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Vistas and vines

On a three-day journey, John Corbett discovers why 'central' Central Otago is a world-class destination for wine and food touring.

Friday, 5pm: All wine regions are beautiful in their own way, but Central Otago surely takes the world prize for jaw-dropping, knock-your-socks-off scenic splendour. The 40-minute drive from Queenstown Airport to Cromwell, through an enfilade of high mountain valleys, each more dramatic than the last, is just the warmup. Sheer rock faces tilt and zoom upwards to dizzying heights. Hawks wheel and swoop above. A rushing river, now milk-white, now powder-blue, rattles about the stupendous landscape like a pinball. In the early part of the journey the chic architecture of the Gibbston Valley wineries also glides past us, but we're bypassing it all. Our destination is the wine heartland of the region, "central" Central.

Friday, 8pm: "Go to Feast," said a local in the know, and our doubts about the restaurant's location in the Cromwell Mall vanish when the menu arrives. Rabbit! It should be on every table in the region, given the problems they have with the pestilential little beasts, and we cheerfully do our bit towards their eradication. There's a delicious petite rabbit pie with a mustard and cream sauce, braised rabbit with a Jerusalem artichoke gratin and much more, including blue cod, duck, lamb and eye fillet. Since we're in pinot noir country we try offerings from Locharburn Estate in the nearby Pisa Valley (one of Feast's co-owners has a family connection), and rediscover that when this aristocrat of red wines is made well, it sings. We smile vinously at our rabbit and venison-munching fellow diners. **Saturday, 10.30am:** Is 10.30am too early to start wine tasting? Not if you have a designated driver. The first cellar doors are open in Bannockburn, a five-minute drive south of Cromwell, so we leave the retro charms of the Central Gateway Motel where we've passed a very comfortable night. Thank goodness there are still old-school Kiwi motels like the Central Gateway out there: friendly, spacious, toasty warm and surgically clean.

Bannockburn quickly reveals a first reason why central Central is perfect for wine and food touring. On two connecting roads the cellar doors of some of the finest New World producers of pinot noir sit side by side. On Cairnmuir Rd, in quick succession, we visit Bald Hills Wines, Akarua (we love

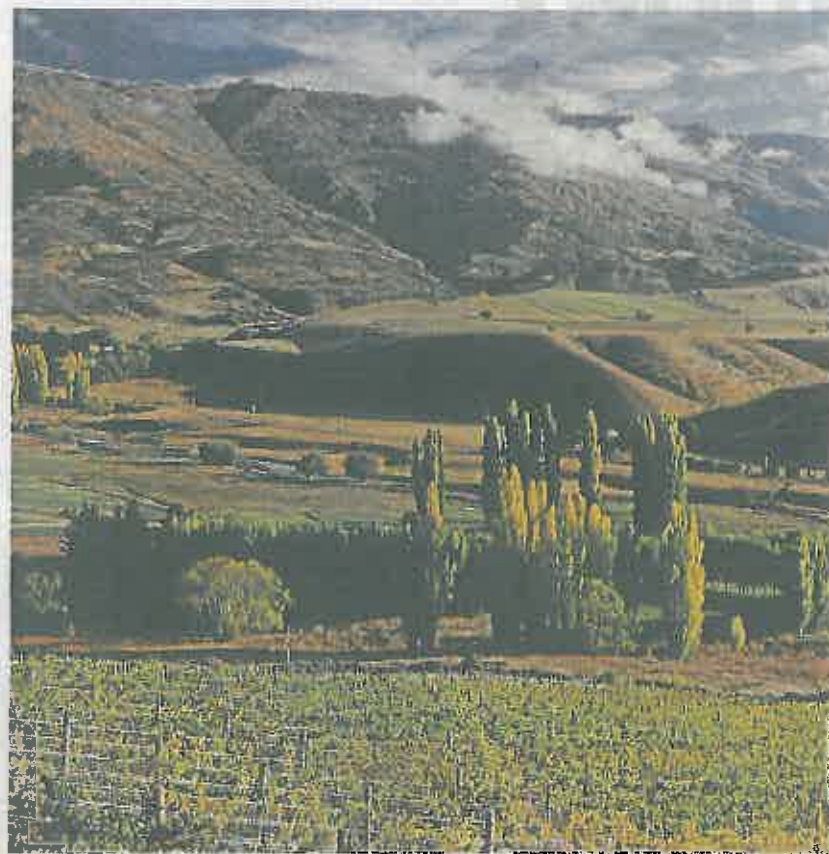
their pinot gris), and Carrick Wines – and discover another good thing: Central Otago isn't just about its much-admired pinot noir. The region also has extensive plantings of pinot gris (a mutation, we learn, of pinot noir), as well as chardonnay, riesling, sauvignon blanc, shiraz, dessert wines and even sparklings. In short, something for everyone. The sauvignons in particular are a revelation: here in the most southerly wine growing region in the world, the climate and soils make them soft and elegant like French sauvignons – and a complete contrast to their big, powerful cousins in Marlborough.

