

Off the beaten path

MOUNTAIN SPELL



Matakauri Lodge provides everything expected, says **SUE WALLACE**, even the characteristic Kiwi mountain view

A view across the water to the snow-capped mountains captures the essence of Matakauri



Daylight pours into the suite Lounge (left) and local flowers scent a room (below)

Dale Gartland, Executive Chef (above) and part of the lodge prior to renovation (right)

Lake Wakatipu takes centre stage at Matakauri Lodge, a chic alpine retreat near Queenstown, a destination known as New Zealand's adventure playground and party town. No matter how often you glance at the glacial lake, she looks different: at dawn she's wrapped in dark sombre shades, at dusk she is a crowd pleaser draped in cerise and indigo clouds, and when the sun is shining, she sparkles.

The newly refurbished boutique lodge hugs the shore gazing up at the rugged mountain tops of the aptly named Remarkables and Walter and Cecil Peaks. It is a stunning panorama and an "occupational hazard" according to Jay Robertson, who is managing director of the Robertson stable of luxury Relais & Chateaux New Zealand lodges and golf resorts (The Farm at Cape Kidnappers and Kauri Cliffs, both in the North Island). "I never tire of this view, it changes so quickly and the colours are amazing," he says.

Robertson and his father, New York Hedge fund billionaire Julian H Robertson Jr, spent years searching for the idyllic South Island property to add to "their string of pearls." He says, "My father and I sat here looking out at the lake and the snow covered mountains and then the vintage steamboat. The TSS Earnslaw passed by and that was the clincher. That's

what helped make this place unique, it gave it character. The position to Queenstown was important, as well. Here you are insulated from all the action but certainly not isolated, it is just a quick drive into town."

Matakauri Lodge boasts 11 luxury suites and is much smaller and more intimate than the other Robertson jewels, yet just as impressive, with the same exceptional service. Step through the front doors of the main lodge and you are immersed in the stylish decor of New Zealand's acclaimed interior designer, Virginia Fisher. Natural light streams in from bay windows and skylights and there's a fresh crisp feel with lots of natural materials reflecting the pristine environment.

The clever use of colour – white, rust and brown – is punctured with vibrant hot pinks and vivid oranges creating a pleasing palette. Fisher says the decor is "gutsier and more contemporary" than its two sister properties. "I have had some fun with colour and added a touch of glamour here and there, with comfort always in mind," she says.

Enter the split-level lounge room and it is a toss-up between making yourself at home on the comfortable couches or cosy armchairs beside the open fire. Jewel-coloured velvet cushions shimmer in the light and interesting artwork catches the eye, including the work of Scottish abstract artist Callum Innes.

Cocktails and canapes are served here nightly as guests

mingle, while there's also a cute cocktail bar. The intimate dining room is softened further at night by flickering candlelight.

Executive chef Dale Gartland treats us to thyme and honey glazed duck breast with celeriac puree and five spice sauce, rack of lamb with confit shoulder, tortellini, braised vegetables and saffron jus and Aoraki salmon fillet and scampi spring roll with crayfish and coriander bisque. The finale is warm valrhona chocolate cake with cherries and kirsch ice cream. Central Otago wines including a famed pinot noir are selected from the extensive cellar. Guests can also dine in cosy corners of the lodge including the small upstairs library. After dinner it's a short walk back to my cosy villa nestled in native forest overlooking the lake.

Next morning a stunning panorama unfolds as snow glistens on the mountain tops and the Earnslaw chugs by. Just 7km from Queenstown, there is a host of exciting activities right on the door step. Fancy a round of golf? Try your skill at Jack's Point, Millbrook or The Hills. In winter there's a choice of ski fields nearby and for an adrenalin rush you can't beat bungy jumping, jet boating and paragliding or a helicopter trip that whisks you up over the mountains for views that leave you breathless.

Of course, Queenstown beckons with more than 100 bars and restaurants. But be warned. You may just want to stay put. It doesn't take long to fall under Matakauri's spell. ■

COURTESY MATAKAURI LODGE

Gourmet Talk



Cooking for Kidnappers

Dale Gartland is the Group Executive Chef of the Lodge at Kauri Cliffs, the Farm at Cape Kidnappers and Matakauri Lodge. Originally from Shropshire, Great Britain, Gartland, with his trademark muttonchops, trained at Devon's Gidleigh Park (another Relais & Chateaux Grand Chef property) with Michael Caines, a two-Michelin-star chef, before heading to New Zealand for a summer season job. He started at Kauri Cliffs in 2003 and became head chef at Cape Kidnappers in 2007. www.matakaurilodge.com

How would you describe the food at Matakauri Lodge?
I use good, honest ingredients and cook with care. I let the ingredients do the talking.

What local produce do you use?
Lamb and venison are a must for this part of New Zealand. I am looking forward to the fruit and vegetable stands in the spring and summertime especially cherries from Cromwell. The Otago region is renowned for its fresh local produce and we are also planting a small vegetable garden at Matakauri.

Do you think degustation menus are still as popular or is there a swing back to à la carte?
We like to offer both options and have the waiters talk through menu options with the guests. Sometimes it all depends on what the guests have during the day. They might want a quick meal or stay for the long haul and have a sample of everything.

Have you developed new dishes for Matakauri?
We are currently working on new dishes with Aoraki Salmon, crayfish and Merino Lamb.

What are the most popular dishes on the menu?
The menu changes every day so unless guests ask for a specific dish then they will not see a dish twice, obviously lamb, crayfish and venison are favourites and everybody wants to try at some stage of their visit.

Are guests becoming more health conscious?
Definitely and we think about that when we are cooking, all our soups at lunchtime have no butter or cream as a standard. We also balance the menus so there are lighter options and salads available.

What are some new emerging food trends?
I am not too sure about food trends, I look at cookery shows and read menus and it looks like chefs are going back to some good old fashioned cooking and letting the ingredients speak for themselves. I could be totally wrong but that's the beauty of cooking. **SW**