



WILD AT HEART

From helicopter tours to remote wineries, to foraging for native ingredients, New Zealand's gourmet experiences present wild luxury on a plate, writes Christine Salins.

The overriding philosophy of The Rees Hotel, Queenstown, is *tiaki*, a commitment to care for New Zealand, in the Māori language. There is no better expression of that than in the hotel's gourmet experiences, which draw on fine artisan products coupled with indigenous ingredients that add a New Zealand flavour.

Executive chef Corey Hume presides over the hotel's True South Dining Room, which has panoramic views over Lake Wakatipu and The Remarkables. He transforms produce such as Gibbston Valley asparagus, Bluff oysters,

Mt Cook salmon, locally produced truffles and honey harvested from the hotel's own hives into masterpieces of creativity, with his efforts winning the restaurant a slew of national and international awards.

Hume likes to invoke "a new memory of time and place" with his food. His squid salami canapé pairs Arrowhead squid with salsa verde made from the native *kawakawa* plant. He loves using Fiordland crayfish; for a truly indulgent experience, the hotel can fly guests to the west coast for hand-dived crayfish he will cook that evening.

His 'Pāmu Deer Milk Ice Cream That's Pretending to be a Lemon' is a talking point. This visually simple, yet technically complex, dessert comprises deer milk ice-cream in a yellow Valrhona chocolate shell. He also used deer milk in a brûlée with poached pear for the first of this year's Culinary Series events.

These intimate and exclusive wine dinners invite guests to indulge in fine food and wine and thought-provoking conversation. Upcoming events will feature Dhall & Nash Fine Wines on 21 May, Dry River Wines on 25 June and Greywacke wines on 30 July.

True South has an enviable cellar, and it just so happens that The Rees CEO Mark Rose is also the hotel's director of wine. For a real treat, guests can join him on a privately guided helicopter tour of the Central Otago wine region.

Flying high

Wine lovers can also be whisked off by helicopter to some of New Zealand's most remote vineyards with Over the Top, a company with decades of experience in flying to inaccessible areas of New Zealand. Its 'Wine by Invitation' experience lands you at the Patriarch of Otago's private vineyard, where you can pick up a bottle of pinot noir and learn about alpine viticulture before swooping off to other vineyards.

The five-hour experience includes a remote alpine landing with a bird's-eye view of Queenstown. It also includes a gourmet picnic hamper of meats, cheese, fruit and chutneys, or you can choose to dine at one of the wineries for an additional charge.

For a shorter, sweeter taste of this breathtaking region, Over the Top's 'Pavlova on a Peak' experience takes

around 45 minutes. While the debate over whether pavlova was created in Australia or New Zealand continues, here it's a quintessentially Kiwi creation, enjoyed with mulled wine or craft beer.

Estate to plate

"*Haere mai taua te hikoi i te ngahere*" ("come walk with me in the forest") says Zeplyn Manny, guest liaison manager at Treetops Lodge & Estate, as she beckons visitors to join her on the Māori indigenous food trail. Nestled in magnificent native forests near Rotorua, Treetops is proof that eco-friendly does not have to mean a compromise on luxury.

A frequent recipient of responsible tourism awards, the lodge and its villas are one with their surrounds. Timber and stone finishes echo the property's natural beauty and its 800-year-old forests. Streams and lakes provide on-site trout fishing. Most meat comes off the estate; many of the vegetables do, too. Everything is organic and 100 per cent pesticide-free. More than 130,000 native trees have been planted over the past few decades.

The indigenous food trail, a guided walk to educate guests on Māori food, has been successfully honed over many years and has now evolved into an 'estate to plate' philosophy offering a complete experience of cooking and eating on the wild side.

Guests are invited to go on a 4WD safari including a visit to the estate's manuka honey aviaries, and an opportunity to view wild deer and water buffalo. That's followed by a stroll through the bush to collect indigenous ingredients such as *tawa* berries, peppery *horopito* and *kawakawa* (herbs), *karengo* (wild nori), *tetragonia* (native spinach) and *pikopiko* (fern fronds).

The experience, available exclusively to in-house guests, concludes with an afternoon in the Wild Food Cooking School, watching the chefs at work and learning the secrets of creating a Māori *hangi*, or pit-oven.

The 'estate to plate' ethos is showcased at every meal and snack at the lodge. Felipe Ponce, head chef for the past five years, hails from Chile and has extensive experience in South America, Spain and the Cook Islands. He blends Pacific



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01 A decadent dessert at Treetops Lodge & Estate 02 Lake views from The Rees Hotel Queenstown 03 Private dining by a Treetops waterfall 04 Fine dining at The Rees 05 Touring vineyards by helicopter. Images 02, 04 © The Rees Hotel Queenstown

"The helicopter experience includes a remote alpine landing with a bird's-eye view of Queenstown, plus a gourmet picnic."



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Travel file

Accommodation
therees.co.nz
treetops.co.nz
Experiences
flynz.co.nz

Rim and Latin American influences in contemporary, imaginative dishes.

Everything on the property is tended, guided, harvested or hand-picked by local Kiwis. Treetops' environmentally sustainable hospitality, luxurious accommodation and pristine wilderness are the epitome of a blissful getaway. ♦