation at Otahuna Lodge, a country estate I'd been longing to visit since hearing about the property's vast gardens and Alice Waters-esque commitment to growing its own food.

I flew into Christchurch—the largest city on the South Island—and headed straight to the lodge, 30 minutes away. Even for someone who has never seen an English-style country estate, Otahuna was easy to recognize as such. There were perfectly-manicured rolling hills, a pebbled drive, a duck pond surrounded by shady trees, and a mansion so clean that I couldn't tell if the most recent coat of white paint was even dry yet.

Stepping out of the car, Hall Cannon and Miles Refo greeted me warmly—both expatriated Americans. The two men showed me inside and directed me to my room.

After years of travel, I still get boyishly giddy about checking into a space like the Polo Suite at Otahuna. The bathroom featured a fireplace and a massive porcelain tub resting in the middle of a white-tile floor. The tables and armoires were done in dark, rich woods. The bedroom had its own fireplace and an extra-wide bed piled high with pillows. Beside the bed stood a glass jar with four brownies inside. I decided it would be rude not to try one. By the time I'd showered and changed, I'd wolfed down the other three.

Basking in the sugar-high, I took a garden tour and a dip in the pool before returning to the living room for happy hour. The other guests were already assembled, drinking cocktails and swapping stories. It wasn't long before the conversation turned to the question of how two Americans ended up in a hamlet outside of Christchurch converting a 120-year-old country home into a luxury lodge.

"We came and initially thought: This place is incredible," Cannon said. "The next thing we thought was: You'd have to be insane to try to restore it." He shrugged, glanced at Refo, and offered a sly smile. "But at some point we decided that there's no substitute for history."

The duo was on a career break when they found the property and formulated the idea of bringing the estate, built by Sir Heaton Rhodes in 1895, back to its former glory. Or perhaps something beyond its former glory, because archival images reveal that Sir Heaton did not have the impeccable, clean aesthetic that the current owners possess.

"We have an amazing canvas, the kind which can't be replicated," Cannon continued, "You don't want to mess that up. Still, you don't want to live like it's 1895. No one likes feeling like they're in a museum."

The renovation was a massive project and no sooner was it complete than cataclysmic earthquakes rocked Canterbury. This series of quakes and major aftershocks in 2011 and 2012 caused massive damage throughout Christchurch and have become New Zealand's second most expensive natural disaster ever. Otahuna lost all 11

Opposite page: An aerial view of Otahuna Lodge nestled in New Zealand's Canterbury region.

Top to bottom: The serene veranda allows guests to bask in the surrounding tranquility. The Otahuna Lodge is reminiscent of a luxurious plantation-style home. The manicured grounds allow guests to meander around the property while simultaneously admiring New Zealand's natural beauty.





chimneys and was forced to close on two occasions. But Cannon and Refo possess an unshakable homesteader spirit. They made repairs and used the fallen bricks to build an outdoor dining patio.

After happy hour, we moved on to dinner – the centerpiece of the whole Otahuna experience. To fully grasp the lodge's commitment to slow food and restoring the once famous Rhodes gardens, I only needed to work backward, detective-style from each plate. The salumi paired with buffalo mozzarella, nectarine, and torn basil came from Otahuna's own pigs, and was cured in-house. The spring vegetables served beside the beef fillet were picked a few hours before service. From the get-go, Cannon and Refo gave their head chef, Jimmy McIntyre, the opportunity to cook for small, eager, deeply appreciative groups every night and he savors the role. He has an eye for detail and works hard to honor the seasons and the region itself with each bite. For what it's worth, his zucchini flowers stuffed with goat cheese and fried in a millet/buffalo yogurt batter is undoubtedly in the top three bites of food I've ever tasted. Each dish is paired with a carefully chosen New Zealand wine. "Another subtle reminder that this experience can't be duplicated anywhere on earth," remarked Cannon.

Dinner concluded with lemon cake, lemon curd, passion fruit and mango sorbet with mint salsa. The dessert was another veritable property tour with fruits grown in the garden, eggs from the chicken coop and herbs from a planter box right outside the kitchen window. By the time I returned upstairs I needed to brace myself on the oiled-wood bannister. After sharing how charmed I was by the notion of taking a bath with a fire crackling a few feet away, and how decadent I found the brownies to be, I opened the door of my room to discover a fire already burning in the bathroom and the brownie jar filled to the brim. The white-glove caliber service at Otahuna is so discreet that one is tempted to believe they've hired elves to do turnovers while McIntyre leads the guests through the final stages of degustation.

The next morning, after a breakfast that included mushrooms from Otahuna's mushroom house, eggs from the hen house, and vegetables from the garden, I met David Hiatt of Canterbury Guiding Company for a tour of the region. We headed first to Akaroa – a quaint settlement on the Banks Peninsula – where we boarded a boat to look for Hector's dolphins. These dolphins are the smallest of their species worldwide;



watching them race beside our boat like eager puppies, with the craggy harbor cliffs as a backdrop, was a lovely way to ease into the day. Later, Hiatt and I would hike to a waterfall, eat a picnic lunch and ride mountain bikes through a working sheep farm. Still, we never felt harried and by midafternoon had arrived back at Otahuna so that I could take a cooking lesson with Chef McIntyre.

As he shared his recipe for lobster bisque, McIntyre also offered up some of his cooking philosophy. "It's about representing New Zealand and this property on every plate," he told me. "The flavors are fresh, bright, and local and people feel that."

Top: A seasonal dish prepared by Chef Jimmy McIntyre.

Opposite page: The chef harvests fresh artichokes hours before the evening meal is served.

Later, when we strained the bisque, McIntyre chose a loose sieve so that the consistency wasn't completely homogenous. Upon doing so he added, "That's Otahuna too – refined but still rustic."

That night, I took my meal in the wine cellar – which was the gameskeeper's quarters in Heaton Rhodes' day. I sat surrounded by bottles of New Zealand wine and house-cured prosciutto and read a history on Heaton Rhodes between courses. Soon, I was feeling contemplative and reflecting on the idea of slowing down. This value is evident all over Otahuna from Sir Heaton's attention to detail in building the property to the patience Refo and Cannon showed in restoring (and re-restoring) it. "We were living in New York before coming to New Zealand," Cannon told me on the eve of my departure. "Finding Otahuna demanded that we take the time to really understand its uniqueness and history."

In doing so, they've created a space that exudes calm – a sensation that is often hoped for and rarely found by travelers. Their approach can be evidenced in the gardens, the kitchen, and the rooms themselves; a fireplace in a bathroom is only useful if you take the time to actually draw a bath.

Perhaps McIntyre put it best at the end of our cooking lesson, "People who never relax come here and find themselves welcoming the change of pace. They get more of that human element – a chef introducing his food, a conversation with other guests, a walk through the garden to harvest vegetables. And that's where the true magic is."

At Otahuna, and in my travels through Canterbury, that magic was on full display – and it was well worth slowing down for. ●

TASTE THE GOOD LIFE ■ Otahuna.co.nz :: canterburycuides.com