

THE BEST DIRT

A garden is evidence of faith. It links us with all the misty figures of the past who also planted and were nourished by the fruits of their planting.











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I don't suppose Josiah Spode even knew what a kumara was let alone that, made into a lightly curried soup, it might be served in one of his most beautiful teacups on the far side of the globe.

Spode would have recognized the second dish, however, or at least the ingredients.

It is a small soufflé, cracked by a fragrant steam fissure. The oyster flavour is low and certain, shot sharply through with lemon. It makes you blink in surprise. The shellfish has a delicate flavour that rolls delectably around your mouth; and then the acid lemon comes zinging out of nowhere, it seems. Who'd have thought two such distinct tastes could share such a small ramekin without the one cancelling out the other? You know when a dish is good; the diners eat it slowly, carefully, making it last. They dip their spoons gently into the mixture and draw them out carefully. They briefly let the mouthful linger beneath their collective noses to breathe in its aroma before placing it almost reluctantly on their tongues, for once it's in your mouth it is gone. If the savouring of it was a film, it would probably be X-rated.

The cook nevertheless declares himself unhappy with the result. The diners stare at him as if he is mad.

Spode would also have recognised the next course – a platter of cheese, fresh bread and salad. And why the 17th Century potter would recognize it is not just because these are common food groups but also because the produce is organic. No modern sprays and potions here in the gardens of Orongo Bay Homestead, on the outskirts of Russell in the Bay of Islands.

Chris Wharehinga Swannell picked the salad greens within an hour of placing the individual bowls on the table, so if they smell a little different it's because the leaves have the scent of rain, not the inside of a plastic bag.

The cheeses – an aged Gouda, Havarti-style Leidse with cumin and a creamy blue – are from the Mahoe Cheese Factory at Oromahoe where a small herd of cows – some hand-reared, some raised by nurse cows – lead a loved and cosseted life other bovines can only dream about. The farm is GE free and only vegetarian rennet is used in the cheeses.

Wrapped in a lettuce leaf and drizzled with olive oil, or on a piece of soft multi-grain Kaiwaka bread, they make very satisfying mouthfuls.

The wine in your glass came from under your feet. Through a trapdoor and down a steep flight of stairs is the 1000-bottle wine cellar.





In the cool gloom they are stacked and labelled – venerable Riesling, oaked Sauvignon, Pinot Gris, Pinot Noir, Merlot, Syrah, Blends, Chardonnay and the oddly annotated Weary Old Wines and Worn Out Wines.

If you are not a wine drinker there's freshly squeezed juice and glasses of pure water that comes from the homestead's own spring.

A sluggish rivulet of Blood Orange glaze nudges the edge of a slice of steamed lemon cake and sidles around a scoop of saffron crème fraîche. You have a feeling of great expectation as you put the three tastes together on your spoon with greedy precision. You're not disappointed. The cake is soft and fragrant, the crème fraîche like silk and the Blood Orange glaze has a satisfying sharp, sour, almost burnt bite.

You sit back with a small self-satisfied smirk. Smirking is really not an attractive trait but everyone around the table is doing so, however hard they might try to disguise it. You give yourself permission to be inordinately, selfishly pleased that it is *you* who sits at this table, on this night.

This night is, of course, followed by a new morning and on the breakfast table are tumblers of freshly squeezed orange and kiwifruit juice, so thick you almost need a spoon.

In the bowl before you is crunchy homemade muesli from a recipe especially designed for the property. There are preserved figs, plums and quinces from the garden; organic Greek yoghurt, chocolate-centred banana muffins from the palms growing on the back lawn, croissants and rich brown bread. Artificial flavourings or colourings and preservatives are not permitted in any Homestead cuisine and it shows.

It has been said that continuity gives us roots and change gives us branches, which is apt for historic Orongo Bay Homestead. The continuity is that the home has been on its site for over 140 years. It was built for the first American trade consul so it was a centre of hospitality from its beginning. The current change is that people have become more concerned for the environment and more interested in sustainable living. Add the two together and you have the Russell Community Garden Project.

It took many years for Swannell and his partner, Michael Hooper, to bring the garden up to organic certification. Their hard work has paid off to the benefit of their guests and now also to the local area. As a community venture, a group of keen local gardeners regularly descend on the homestead to learn to grow their own organic vegetables.

The sub-tropical climate leads to a cornucopia of produce that grows quickly, with sturdy stems and lush foliage. So prolific, in fact, that the homestead has a surplus for the local market and also for families in need and the elderly. This is, says Swannell, the way communities are supposed to work and he and Hooper derive a great deal of satisfaction from the project.

Their guests also derive a great deal of satisfaction from the garden and dine on Heirloom potatoes, kumara, broccoli, silverbeet, fat artichokes, glossy avocados, all kinds of lettuce, three varieties of peas, beans, apples, feijoas, figs, guavas, Cape gooseberries, quinces, pawpaw, plums and bananas, flavoured with basil, parsley, mint, nasturtium, lavender, rosemary and sorrel.

The yellow flowers of the mustard lettuce sway over your head as you follow Swannell and Hooper around the beds, as they 'shop' for the



day's ingredients. While meals can be planned in advance, it is the preference of the two to allow the garden to dictate the menu on the day, mere hours before it is served.

Which is why you get such dishes as Kawakawa and garlic-scented pan-fried tofu, resting on double mushroom and tarragon pilaf with this evening's garden harvest of sweet mange-tout and steamed baby asparagus, dressed with green ginger wine vinaigrette. Or, ocean-raised South Island salmon, coddled in champagne and Réunion Island pink peppercorns, served over this evening's garden harvest of blanched beans and mange-tout, accompanied by a golden kumara and miso soufflé, finished with a light curry hollandaise. Or even country hors d'oeuvres with Homestead organic chutney/pickles and tonight's freshest haul of natural Orongo Bay oysters. And then a dessert trio from the Homestead gardens and orchard: organic fig and honey parfait, wild strawberry pudding and caramelised bananas with a Cape Gooseberry, mint and Benedictine salsa.

The key phrases are, of course, "...this evening's garden harvest...", "...tonight's freshest haul...", "...from the Homestead's garden and orchard...". You find yourself redefining your sense of taste and appreciating the adage that cuisine is when things taste like themselves.

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