

## An Utterly Transcendent Food + Wine Tour of New Zealand's North Island, Part I

Posted on [November 17, 2017](#) by [Adam Pollock](#)



There's a tendency for those of us who have chosen to reside in cities like NYC in our ridiculously overpriced luxury shoeboxes, to possess a particular sort of snobbery about the privilege of knowing that the chef-of-the-moment has just opened the most talked about restaurant in the universe right down the street. Which only makes it all the morning humbling to be reminded that they can do it just as well elsewhere, usually without all the haughtiness.

Which is precisely what transpired on our recent visit to New Zealand, where, during a weeklong stay, we ate and drank our way across the landscape to rapturous effect. Truly, the level of excellence we encountered could hardly be conveyed. From [Auckland](#) to [Wellington](#), [Hawkes Bay](#) to [Waiheke Island](#), we were duly impressed at every turn...and we didn't even make it to the South Island.

Speaking of excellence, the delightful flight on [Air New Zealand](#) also reminded us of why US airlines could use a few lessons in impeccable service. And for some reason, the day-and-a-half-time difference resulted in minimal jet lag...perhaps partially thanks to the employment of the appropriate medicinals?

Here's how our epicurean tour of Kiwi country's ethereal North Island played out.

## **Auckland**

After a painless [13-hour flight](#) from LA to Auckland, our first meal allowed us an intimate look at typical Aucklanders out on a Saturday night – and at [Depot](#), across from the famous Sky Tower, they were loud, proud, and knew how to have a good time. The restaurant specializes in casual fresh and sumptuous shareable plates, from oysters and clams to the NZ meat board, which included wild rabbit rillettes, popcorn duck tongue, wild pork salami, beef bresaola and smoked pork loin with cherry relish and fig & fennel crostini. Any doubts as to N-Zed's chefs' ability to sit at the big boys table were immediately dashed.

On our first morning we breakfasted at the popular [SKYCITY Hotel](#), before hopping in a rental car and heading an hour or so north (more on driving on the left in another story). Our destination was the [Brick Bay Winery and Sculpture Trail](#), and on the way we stopped for a coffee at the unbelievably charming [Puhoi General Store](#), where the comely young checkout girl seemed genuinely excited that we were from Brooklyn; we only had to go 8,699 miles for that to happen.



Once at [Brick Bay](#) we delighted in strolling the 2km long trail and mercilessly critiquing the 45 sculptures on display; most received raves from us, however, despite our tendency towards cultural jadedness. Then it was back to the winery for a tasting from what is one of the [Matakana Wine Region's](#) top boutique vineyards; we were particularly partial to their crisp rosé. The beautiful Glass House Kitchen restaurant paired BB wines with simple yet delectable menu items, such as the grilled chorizo and fried egg sandwich (with free range bacon, buffalo mozzarella, and roasted garlic aioli).

Matakana also has a town of the same name; and we took a stroll amongst the quaint boutiques and shops before stopping at [Sawmill Brewery](#) for a tour and tasting of the local suds. That included an impossibly delicious and healthy lunch of miso baked gurnard with asparagus and preserved lime gremolata. Co-owner Rei Harris' tale of kayaking to work from his house "upstream" challenged us to come up with not horrible tales of our daily L-Train commute; we failed miserably.



*Above: Orphans Kitchen; Sawmill Brewery*

That evening we skipped a traditional dinner and went straight for one of the most creative and decadent desert experiences we've ever had the pleasure of...experiencing. Inspired by couture fashion houses, science, art, and technology, [Giapo Petrucci](#) and his wife Annarosa make 'haute ice-cream' in the form of mind-bogglingly inventive creations like the chocolate covered giant squid, at their namesake [Giapo](#). The couple were so passionate about their creations that we couldn't disappoint them by not trying them all.

The following day, before saying adieu Auckland, we checked out some shopping on [Ponsonby Road](#), and had yet another impressive lunch at [Orphans Kitchen](#). The simple, quaint restaurant on a boutique-lined street serves food so fresh there isn't a standard menu; but our waiter suggested wood roasted chook with kiwifruit mole, kumara tortillas, as well as a side of oysters and a cheeky glass of Pinot...and who were we to disagree?

## Waiheke Island



Our next stop was Waiheke Island, a stunning, 32-square-mile rock, just a 30-minute [seaplane](#) ride east of Auckland, that is home to over 20 wineries and close to 50 hotels. During the summer its 7,000 permanent residents are inundated by 50,000 visitors (think: The Hamptons, without all the hangers-on).

[Auckland Seaplanes](#) dropped us off at 10am on a seemingly deserted beach in a stunning cove, and promptly departed. We were about to start gathering wood and laying animal traps when we were welcomed by an amiable missionary from [Man O' War Vineyards](#), located about 50 yards from our position, who escorted us to the tasting room (so, we were "stranded" for all of about five minutes). Named for the battleships that Captain James Cook of the British Royal Navy sailed in the 1700's, the winery is one of the island's finest – although that impression may have been influenced by the thrill of drinking good vino at 10 in the morning. Their Sauvignon Blanc and Tulia Blanc de Blanc were the definitive standouts.



*Man O' War Wine Estate*

We spent the remainder of the afternoon being ferried around Waiheke by a wonderful guide from local tour operator [Ananda Tours](#), who had once worked in the Auckland music biz. He regaled us with a constant geyser of information about the island between stops at various vineyards and restaurants. First up was an alcohol-free vineyard (or "orchard"), which excelled in another dinner table staple, olive oil. [The Rangihoua Olive Estate](#) is an award-winning 100% NZ owned purveyor of the extra virgin variety, which we sampled in abundance.

Stony Ridge and Mudbrick vineyards followed, both of which were in the grand tradition of opulent wineries, the former focusing on luscious reds, the latter including cottages and a lodge for when one doesn't want to sleep too far from the next bottle. We had a late lunch of local Te Makutu Bay oysters, olives, and the vineyard's signature Shepherds Point Merlot in the Mudbrick restaurant, overlooking the rolling hills and ocean beyond.

Our final stop for the day was our room for the night at the gorgeous [Boatshed](#), a boutique hotel where our four-course dinner was served in the downstairs sitting room with yet another ethereal view of the bay. The crème brûlée was to die for, and a sublime cap off to our visit.

In Part 2 we travel south and east explore Wellington and Hawkes Bay.



*The Boatshed*