



## Get a taste of island life in New Zealand

[By Julie Pendray]

**WAIHEKE ISLAND, AUCKLAND, New Zealand** - Some of the locals on Waiheke Island tell the story of how tennis star Martina Navratilova stood up in the Te Whau Vineyard restaurant and proclaimed that she had just had the best meal in three years. She was particularly won over by the olive oil, and so she was taken to meet its producers at Rangihoua Estate on the island. Ever since, she has ordered her oil by the case from the owners, Anne and Colin Sayles.

Waiheke Island is a tiny islet in Auckland's Hauraki Gulf, which is internationally recognized for its wines as well as its oil. Time magazine noted in one of its Vintage Buzz columns in September 2006 that the island's climate and its clay soil mixed with volcanic rock give the grapes a "wonderful consistency" and add "particularly smooth tannins to Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot."

The magazine mentioned three wines from the island: Larose from Stonyridge Vineyard, which has "sweet blackberry, cassis and plum notes"; Reserve Merlot Cabernets from Mudbrick Vineyard; and The Point, a wine from Te Whau Vineyard, which columnist Audrey Luk compared to a classic Bordeaux.

Grape plantings on Waiheke include Pinot Gris, Viognier, Syrah, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec and Petit Verdot. One aspect of growing fruit on an island that is covered in native forest is that it has to be netted because of all the birds. Most of Waiheke's wineries also use sustainability practices.

A visit to this 23,000-acre getaway takes 35 minutes by ferry or catamaran from the historical Auckland Ferry Building, passing through waters inhabited by orcas and dolphins. About a quarter of Waiheke's resident population of 8,000 takes the ferry to work in the city.

Kiwis have always enjoyed day trips to Waiheke, and foreign visitors are arriving in increasing numbers. The climate is warmer and sunnier than the rest of Auckland, with less humidity and rain. In the summer, up to 50,000 tourists come to drop anchor, soak

up the rays, picnic with their kids, meander among the arty villages or go wine-tasting. Some get married or honeymoon at the quiet resorts. Others come for the annual jazz festival, yearly horse races along a beach or the great hiking and bird-watching.

Travelers who stay for dinner can see Auckland's skyline etched against peach-colored clouds. Taking in the view from Mudbrick Vineyard's restaurant, while eating plump, juicy mussels in a wine-and-cream sauce and drinking feijoa (pineapple-guava) vodka was a big treat for this Americanized Kiwi returning for a visit.

Mudbrick is one of the many internationally extolled Waiheke restaurants. The story of how its owners, then accountants in their 20s, built their establishment, vine by vine, on weekends for years, while cattle ate the plants during the week, is heartwarming and a reminder to all of us that we can have our dreams.

I also stopped into Te Whau Vineyard, voted "One of The World's Finest Winery Restaurants" (Wine International Magazine, London, August 2004). Visitors drive past one of three alpaca farms on the island to reach the winery, which spans a bluff with a panoramic view of the gulf and city.

Te Whau (pronounced roughly "Te Foe") is an organic winery; owners rely on natural yeasts and don't add pectin or acids. Each vintage is foot-stomped in a celebration by friends and family before going through a basket press and then into oak barrels.

Wine tasting works up an appetite, so my next stop was Rangihoua Estate to check out

what Martina likes about the olive oil. I can say that the supreme freshness and tangy, herbal fragrances of Rangihoua's extra virgin olive oil, sampled on fresh artisan bread in the quiet garden overlooking the trees, was a meditation on the good things of life. Several of the estate's products won gold and silver awards at the Los Angeles County Fair in 2003 and 2004.



Waiheke is home to several olive groves that have a total of about 40,000 trees.

Among the island's other sensory experiences are the chances to visit artists' studios. I called in to see one of New Zealand's top artists, Gabriella Lewenz. She and her husband used the island's mud for bricks to build their rambling, sunset-hued, Tuscan-style villa. When the last of a day's light hits the stucco exterior, the home glows with warmth against a stunning expanse of verdant hills. Lewenz greets visitors in her paint-splashed, blue overalls, with a smile that lets you know the warmth is not just external.





LIFESTYLE TRAVEL

Lewenz creates three-piece, abstract art in bold colors. Landscapes and the ocean are repeated themes in her work, which is presented on canvas, glass and wood.

"I'm always exploring different materials and pushing the envelope as far as I can," she said, recalling how she has dipped wings and feathers and used them to apply paint.

Travelers who stay overnight on Waiheke have a wealth of accommodation choices, from camping and backpacker hostels to chalets and resorts.

One of New Zealand's top locations is Te Whau Lodge on the island. Sprawling on a hilltop with island and city views, the lodge offers stays for just four couples at a time.



Dinner-party-style meals include duck, venison and seafood, and are complemented with vegetables and herbs from Te Whau's garden and paired with the island's wine. Dinners are served on the deck in summer.

For a more down-to-earth visit, backpackers can stay in hostels near the beach or in the forest. Hikes in either direction offer the low-cost pleasure of scoping out some of New Zealand's birds - the wood pigeon, tui, fantail, kingfisher and song thrush.

Visitors interested in pre-European Maori history can find the remains of communities along the narrow headlands. The Maori name Waiheke means "cascading waters."

**IF YOU GO**

**Information:** [www.waiheke.co.nz](http://www.waiheke.co.nz).

**Accommodation:** From camping to resorts, at prices of approximately \$7 to \$1,000 a night.

**Transportation:** Ferries and catamarans depart from Auckland Ferry Building, 99 Quay St.

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