

Fertile slopes
Central Otago is New Zealand's fastest growing wine region, and Rippon Vineyard (pictured) is the place to drink in the view. Skiers and boarders (opposite) hike for fresh tracks at Cardrona Alpine Resort.



WANAKA WONDERLAND

Luxury digs, an open fire, a glass of organic pinot noir,
lamb rack with artichoke purée... the après-ski action in
New Zealand's Wanaka is just as exciting as the skiing.

Words Peter Wilmoth Photography Kieran Scott





There's something about a deep bath that inspires

even non-bath-devotees to climb in. My quads and calves are killing me after a day's skiing, so with a slight John Wayne gait, I ease myself into the tub. Wanaka's luxurious Release Private Retreat eco-lodge is positioned to maximise the view of the Southern Alps, and the panorama from the bath is jaw-dropping. I sink in up to my dropped jaw and let the hot water work its magic on my muscles. From where I lie, the Alps look like scooped and plated massive mounds of vanilla-bean gelato.

Then the blind comes down, obscuring the magnificence. I climb out of the bath, press a button and up it goes. Five minutes later it comes down again. Must be on some sort of timer. Out I get again. Down it comes again. Damn.

Later that evening, over dinner, host Nick Frame enlightens me. The bathroom is visible from the lodge's dining area, and he lowered the blind to preserve my modesty. Thrice.

I hope he interprets my flushed face as the result of the three different Central Otago pinot noirs served with the meal cooked by Emilie Brosnahan and Brona Parsons, who offer in-house chef services under the name Raspberry Creek – just one of the "experiences" Frame is happy to arrange for guests. We could have chosen wine tasting, a guided motorcycle expedition or heli-skiing, but our party of six has opted for sharing a long table by the fire to enjoy Southland

venison carpaccio with pickled beetroot, pear and walnut salad, lamb rack on artichoke purée with crisp pancetta, and apple tarte Tatin with Calvados cream. It is a celebration of the food and wine of the region, a brilliant way to spend an evening with good company.

The last time I visited New Zealand was more than 10 years ago; my gastronomic memories of that time revolve around lamb casserole and beer in stubbies. Already I had a feeling this trip was going to take me to a higher plane, food- and wine-wise. With its wine culture, its thriving restaurants, cafés and bars and its heli-skiing (it offers the largest heli-ski region in the world outside North America), Wanaka today is a dream destination for food and wine lovers who happen to ski.

To find out more about this changing region, I visit Nick Mills, winemaker at Rippon Winery. In the grey of a July afternoon, a light mist is settling over the pinot vines, lending it the sort of surreal quality you'd expect from a vineyard spilling down to the shore of an ancient moraine lake. The air is somehow appropriately icy. A farm dog finds a squealing rabbit in a hedge and dispatches it to a kinder place, and we move into Rippon's winemaking area to taste a pinot still in barrel and due for release in 10 months. This work space, once a shed for goat-shearing, is where, 20 years ago, Rolfe and Lois Mills would hand-bottle their wine and sell it on trestle tables; they were pioneers in an area where the closest winery was half the country away in Marlborough.

In many ways, Nick Mills's family's story encapsulates the trajectory of Wanaka from a naturally exquisite service town in a high-country farming region, to a skiing mecca and the heart of one of New Zealand's great food and wine regions. It's startling to consider how quickly the change has happened.

Mills, his wife, Jo, and two of his siblings are now involved in this celebrated 15-hectare winery, which began when his parents planted a few rows of experimental vines on a small bank above their house in 1974. For five winters from 1992 Mills was based in Canada representing New Zealand in its freestyle ski team; he aimed to compete in the 1998 Nagano Olympics. Then, racing at his home hill, Treble Cone, he lost control, smashed his knee and ended his Olympic dream.

From 1998, he pursued his other passion, wine: he studied and worked in Burgundy and Alsace for four years. In 2000 his father died of cancer, and two years later Mills received a call from his mother. "She said maybe it was time for me to come home," he says. "I was 29 and after everything I'd learned and the experience I'd had, coming home to run the winery was the perfect project. It meant I could carry on my father's work, in my own way."

