

It's by Huka and by cook

Rub shoulders with the chef who has put this New Zealand lodge on an exclusive global list, writes **Andrea Black**.

The executive chef of Huka Lodge, Paul Froggatt, is holding a cooking class in the grand Trophy Room.

With good humour, and patience, he is showing us, an eager group of five guests, how to expertly shape tortellini.

Immersive experiences like this are par for the course in the rarified world of New Zealand luxury lodges (as well as petanque, tennis, mountain biking and spa treatments), but how many can say that they have rolled pasta, grated truffle and chopped walnuts with a chef whose cuisine has helped put Huka Lodge into the pages of France's exclusive *Les Grande Tables du Monde*; the prestigious guide to the best restaurants in the world?

For Froggatt, a lodge in Taupo on New Zealand's North Island is quite a departure from his culinary career in busy Michelin-starred kitchens of Britain, France, Singapore and Hong Kong.

Look out past the mounted taxidermied deer heads (it is the Trophy Room) and just outside the window the mighty Waikato River is flowing. A couple of guests are trying their luck fly fishing for trout. Right by a willow tree, a greensperson is manicuring a patch of the seven hectares of gardens. A string of ducks waddle on the banks. It's an exceptionally scenic location.

"I wanted to do something a bit different, I wanted to cook in a place where it's not just about the food experience but the whole package, I also love the lifestyle – I'm a father of two," says the British-born chef.

This "whole package" includes foraging for and sourcing the best

sustainable local produce for the nightly five-course menus, which change depending on what's in season.

"The ingredients change so quickly, everything is so fresh, we can chop and change menus whenever we want," says Froggatt with gusto.

"If tomorrow a farmer says to me, 'I've got some beautiful

raspberries' we can do test recipes with raspberries and within two to three days it will be on the menu. It keeps us busy," he says.

And he's keen to share in the glory. Froggatt has devised "Test Kitchen Tuesday" where his team can create anything they desire; he gives them a platform to put up a dish to experiment with tastes and flavours.

"It's something that we do because I was never given that as

an opportunity as a young chef," he says.

"If it works the dish goes onto the menu and they have a much larger sense of pride of what they created and what they're doing every day – it's the team's food."

He may seem laidback, and in person, quite cheeky, but Froggatt is driven.

"When I started cooking I aspired to do three things – to work at Michelin star restaurants, be part of Relais & Chateaux and finally admission into Grande Tables du Monde; for me it was a lifetime goal to become part of that membership. And I got it," he says. Huka Lodge and Melbourne's Vue du Monde are the only two members from our region.

The long table in Huka Lodge's vaulted cellar is set and the candles are lit for a five-course meal with wines to match. It's just one of the 20 private venues to dine at here. Tables for two are set up in an immaculately hedged garden, alfresco by the river or by the fire. Larger parties may want to dine at the Alan Pye Cottage, lavishly decorated in green and blue hues by interior designer Virginia Fisher. Others are sitting down for a meal among the tartan and portraits of hounds in the Library Room, reportedly the favourite venue of Queen Elizabeth II, who has stayed at the lodge several times.

On the walk to the cellar I spot the kitchen garden set up by Froggatt and his team. It's full of radishes, carrots and flowers used for garnish.

Over paired wine we feast on dishes including Manurau Farms quail, John Dory, Nelson crayfish and roasted Southland lamb. We finish with an artfully designed dessert called Abundance, combining Meyer lemon, persimmon, tonka and jivara. It's served by the chef himself. Froggatt tells us we've come at the right time; in-season persimmons have just arrived.

"I enjoy it because you can do that here," says Froggatt of designing the menu from scratch and testing recipes with in-season ingredients days before they are served to guests. He relishes the fact the team can be so creative on a daily basis.

"If working in a city restaurant or big city luxury hotel I really wouldn't be able to do this." **T**

Trip notes

FLY

Air New Zealand operates multiple daily direct flights between Australia and Auckland with connections to Taupo and Rotorua, the nearest main centres to Huka Lodge, which can arrange transfers to and from the lodge. See airnewzealand.com.au

STAY

Rates include pre-dinner drinks and canapes as well as a gourmet five-course dinner (with set menu) each evening, accommodation and full breakfast and use of all lodge facilities. Visit the website for specials.

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Andrea Black travelled as a guest of Huka Lodge and Air New Zealand.