At Carrick Wines we are tempted by the pre-lunch aromas wafting from the restaurant kitchen, but we already have a lunch reservation nearby in Felton Road. On the way, another smell – of the flowering wild thyme that covers the hillsides of Central in spring – fills the car. We get out to enjoy it and are stunned into immobility by the view. In the foreground is the teal-coloured Kawarau River. Beyond are ochre-coloured hillsides with bursts of flowering white hawthorn.

Bannockburn quickly reveals a first reason why central Central is perfect for wine and food touring.

Beyond again are the snow-tipped peaks of the Pisa Range and a sky of navy blue. Scenic immobility happens frequently during the next two days.

12.30pm: God must have been in a very good mood when creating the setting for the winery restaurant at Mt Difficulty Wines in Felton Rd. Laid out in front of its north-facing outdoor terrace is a vast geology lesson – a view straight up the classic, glacial U-shape of the Pisa Valley, lush at the time of our visit with spring growth. Although we are as far as you can be from the sea in New Zealand, the menu includes swordfish and a frittata made with whitebait from the West Coast, plus slow-roasted duck in a raspberry and cassis sauce, wild venison tenderloin, pork medallions and a good selection of Mt Difficulty's acclaimed pinot gris, riesling and pinot noir. For dessert, we try one of the house specialities – gingerbread with wedges of blue cheese – with a Mt



Difficulty Single Vineyard Long Gully late-harvest riesling. **2.30pm:** They've got big ones in Cromwell – fruit sculptures that is, and right opposite the giant apricots and nectarines and pears on State Highway 88 is the entrance to Wooing Tree Wines, so named for a landmark tree, visible from the tasting room, that's been used by locals for decades as a place for ahem, assignments. Sampling this winery's impressive range of offerings – it's a specialist in chardonnay – underscores yet another reason why Central keeps drawing wine lovers back: it's

rough stone hides where 19th century drovers and travellers sought shelter for the night. In this landscape where the marks of man remain for a long time, history is present everywhere: the 1860's gold tailings and sluicings that line the rivers and creeks could have been deposited yesterday. The California popples that strew the roadsides were brought by American miners seeking luck in a new land. The briar rose hedges were planted for the vitamin C in their roships and the thyme-covered hillsides owe their origin to Chinese miners who used the herb to flavour their food. History and heritage are a compelling part of Central's attraction: there is so much to see and explore here apart from food and wine. Thirty minutes' drive north of Cromwell, where the walls of the Pisa Valley narrow and turn west towards Wanaka, Aoturoa Luxury Villa is a haven of five-star elegance and comfort.

"We have guests from all over the world and one or two have asked what to do if the bandits ride up!" laughs co-owner Lesley Davies. "We explain that the landscape of Central may resemble the Wild West, but that's as far as it goes."

Aoturoa's Winemakers Dinner emphasises the point. Sheltered snugly indoors that evening from a blustery northwester, we enjoy West Coast whitebait with fresh asparagus and a lemon mayonnaise, braised wild Fiordland venison (shot by Lesley's brother-in-law) and a chocolate brownie and raspberry coulis dessert. The wine matches are a superb lineup of multiple award-winning pinot gris and Black Poplar Block pinot noir from nearby Pisa Range Estate. **Sunday, 10.30am:** The Central Otago Farmers Market in Cromwell doesn't sell much fresh produce, but why would it when

the town is surrounded by orchards and market gardens with signs reading: "Apples/lettuce/herbs picking now"? It's also too early in the season for the region's fabled stone fruit, but the market has delicious things nevertheless: fresh fish from Southland, hot smoked salmon from Stewart Island, Cairnmuir olive oils from Bannockburn, piles of Wild Thyme artisan breads and matching amounts of jams, chutneys and sauces from local producer Tavish's Kitchen. After a stroll through the adjacent Old Cromwell town, relocated and restored to its 1860s glory out of the reach of Lake Dunstan, we stop just before Deadmans Point Bridge over the Clutha River at the Cider House Cafe & Bar – have designated driver, will do. On the 30-minute drive east towards Alexandra, the landscape again awes us into silence.

