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Pacific Pinot

Wine tasting on New Zealand's South Island

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PHOTO COURTESY MATAKAURI LODGE

When the fog rolls in near Queenstown on New Zealand's South Island, our scheduled foray by helicopter to Milford Sound gets nixed. That fjord, one of the island nation's top tourist attractions, a dream-laden crevasse on the craggy southwest side, was at the top of my list when I decided to fly nearly 24 hours to visit this remote spot in the South Pacific. I'm disappointed.

But the doldrums don't last long. As it turns out, Queenstown, perched on glassy Lake Wakatipu, is a

convenient launch pad for Central Otago, one of the fastest growing wine regions in the world. With snow-capped mountains, deep gorges, and rushing rivers that were once the domain of gold miners, the vineyard-mottled expanse spreads over the southern half of the island. Chillier than the north, it has a climate akin to Oregon's Willamette Valley. That makes Central Otago pinot noir country, and like the gold seekers of yore, there's ample opportunity for oenophiles to do some prospecting of their own—pinot prospecting.

Disappointment erased, I let the concierge at my hotel, Matakauri Lodge, arrange for a driver, and join my friend, Jared, on a wine tour of the region. But first, Jared has something heart-stopping he wants to do. Before taking even one tippie of wine, he insists we make a pit stop at AJ Hackett, home to the world's first commercial bungee jumping venture. In business since 1988, with nary an injury in its history, the pioneering site on Kawarau Bridge sits amid the vineyards and wineries of the dramatic region.

On most adventure junkies' bucket list, the jump off Kawarau Bridge falls more than 140 feet. With an option to touch the water (or not) and to do a tandem jump, the amusement park-like business brings thousands to the bridge annually. Jared signs the waiver papers, suits up and leaps. Before I can say "hobbit," he bounces back up, and falls down to the water a second time. It happens with such alacrity, I can't even take a decent picture of him. Thankfully, AJ Hackett has thought of this, and their commercial photos show him making the "hook 'em" sign as he screams banzai in a frozen free fall.

We need wine after that. So our driver wheels it to Peregrine Winery. An elegant winery reflective of the success of the region, it manifests wine-nerd chic via award-winning contemporary architecture. Marked by a sculptural steel structure that mimics a Peregrine falcon in flight, the tasting room feels modern, luxurious and friendly. At the bar we try wines ranging from sauvignon blancs to rieslings, but, as expected in this part of New Zealand, the pinot noir vintages surpass everything else. Light ruby, they smell of apple skin and have a burst of pure cherry, overlaid by a stony mineral base.

On the way to the next vineyard, Mt. Rosa, our driver relates the local legend that wines got started here thanks to a French miner who had emigrated from Burgundy. Still, it wasn't until about 15 years ago that Central Otago got grape inspirited. We find out more about that at Mt. Rosa, which, in direct contrast to Peregrine, pours its tastings in a rough-hewn, well-dented wool shed. Behind the table, one of the owners, Jeremy Railton, greets us, screw top in hand. He tells us that this pastureland was poor for sheep, but turned out to be beneficial to grapes—especially pinot noir. The one-time farmers of Mt. Rosa sent their sheep away and learned to make wine. "We just kept planting more and more grape vines, until we were one of the biggest in Otago," he says. And then, he winks, pours us each an inch of garnet-colored liquid, and says, "But size doesn't matter, does it?" We laugh and prepare to taste the wine. We pick up our glasses and put them to the sunlight, which emblazons the purplish liquid with golden light. We swirl, sniff and sip. And wow. This 2010 pinot noir presents plum- and sugar-dusted blackberry notes, all tied up with something herbaceous. We try a few more wines and talk screw tops versus corks. "We're free spirits out here," says our driver. "We do things our own way—that's what Kiwis do."

Indeed, the Kiwis we meet seem a robust, down-to-earth clan. As we head back to Queenstown we stop at Amisfield Winery & Bistro, purportedly a favorite hangout for Orlando Bloom when he was in the area filming the various *Hobbit* movies. Reminiscent of Napa, this high-tech, tony tasting room serves stellar food and also boast-worthy pinot noirs. We nibble some cheese, but save our appetite for Queenstown. Matakauri Lodge awaits and features a lakeside restaurant that serves the finest New Zealand products, including the country's famed lamb. Afterward, we'll get the map out to chart our next day's activities in this adrenaline-charged part of New Zealand. Jet boat riding on a rapidly flowing river? Check. Tramping? (That's what Kiwis call hiking.) Of course. Mountain biking on the Otago Central Rail Trail? Why not? And maybe, if we get lucky and the fog stays at bay, we can finally heli over to Milford Sound. I know it will be worth the wait.

When You Go

Fly There's no getting around the fact that New Zealand is a long way away. Expect to stop once in the U.S. and once more in Auckland before reaching Queensland.

Stay Just five minutes from Queenstown, Matakauri Lodge hovers at lake's edge. A Relais & Châteaux property, it proffers an intimate stay that includes a complimentary cocktail hour. matakaurilodge.com

Drink Hire or designate a driver and make the rounds at the local wineries: Peregrine Winery, Mt. Rosa Vineyards and Amisfield. peregrinewines.co.nz, mtrosa.co.nz, amisfield.co.nz

Do If you dare to jump, go with AJ Hackett, the pioneer in commercial bungee jumping. bungy.co.nz

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