



It was dusk, after an easy 40-minute drive from Taupo, as I drew up to the unassuming front doors of the secluded luxury wilderness lodge called Poronui – and clinking glassware was exactly the right sound to greet a thirsty traveller.

I was there to attend one of Poronui’s fabled food and wine weekends held each October – and lucky enough to hit on the Bosley/Craggy Range collaboration. As Martin Bosley’s Yacht Club Restaurant is one of Wellington’s finest eateries and Craggy Range is among New Zealand’s finest wineries, I was looking forward to this with great anticipation.

Saturday morning sees the party fleeing to the four corners, some at the crack of dawn in waist-high waders to commune with trout; some to Rotorua just a short ride away for a Zorb; others helmeted on mountain bikes. All to meet for lunch at Poronui’s Safari Camp by the Mohaka River.

Not being a sunrise person, I nurse my mid-morning coffee and fresh mango at the main lodge and watch manager Eve Reilly, who has been at Poronui since 1993, make baby quiche for lunch. “Poronui was a fishing camp way back at the beginning and we have nurtured it lovingly over the years – it’s still a work in progress,” she tells me.

There’s a whole lot to manage here. The main lodge is attached to seven individual cabins, all with expansive views of the river and hills from private balconies that make you feel as though you’re the only person on earth and where the only sounds are the river and birds. The lodge itself is “mission control”, the place everyone flocks to between rides and hikes, for a drink, for a snack, for dinner or just for company. I imagine the enormous stone fireplace comes into its own when the snow falls, and the deep leather settees set around it are at a premium.

At lunchtime, the baby quiche, along with thick, juicy, ham sandwiches, moist sultana cake and the inevitable bottles of fine wine, are driven, along with us, to Safari Camp. The camp is right on the edge of the Mohaka

Opposite page: The view over the Taharua Valley from the living room of Blake House.

Above: The Stables Complex, where we find the 10,000-bottle cellar and Martin Bosley cooking dinner.

Below left: A casual barbecue at The Stables.

Below right: The Main Lodge is Mission Control where fireside perches are a premium during winter months.



A JEWEL IN THE WILDERNESS PORONU I RANCH

Connie Clarkson visits a fabled back-country lodge for a weekend of exquisite food and wine.



Above left: Food, wine and ambience make for a memorable stay.

Centre: "Roughing it" in luxury at Safari Camp.

Opposite top: Evening at Blake House is even better with your own inhouse chef.

Opposite bottom: The soaring ceilings at Blake House create the feeling of grandeur and luxury.

River, where the original Poronui anglers, who would trek through 20km of almost impenetrable country, camped and fished. "Roughing it in sheer luxury" comes to mind as a fitting description for the facilities nestled into the countryside. In fact, I don't think "roughing it" really works when you can snuggle down between fine cotton sheets and bounce on proper queen-sized beds in the accommodation "tents" – which look more like buildings than tents. You can choose to cook your own gourmet meals in the amenities tent or have your own chef do the honours. I think I would "rough it" very well.

We are invited back to Blake House, the magnificent John Blair-designed high-country home 10 minutes from the main lodge. This really is the jewel of the whole property, a grand retreat you have to experience to appreciate. I imagine us in some Hollywood epic, galloping into the courtyard on horseback with the wind in our hair, butlers in coat-tails stepping from the door to greet us and stablehands rushing to tether our horses.

There are stupendous views over the Taharua Valley from every room, with hills and blue sky as far as the eye can see and not a building in sight. The sun pours onto a massive deck, which seems to drop away to nothing and from deep in my wicker armchair I am sure I can see the ends of the earth.

No luxury is spared here. Two expansive lounges with soaring ceilings and four huge open fireplaces are perfect for entertaining. There is a library and cigar room for those so

inclined, satellite television and high-speed internet for those who absolutely must have contact with the outside world – although I wonder why one would want to.

Each of the four main bedrooms comes with a sunroom, ensuite and a bed big enough to get completely lost in. The house will hold up to 16 people. It would be perfect for small company retreats, family reunions or, indeed as a luxurious hideaway.

