



Marlborough Lodge, main; outdoor dining, above; chef and author Christine Manfield

# TASTE SENSATIONS

A fallen 600-year-old totara tree is our footbridge across Spring Creek, which winds its way through the Marlborough Lodge estate, in the northeast of New Zealand's South Island, and out to Cloudy Bay on Marlborough's east coast. Sydney chef Christine Manfield, in her signature black-framed glasses, is wrapped up in a hooded black puffer jacket.

Maria, the onsite gardener, casually mentions there are eels in the creek. Manfield licks her lips and her eyes light up. She closed her two-hat Sydney restaurant, Universal, in 2013, but that hasn't stopped her forging relationships with growers and producers. For the past 20 years, she's hosted small-group "culinary safaris" everywhere from Cambodia to India, southern Italy to South America and many destinations between. Tastes of Marlborough is her first tour in New Zealand. And judging by her enthusiasm for the eels and wild rabbits that cross our path, we are in for an adventure.

When I think of Marlborough, it's not wild-caught eel that springs to mind. It's sauvignon blanc. Planted in the region for the first time 40 years ago, the varietal accounted for more than 86 per cent of Marlborough's total wine production last year. Manfield isn't that fond of doing what's expected, though. "Being able to show people [that] there's so much more — I get much more of a thrill out of that," she says.

I certainly didn't expect the first glass of wine I'd be offered after touching down in sauvignon country would be a naturally fermented field blend of riesling, pinot gris and gewurztraminer. But it is. Tamra Kelly-Washington is the winemaker at Seresin Estate, one of the first vineyards to farm its fruit biodynamically in the region. "We're not looking to make full-on fruity, in-your-face styles," she says, "but something more restrained with beautiful natural acidity." We taste chiacrosuro by the outdoor fireplace. Kelly-Washington calls it "a fun little field blend", and it's certainly fun with a mini Canterbury black truffle toastie or two, courtesy of our chef and host.

On last year's count, there were 510 growers and 141 wine companies in Marlborough. "You're really spoiled here with what you can draw on," says Manfield. Our welcome dinner moves from Ora King tempura salmon, straight from the sounds, to a risotto of guanciale, wild rabbit and chorizo. "You're in the middle of the vineyards, you're close to the ocean. The opportunity to bring so much of that bounty, and to share so many rich food stories, is at your fingertips here."

Built in 1901 as a convent for the Sisters of Mercy, Marlborough Lodge was transplanted to its 6.5ha Blenheim location in 1994, and re-

A Marlborough food odyssey with Christine Manfield

MAGGIE SCARDIFIELD



PICTURES ABOVE: CHRISTINE MANFIELD; INSET: MAGGIE SCARDIFIELD

furbished in 2016. Manfield has booked out the 10-suite lodge exclusively for the four-day tour. "A place where you can retreat to and feel luxuriated ... that's my benchmark for travel," she says.

Another benchmark is tracking down less-expected, smaller producers making "cracking products", including winemakers such as Fromm which, uncharacteristically for the region, produces more than 70 per cent red wine, all with organic hand-picked fruit. And Johanneshof Cellars, which does a methode traditionnelle made from 75 per cent pinot noir and 25 per cent chardonnay. The riddling, or manual turning of the bottles, takes place in a candlelit rock tunnel, originally formed by blasting 50m into the hillside with gelignite. At Mahi, winemaker Brian Bicknell goes against Marlborough's more traditional sauvignon styles with a number of hand-picked, whole-cluster pressed, and wild-fermented wines. "Our sauvignon comes from six vineyards," he says. "You get more citrus characters rather than that under-army character." Mahi has pared back its winemaking over time. "No additions, no sulphur ... just juice straight to barrel. I particularly love what that does for sauvignon. It ages really well."