In 2002, Mills returned from France and converted the property to biodynamics. It's no surprise to discover staff at Rippon greet each other every morning with a handshake, a French ritual instigated by Mills and



We drive along the **LAMB-FATTENING** valley floor with its rows of poplars and deer farms and begin our ascent of one of Wanaka's **FOUR SKI RESORTS**.



Icebreaker

Above: Floor-to-ceiling views from Release Private Retreat. Opposite: After a day's skiing at Treble Cone (middle right) or Cardrona (bottom, left and right) there's ample time to relax: lounge around at Release (top right); explore the local area with Eco Wanaka Adventures (top left); follow Nick Mills (top centre) in a wine-tasting venture at Rippon Vineyard; or settle in for a meal at The Landing (middle left).





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Winter warmer
The Cow Pizza & Spaghetti House offers a relaxed atmosphere for casual dining.
Opposite, clockwise from top left:
Cardrona Hotel; chef Matz Asberg from The Landing; Relishes Café; Cardrona Hotel.

suggestive of a Francophile approach to the art, science and passion of winemaking.

Mills reflects on the Wanaka he knew as a child, where vegetables came in frozen packets and café society extended to a pot of tea and a lamington. "I reckon I remember when the first avocado came to town," Mills says. "I was already in my teens. It was 'What is that?' I think around the same period I tasted an olive for the first time." The first café in town called itself The First Café.

Twenty years on, Central Otago is New Zealand's fastest-growing wine region. Wanaka, one of the cooler Central Otago subregions, is known for complex wines that are, according to local winemaker Grant Taylor of Valli Vineyards Limited, more about finesse and subtlety than power.

"The spirit is pioneer winemaking, and the opportunities to try new things are very much part of the region," says Taylor, who makes pinot noirs from nearby Gibbston and Bannockburn. "Those of us living here feel our job of making wine is as much about capturing Central Otago and putting it into a bottle as anything else."

The attraction of the area is clear. We drive along the shores of Lake Wanaka and the lamb-fattening valley floor with its rows of poplars and deer farms and begin our ascent of one of Wanaka's four ski resorts, Treble Cone. From its 2088-metre summit you can see the hundreds of snow-capped peaks in Mount Aspiring

it's a little bit *Lord of the Rings*. All in all, I think to myself, sipping the mug of tea Riley has handed me and stamping my feet to keep warm, it's a moment of New Zealand magic.

That night we dine at The Landing, where a pre-dinner drink in front of an open fire is followed by an impressive menu that includes potato gnocchi with rabbit ragù, twice-cooked Cardrona lamb stuffed with olive tapenade, and grilled mascarpone polenta with braised leeks, roast mushrooms and Parmigiano-Reggiano. It's stylish and welcoming. And always there is the sense of anticipation about what skiing adventures the next day holds.

The skiing in Wanaka is exceptional, with a little something for everyone. Thirty-four kilometres from Wanaka, across the valley on the Pisa Range, is Snow Park NZ, a dedicated freestyle resort featuring New Zealand's only quarter pipe, a 22-foot super-half-pipe, multiple jumps and a dazzling array of rails and boxes to grind. And for those who can't get enough skiing through the day, the slopes are floodlit three evenings a week (Tuesday, Friday and Saturday) until 9pm.

Less aerial-inclined skiers should head for Snow Farm, New Zealand's only commercial cross-country ski field, which offers 50 kilometres of well-groomed cross-country trails for Nordic skiers of all abilities, from beginners through to experts. And for a true ski-in, ski-out experience you can stay at one of the Farm's remote back-country huts; they're not glamorous, but the wood

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National Park and the Southern Alps. Well, usually you can. Today visibility is poor and skiing at any pace is an act of faith, although one repaid by the quality of the resort's extensive array of runs for any standard of skier. I just point downwards and follow our guide for the day, who is helpfully wearing a bright red suit. Treble Cone has some of the longest groomed runs in New Zealand and the magical mystery tour our guide takes us on is exhilarating.

