

Huka Lodge

90 Years of Excellence

Words: Angus Brown

All good things — trout as well as eternal salvation — come by grace and grace comes by art and art does not come easy.

— Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories*

Nearly a century has passed since Irish fly fisherman, Alan Pye, set up camp under the weeping willows and ancient totara trees lining the banks of the Waikato River, just south of the Huka Falls. Lured there by the magnificent surroundings — the majesty of the ever-changing river and some of the best trout fishing in the world, Pye realised his dream of building a fishing lodge on the edge of those teal waters. Huka Lodge soon became a Mecca for anglers the world over.

The lodge's conditions in those days were austere at best. In 1984, the present owner, Alex Van Heeren, fell in love with it, just as his Irish predecessor had done a half-century earlier. Taking Maclean's words to heart, he poured his considerable energy, resources and passion into the lodge. In time and with the exacting touch of the hugely talented interior designer, Virginia Fisher, Mr Van Heeren transformed the property into a destination that has been consistently recognised as one of the most exquisite resorts in Australasia and indeed the world.

This year Huka Lodge turns 90 and to mark this august occasion, it is hosting a series of exceptional events throughout autumn and winter, beginning with the Italian Opera Weekend on 25 April. That day is of course Anzac Day, and so, on the centennial anniversary of that fateful occasion, I am fortunate to be amongst a select grouping of guests at Huka's first celebratory weekend of the season. The combined effect of this hallowed day and the quiet splendor of this place in the fading afternoon light, lend a powerful charge to the atmosphere and there is a feeling of excitement and anticipation in the air. The other events being held this season promise to be equally enchanting: evenings with Eleanor Catton and Nick Farr-Jones, a Rodd & Gunn weekend in

May (co-sponsored by Range Rover), the Bollinger Champagne Dinner in August — with guest chef Martin Benn from Sepia Restaurant in Sydney are but a few of this year's offerings.

There is still a little time before our evening formally begins, and I'm able to wrest the Executive Chef, Englishman Paul Froggatt, from his bustling kitchen to hear about his plans for the evening. Paul's reputation for outstanding cuisine precedes him, coming to Huka Lodge via some of the finest restaurants in England and France, most notably Gidleigh Park Hotel, Bernard Loiseau en Bourgogne and Chateau de Courcelles. In the candlelit underground wine cellar, surrounded by a grand selection of outstanding wines from around the globe, Paul describes a sumptuous five-course meal of langoustine, Waikato pork with spaghetti, Abalone and venison, rare Taupo beef served with piquant onion and mustard preparations, consummated with salted caramel and cinnamon and accompanied by carefully paired Italian wines courtesy of the lodge sommelier.

This is the Italian Opera Weekend and therefore tomorrow, Italian-born Stefano Manfredi — Australia's leading exponent of modern Italian cuisine, will temporarily usurp Paul in the kitchen, beginning with a coffee workshop in the morning which, as a coffee-lover, is a personal highlight for me. Most regrettably though, I will be departing from the lodge after lunch for another engagement in Taupo and will therefore be unable to sample the superb Italian cuisine on Saturday evening.

Time passes too quickly in such splendid surroundings, and after soaking in one of the secluded spa's nestled in the glorious native bush near my impeccable suite, it is time for champagne and canapés in the Lodge



Room. An open fire blazes as the guests arrive. One of Goldie's solemn-eyed Rangitira moko surveys the scene, his jade-green moko perfectly matches the muted green hunting tartan of the chairs and cushions. Our host, Mr Van Heeren, makes time to chat with each of the roughly 30 guests in the room before we are ushered into the dining room. Alex introduces our master of ceremonies, the Director of the New Zealand Opera School, Jonathan Alver and Soprano, Deborah Wai Kapohe who, after a few words from Mr Alver, proceeds to sing half a dozen of the most beautiful arias. Some of the guests close their eyes, some stare dreamily off into the darkness of the river. All are undeniably spellbound. As the evening draws to a close, we retire once again to the fireside. A selection of cheeses and petit fours, which would normally be irresistible, are, after such grand winter fare, simply beyond me. And so I wish my fellow diners good-night and meander down the dark forest path that leads back to my suite.

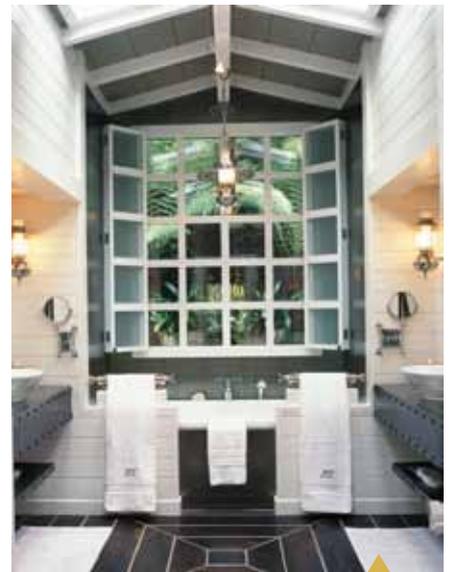
The next morning is glorious. Tui's sing in the trees above my room, the grass glistens in the sharp morning light and the last of the fog rises from the river like some primordial apparition. Stefano imparts his vast knowledge of coffee



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and coffee-making as we savour the delicious blends of Arabica and Robusto he prepares for us. Sufficiently fortified, I now have to move quickly, as we're due on the lake to try our luck with the trout. As it happens, on our homeward stretch, I somehow manage to haul in the fattest, shiniest looking rainbow of the day, which someone quickly sashimi's for us — providing a perfect adjunct to a delicious Pinot Gris from Alex's South African wine estate, Grand Provence. What a day it has been. Thank you Huka Lodge and we wish you the best of luck for the remainder of your marvellous events this year.



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