

dining in

the name of the game

Some of the finest
game dishes in
New Zealand are
now being served in
Rotorua's Treetops.



Written by Timothy Giles

One of New Zealand's most exclusive lodges, Treetops, has lured home a local chef with a culinary CV that reads like a gourmand's must-do list of the finest eateries in Europe and the United Kingdom.

In eleven years away, Auckland-born Philip Reynolds worked and led in some of the world's best-known kitchens. This included Michelin three-star establishments such as the Enoteca Pinchiorri, George Blanc and Alain Senderens. Well-travelled foodies will recognise, and probably have been frustrated trying to book, Marco Pierre White's L'Escargot, famed A-list hang-out Morton's or West London's premier members-only Cobden Club, for a taste of Reynold's food

But London couldn't keep him. Announcing his intention to return home, Reynolds surprised Britain's most famous foreign resident, Mohammed Al-Fayed, by resigning from his prestigious position as head chef at Harrods.

"Mohammed Al-Fayed is quite a man to work for; he is incredibly exacting," says Reynolds. "For example, I served a one-off dish for a Discovery Channel feature. Twelve months later Mr Al-Fayed asks me for the same dish. I made it and he was happy, but pointed out that the original had seven mushrooms on the plate while this time I'd only presented six!"

Reynolds says that at Harrods he had every resource available to cook to an excellent standard. "Which is exactly what I need to work to". But even Al-Fayed couldn't compete with the call home. "I



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don't know a single kiwi who doesn't long for home and I saw the opportunity to match my professional passion with my love of the New Zealand lifestyle."

At Treetops, Reynolds has found a place to enjoy that lifestyle to the full.

Set in a sheltered valley among 1000 hectares of carefully managed private wilderness, Treetops resort is unique not just in New Zealand, but internationally.

With five-star plus luxury, up to 40 guests can choose to stay in the beautifully appointed and rustic lodge or secreted away in one of eight forest or lakeside villas. Treetops offers every experience from pampered pleasure and quiet contemplation of nature to vigorous interaction with its vast wilderness.

It's a wilderness owner and founder, John Sax, loves with a passion. The estate is just a few miles from the farm where he grew

up hunting with his father and four brothers. Until, like so many of his farming peers, John's father drained the property's last wetlands for pasture. For John, that decision was the birth of a lifelong dream "When Dad lost interest in hunting, we lost the remainder of our woodlots and wetlands. That was a sad time for me. I loved being amongst the trees, climbing up through thickets to watch our native birds, waterfowl and pheasants nesting. I dreamt that one day, just maybe, I could turn the clock back and restore some of those magnificent trees and habitat, that was not only my playground but that of native and game birds alike."

Treetops is that dream and John Sax has indeed turned back the clock. Having been involved with the property for some years, Sax bought Treetops in 1993. "I thought here was a way to combine many of the things I

love. To create an eco-park, centred on the establishment of an upland game and waterfowl habitat. New Zealanders, I believe, need to learn more about our environment. We are very fortunate in New Zealand to have large tracts of country that are freely available for hunting and fishing. But that's meant we're often too focussed on the taking, rather than investing in the environment. Our aim through this eco-park is to encourage others to think about alternative land use and to value the environment for the future. With nearly ten years of toil,



Above: Philip Reynolds, left the Michelin-starred kitchens of Europe for the bush-clad luxury of Treetops Lodge and Estate.

planting over 70,000 trees to supplement centuries-old native forest, ongoing predator eradication and close co-operation with government and private environment agencies, an area once almost entirely devoid of wetland now boasts six distinct wetland areas ranging from 0.6 to 2.5 hectares.

Sustainability is the key says Sax. "When we started out, I was surprised at the knowledge gaps in eco-management. So in good kiwi style we set out to create something that felt right. The emphasis here is on balance, on providing a sustainable harvest environment that is good for man and beast, now and in the future.


The property is certainly good for people. As well as five-star plus luxury,

Treetops boasts over 70 kilometres of walking or mountain biking tracks and seven separate trout streams and ponds.

That Treetops is good for beasts is proven in the resort's status as one of New Zealand's few Fish And Game Council licensed game preserves - an achievement Sax counts as one of his finest.

Reaping a sustainable harvest is certainly top-of-mind for Philip Reynolds. "Cooking in Michelin-starred and AA Rosette restaurants was terrific, but too often I ended up managing chefs, organising kitchens and inspiring others to deliver my food on product I couldn't control. Coming home is about getting at the best product to deliver the best food I can possibly create."

Drawing trout, venison, pheasant, pork and duck from the rich and constantly regenerating stocks on his doorstep means Reynolds can guarantee the quality. "I know what the pheasant are eating, so I know the taste I can harness. Even the venison," he laughs. "They've been devouring my herb gardens regularly. Inconvenient perhaps, but I know they are dining on the very best."

Which is true for Treetops guests, too, something Reynolds wants to personally ensure. "John Sax has a philosophy here; all of Treetops is open to our guests and that includes my kitchen. It's an interactive kitchen, where guests come and interact with us. I want to remove the mystery of cooking and I want to know my guests, their tastes, their mood. I want my guests to be excited about what they are eating. I want them as excited about my food as I am." 

PHEASANT WITH SAUERKRAUT

100g smoked streaky bacon
3tblsp olive oil
1 medium onion, sliced
450g tinned sauerkraut
100ml white wine
200ml chicken stock
1 bay leaf
2 juniper berries
2 peeled carrots
2 pheasant
salt and pepper

Remember that Pheasant has a low fat content, so it can dry very easily. With no fat to protect it, pheasant must be cooked gently, which is the idea behind roasting it off quickly and using the moisture from the sauerkraut.

METHOD

Set oven - 200C
Blanch bacon in boiling water for 2 min. refresh in cold water.
Sweat onion in 1 tblsp oil slowly for 8 min until soft, add bay, crushed juniper, whole carrots, white wine, stock, bacon and sauerkraut.
Cover and cook in oven for 1hr
Season pheasant inside and out.
Brown in a hot pan on all sides then roast in oven for 10 mins. Let cool.
Cut pheasant in half; remove bone and place on sauerkraut.
Return covered to the oven for 15 minutes.
Serve with sliced carrot.

MONTEITH'S DOPPELBOCK BIER

Originally brewed in 16th century Bavaria to help Germans through a traditional fasting period, Doppelbock (often referred to as liquid bread) has a rich flavour, dense head, powerful aroma and chocolatey malt notes. Monteith's Brewing Company has released its 21st Century version of Doppelbock as part of the company's limited edition seasonal brews. Described as "voluptuous" the beer is the perfect accompaniment to rich game foods such as pheasant (see our recipe), venison and wild pork Available nationwide - \$10.50 per six-pack.