In the morning, resuscitated by strong coffee, we meet Chris Riley of Eco Wanaka Adventures at the marina for a boat trip to Mou Waho Island in the middle of Lake Wanaka. If there's something, anything, Riley doesn't know about the area I'd like to find out about it. He is an extraordinary guide, a walking natural history documentary. As our little boat skates across the lake, Riley tells us about the warring Maori tribes who once lived in the area, about the rare flightless Buff Weka, extinct on mainland New Zealand since the 1920s, that resides on Mou Waho, and about the lake on top of the island he is going to take us to for morning tea.

The what? After a half-hour hike we arrive at the lake in the sky, Arethusa Pool, and I stand and stare, without words. With the steam rising off the water,

fires are cosy and a night here will ensure you get first tracks come morning.

But for us, the next stop is Cardrona, the resort renowned for its dry snow, wide-open slopes and family-convenient facilities. The next morning our car climbs steadily uphill through the morning mist. We round a bend and suddenly we're above the clouds in the midst of gorgeous sunshine. And then I experience another of New Zealand's magical moments: the cloud cover recedes like a veil pulled aside to reveal the majestic and serene Lake Wanaka, mirror-like today, dotted with a series of islands. At its base the mountain is sprinkled with snow, like a chocolate cake dusted with icing sugar. I am on fire with food metaphors – I'm excited and hungry and I can't help it. This is the moment when I reach an understanding of why this region is spoken of in awe by ski enthusiasts the world over.

Go to Wanaka: to ski, to drink, to eat. It's not hard to find a reason. It's only a three-hour flight from Sydney, Brisbane or Melbourne to Queenstown, and then a picturesque one-hour drive to Wanaka. Right now the Australian dollar goes nearly 40 per cent further in New Zealand. And the sights before you are an assault on the senses. If this beauty doesn't break your heart, you haven't got one.*

Crystal clear
The view from
Treble Cone's slopes
(opposite) is all the
more reason for
skiers to hope for a
bluebird powder day.

THE FINE PRINT

Getting there

Air New Zealand flies to Queenstown daily from Sydney and four times a week from Melbourne and Brisbane in July and August. In September there are four flights a week from Sydney, three a week from Melbourne and two a week from Brisbane. Wanaka is a 50-minute drive from Queenstown Airport. Alternatively, you can fly to Christchurch then drive to Wanaka; the drive takes around five hours. airnewzealand.com.au

Do

Eco Wanaka Adventures offers fishing tours, glacier hikes, Lake Wanaka cruises and island nature walks led by Chris Riley. +64 3 443 2869, ecowanaka.co.nz

Rippon Vineyard & Winery creates superb organic wines. Visit Rippon's newly built tasting room, order a cheese platter and drink in the view. 246 Mount Aspiring Rd, Wanaka, +64 3 443 8084, ripon.co.nz

Ski one or all of Wanaka's resorts. Prices listed are

for a full-day adult lift pass. cardrona.com (\$69); snowfarmnz.com (\$40); snowparknz.com (\$62); treblecone.com (\$73)

Eat & drink

Barluga The indoor and outdoor fires, glühwein, and rotating list of cocktails make this a welcome après bar. Post Office La, 33 Ardmore St, Wanaka, +64 3 443 5400

Cardrona Hotel is located at the base of Cardrona mountain, and its hot chocolate and glühwein have been pulling après-skiers for

years. Crown Range Rd, Wanaka, +64 3 443 8153, cardronahotel.co.nz

Relishes Café is a family-run café that offers excellent hospitality, locally roasted coffee and homemade baked goods. 99 Ardmore St, Wanaka, +64 3 443 9018, relishescafe.co.nz

The Cow Pizza & Spaghetti House is full of alpine charm. Post Office La, Wanaka, +64 3 443 4269, thecowrestaurant.co.nz

The Landing offers fine New Zealand produce

prepared in a contemporary style. 80 Ardmore St, Lake Wanaka, +64 3 443 5099, thelandinglakewanaka.co.nz

Stay

Release Private Retreat stays include exclusive use of the lodge and grounds, plus breakfast provisions. The cost per night is \$626 per couple, or \$921 for up to six people. 9 Mount Gold Pl, Penrith Park, Wanaka, +64 21 762 695, releasenenz.com

