

SE Escape
HD Sublime in valley of riches
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TOUCH OF CLASS Tijana Jaksic discovers a **B&B** in the beautiful Waitaki Valley that offers all the comforts of home and more DRIVING through the limestone landscape along a rural road bounded by paddocks flecked with sheep and cows, it was easy to see why Steve Harrop resolved to live here before he'd even stepped foot in a vineyard.

An emerging **wine**-producing region in the South Island of New Zealand, Waitaki Valley is also breathtakingly beautiful. Just a short drive away from the distinctly Victorian streets of Oamaru, lined with grand limestone buildings made from the local stone, the valley is steeped in old-world charm.

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The former Post Office building up the road in the tiny town of Kurow says much about the region, where for many years it was only the residents who knew about the thriving food and **wine** scene. Now a tasting room, Vintners Drop is the valley's first, a humble local establishment far removed from the busy tourist-laden **wine** routes winding through other parts of the country.

Steve and his wife, Fenella Barry, saw the potential here a decade ago. Steve took the job developing vineyards for Otago Station Estates that he'd first come here to investigate, where he pioneered some of the first local vineyards, and five years later they created Sublime, a luxurious bed and breakfast.

Catering to a couple or family **group** at a time, to say privacy is guaranteed is an understatement. The double and twin rooms are separated by a single ensuite, positioned in its own wing away from the rest of the L-shaped house. A decadently decorated guest dining room with an open fireplace sits between the rooms and the kitchen at the centre.

From the grass-level balcony running the length of it, panoramic views extend across the gently sloping one-hectare vineyard out the front to the flowing waters of the Waitaki River in the distance.

Steve and Fenella are passionate about producing wines under the Sublime **Wine** label. Their home block vineyard has 9000 vines. With the help of family and friends, every drop is bottled by hand then **sold** from the farm door.

They also produce wines on a large scale for international sale from 16ha of vineyards across New Zealand, including the award-winning Maude Wines and Tiki Wines labels.

What's unique about the Waitaki Valley wines however, is the limestone soil and maritime climate. Steve says they're "much more mineral wines" and are very different from those from nearby Central Otago.

He describes the Waitaki Valley white varietals as zingy and sherberty with expressive acids, while the reds are elegant and feminine with fruity expressions.

Sitting down at a grand wooden table in the guest dining room, Steve serves two bottles of **wine** to go with lunch – a pinot and a chardonnay, though they also produce bubbly. We enjoy prosciutto ricotta

tarts and freshly baked homemade **bread** before Fenella arrives with our mains, seared hare loin peppered and served in a pinot reduction, followed by dessert.

Steve shot the hare a few days earlier and I spotted Fenella ducking out to her herb pot minutes ago. They try to be as self-sufficient as possible, with a vegetable patch as well.

Steve tells us there's lots of game nearby, which they kill and hang themselves, from hare to venison, pig, wild duck and salmon from the river.

"It's cracking," he says.

"The thing that people really like – especially the Aussies and Kiwis – is merino. The meat of a merino is delicious, quite different to lamb.

"When the mushroom season happens here we do lots of mushroom," he adds. "Everything we try and make it as authentic as possible." Steve says they want to provide the whole experience – great food, **wine** and accommodation. "That's what we fell in love with in Europe and we tried to replicate it here." Together they spent nearly eight years living and working in Europe, followed by a brief stint in **Hong Kong** on the way home. For four years they lived by the seasons. In summer they worked as butler and chef at Ardverikie, a 450-room castle in the Scottish Highlands, and by autumn they rode a tandem mountain bike around Europe. Come winter and it was time for a snow season in the French Alps, and through spring they lived in Paris, where Steve worked as a musician and Fenella as a chef.

It was here that Fenella trained in French restaurants, which explains why many of her meals are French-inspired. She is also an artist and, in the past, co-ordinated the Wilderness Society in Australia for eight years. Fenella created the eye-catching Sublime **Wine** label herself.

When they first bought this 6ha property, it came with a modest weatherboard farmhouse, a separate shearers' quarters and a woolshed.

They've since connected the main house with the original quarters to form the new guest wing. Inside, their rich and varied background plays out in every room. An eclectic mix of preloved furniture, artwork and colourful ornaments are backed by bold wallpapers. There's a story behind every piece.

Both originally North Islanders, they've come to love the Waitaki Valley and Oamaru for the great sense of community, the fantastic local arts and the wide open spaces. Fenella says she feels like they're "in the middle of nowhere and the centre of everywhere".

Off the highway between Dunedin and Christchurch, the Waitaki Valley sure is flying under the radar.

This is no usual **B&B** or cellar-door experience. It's classy, it's local and it's real. And that's just the way they like it.

GO2 OAMARU GETTING THERE The Waitaki Valley is just over three hours' drive from Christchurch and two-and-a-half from Queenstown. It's only 45 minutes inland from Oamaru.

For car hire, see budget.co.nz **STAYING THERE** Sublime is a bed and breakfast that combines great food and **wine** in the beautiful surroundings of the Waitaki Valley. There is a health spa nearby and lots of local nature-based activities. Don't miss a trip into the Victorian streets of nearby Oamaru.

See sublimewine.co.nz Visit newzealand.com and airnewzealand.com

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