Meanwhile, Manfield is desperate to get some "tree-to-table" stoneground hazelnut butter from The Nutt Ranch, a small Waihopai Valley producer she discovered on a reconnaissance in February, so we load into a van and head towards Blenheim Town's Farmers' Market. Even in the down season, growers are out in force. Artisan food trucks, selling the likes of tempeh tacos, can't gentrify a thoroughly car-boot vibe, all muddy feet,

big smiles and buskers. An older gentleman proudly displays just two small buckets of asparagus; the thin stalks look as if they're climbing out of the tubs to join the rest of the community lolling about in the winter sun. "You've gotta be down in the earth to get it," the grower tells me. "Because of my age, I don't always get all the stuff I should. But I still want people to enjoy it."

Heading north to the 2800ha Kaituna Ridges Farm, a fence is strewn with sneakers that would once have belonged to Queen Charlotte Trek walkers. Piles of green-lip mussel shells from nearby Havelock are being used in many of the vineyards for weed control. Paul and Muff Newton have been on their working sheep and beef farm for 20 years. "We're just guardians of this land really. We keep the gates open," says Muff. Paul, in fluffy moccasins, demonstrates sheep shearing, and Muff the process of spinning the Romney wool into thread, which she says is "a bit tricky, but it's romantic". In 1986, Kaituna would get \$NZ6.35 a kilo for wool; now it's about a third that.

A long table in the woolshed is set with linen napkins, vintage silverware and blooms that make me feel as if I should be dressed for a wedding, not a farm tour. A whole mutton, cooked over the spit for six hours before we arrive, is loaded on to platters with freshly baked focaccia. Manfield is behind the side dishes of produce plucked straight from the grounds or picked up at the markets. There's a lick of spice from a pickled eggplant raita; zingy chimichurri; and velvety black garlic and tahini-dressed brussels sprouts with charred baby kale.

## IN THE KNOW

The next Tastes of Marlborough with Christine Manfield will take place in 2020. The Marlborough Lodge at Blenheim offers 10 luxury suites; from from about \$NZ1300 (\$1208) a night. A seasonal Luxury in the Vines two-night package includes return Blenheim airport transfers, accommodation in a Premium Lodge suite, breakfast, winery and cellar-door visits with wine-matched lunch, and pre-dinner drinks, canapes and a la carte dinner. Book by Monday for stays to October 31; \$NZ3390.  
[christinemanfield.com](http://christinemanfield.com)  
[themarblboroughlodge.co.nz](http://themarblboroughlodge.co.nz)

Spit-roasted mutton with fresh focaccia, far left; local coriander, right; pipis, inset

Just over Kaituna's steep avocado-green hills is the magnificent Queen Charlotte Sound, one of four waterways that make up the Marlborough Sounds. Picton, the entrance to Queen Charlotte, is "a sleeping giant" this August, but over the summer the population jumps from 5000 up to about 20,000.

Today, however, it's just our intimate group of 10 and the native bush stretching from the misty water's edge to the even mistier sky. We navigate the waterways with the help of Grant Orchard and his locally designed and built wooden boat, MV Katabatic. Orchard is a chef as well as a skipper, and today his menu includes flame-grilled local abalone, pipis and uni, and crisp, beer-battered hapuka and blue cod.

Back at the lodge, a raw bar is set up by Aaron Piper of Cloudy Bay Clams; his family was the first to commercially wild-harvest clams from the coast of New Zealand. We slurp raw tua tua, diamond, moon and storm-shell clams, then follow up with Manfield's cooked versions, such as steamed open with a ginger vinaigrette, and hot-smoked with paprika mayonnaise. Another night, we zip away to the nearby Harbour Restaurant for a more formal, yet no less hyper-local, menu from one of the region's star chefs, Bradley Hornby. "You want people to go away remembering something," says Manfield. "Taste memories, I call them, and a whole feast of them, hopefully."

Our grand finale is a relaxed buffet, cooked by Manfield, which celebrates the world-class produce and wine we've encountered over the weekend. We've had a taste of Marlborough, sure. But also a taste of Christine Manfield, a chef who's inquisitive, inspiring, generous and all sorts of fun.

Maggie Scardifield was a guest of Christine Manfield and The Marlborough Lodge.