Eve, a native of County Tipperary, Ireland, who succumbed to the charms of Aotearoa 20 years ago, has a very clear vision of Poronui: "We have a strong philosophy of conservation," she says, "of preserving the natural assets of the property." They've done a brilliant job of looking after the land, which is the hero of the piece – loved and taken care of by those who work here.

"We also have a strong customer service ethic," Eve continues, in a soft Irish lilt. "While Poronui itself is spectacular, it is our people and the camaraderie of your fellow guests that will make the experience truly memorable."

And they do know how to make it easy for guests to mingle. Drinks and dinner on Friday night is a casual affair – trays of whitebait fritters, enormous cheese platters and hand-picked wines from the cellar.

An eavesdropper that evening would have heard snatches from conversations such as:

"Did you get one?"

"Yes! I did!"

"Will you go again?"

"Absolutely!"

The "one" referred to a clay birds and "going again" meant sporting clays, just one of the many activities available at Poronui. There is something for everyone here. For those who catch and release, the stories of the big, notoriously wily brown and rainbow trout attract avid fly fishermen from all corners of the globe. For the hunter-gatherers, the call of the red stag, fallow and rusa deer, along with sika stags, in the 1,214-hectare game estate is a challenge not to be passed up. The Kaimanawa Mountains are the perfect backdrop for those who enjoy horse-trekking, hiking, mountain-biking or lovely long walks. And for those who prefer to be pampered back at the ranch, massages and facials complete the experience.

Deep in the bowels of The Stables, Poronui's sport and relaxation centre, the 10,000-bottle wine cellar is home to the Poronui collection, and our dining table for Saturday night's feast. The very affable Martin Bosley and his lovely assistant work their magic far away from his immaculate dining room in the Port Nicholson Yacht Club on Wellington's Oriental Parade. Much is said about the man and his restaurant, but an Australian reviewer's closing recommendation best sums them up: "Commitment to detail verges on the obsessive and at the table it's nothing but easy pleasure."

A forest of Reidal glasses graces our cellar table (a sign of good things to come) and my favourite dish of the night, the Queensland spanner crab tartare, scallop, wasabi sherbet and pork crackling entrances us. It's a symphony of textures and tastes – the delicate flavours of the crab and scallop are elevated by the crunch of the





Queensland spanner crab tartare, scallop, wasabi sherbet and pork crackling.
 Below left: Jasmine tea crème brulee, lychee foam, rose petals and coconut rice.
 Below right: Pacific big-eye tuna Rossini, monkfish foie de mer, brioche crumbs, grated summer truffle, carrot puree, mushrooms and a red wine reduction.



crackling and the wasabi sherbet dances on the tongue. Fitting nicely over the whole package is Steve Smith's Craggy Range Fletcher Family Riesling 2006. The hint of lime on the nose picks up the wasabi, while the stonefruit flavours and acidity are lovely foils for the delicate yet rich crab.

Of the following six dishes, standouts include the Pacific big-eye tuna Rossini, monkfish foie de mere, brioche crumbs, grated summer truffle, carrot puree, mushrooms and a red wine reduction. The smooth and fulsome monkfish foie de mere just makes the dish, which is complemented by the Craggy Range Bannockburn Sluicings Pinot Noir 2007.

The Jasmine tea crème brulee, lychee foam, rose petals and coconut rice closes the meal with the sexy Craggy Range Noble Riesling 2006.

The wines are presented with skill and passion by Grant Petherick, wine and fly-fishing guide extraordinaire, and long-time member of the Poronui family. Altogether, an excellent evening.

They come from everywhere to visit this wilderness gem. We have merchant bankers from Wellington, lawyers from Auckland, machine manufacturers from Illinois. Some are Poronui first-timers drawn by the reputation which precedes their stay. Some return annually because it's their favourite place on earth.

The true leveller on this particular weekend is exquisite food and wine: the month of October should be etched in all our diaries. 