12 noon: With its main street lined with stately Victorian buildings, the township of Clyde makes a fine introduction to the third wine sub-region of Central. A visit to the Central Gourmet Galleria in Sunderland St and its lineup of local wines sends us on a detour across the Clutha to family-owned Three Miners Vineyards in McPherson Rd. The decorative scheme of the cellar door, complete with dusty old boots under the corrugated-iron tasting counter, evokes the 1860s, when gold was first discovered here, and there's gold in a different form in the winery's award-winning pinot noir, riesling, pinot gris and gewurztraminer. Further down the road, set on a rocky hillside, is Black Ridge Vineyard, whose lively co-owner may tell you, if you ask him politely, about landscaping with dynamite.

And then it's time for lunch in nearby Alexandra at the Shaky Bridge Vineyard Cafe, housed in



Grand central: The hills and thrills of Bannockburn.

Photo: Central Otago Tourism

an historic mud-brick cottage close to the aforesaid bridge, which looks pretty solid these days. Like many places in the region, the Shaky Bridge Cafe serves its own award-winning wines. When we get up to leave we notice that the mountainside rearing straight up behind us has a giant mechanical clock set into its face. Definitely time to go. 7pm: If the Speargrass Inn was located in the US or England, it would probably have its own Food TV show and legions of devoted followers. It is, however, located 15 minutes' south of Alexandra on

State Highway 8 and the travellers who whip by it at 100 kilometres an hour don't know what they are missing.

Co-owners Jackie van der Voort and James Russell have transformed the inn's 1869-vintage stone buildings into elegant accommodation, with lunch and evening dining, and a bustling weekly summer market. American-born, classical French-trained head chef Joel Cowley showcases the seasonal produce of the region and restaurant manager Rebecca Cowley has a hand in the inn's small, but expert



Old times: Cromwell's historic town centre.

Photo: John Corbett

selection of local wines. There's also excellent gewurztraminer and pinot noir from the vineyards around Hawkdun Rise, our luxurious accommodation for the night in Letts Gully Rd, just north of Alexandra. The vines come right up to the blooming peony bushes that surround our hilltop suite. The next morning there are soft pools of mist in the valleys between the dry brown hills. Who needs Tuscany?

Monday, 10.30am: Cheese rolls. You can't visit Central without encountering at least one southern icon, and in one of the counters at Alexandra's Courthouse Cafe, we find and photograph these famous/infamous contributions to Kiwi cuisine. We don't have room for one after Hawkdun Rise's perfect breakfast omelette, but we do enjoy the cafe's good coffee. There's good food everywhere in Alexandra, including The Fridge in Tarbert St with its offering of cheeses, charcuterie and other goodies. Right in town too, next to the Otago Rail Trail in Chicago St, is the cellar door of family-owned Hinton Estate Vineyard. It's 11 o'clock by now . . .

12.30pm: Twenty-five minutes' south of Alexandra on State Highway 8 is the Clyde Dam, and set in tranquil gardens nearby is four-star Lake Roxburgh Lodge, where we enjoy a lunch that includes big portabello

mushrooms forged that morning by co-owner Phil Winterbottom. Chef Kim Winterbottom serves them stuffed with asparagus, cheese, leeks and bacon, and a salad of beetroot and greens, matched with a glass of Judges Rock rose. Since this is our last lunch in Central we also try the 2009 Judges Rock pinot noir. We're rapidly running out of Central now, but we can't leave without buying apples from a roadside stall in Ettrick, and a final stop in Roxburgh at a true southern icon, Jimmy's Pies. Veal and redcurrant pie. Chicken, mushroom and thyme pie. Mutton pie. Seafood pie with curry mornay. Plus custard squares, fruit squares, lamingtons and neenish tarts. We can't decide so we buy a couple of each. By now we're worried about how much Air New Zealand will sock us for overweight luggage at Dunedin Airport and spend some time spreading our haul of apples, jams, sauces, charcuterie, pies and wine amongst our suitcases. We remind ourselves though that the two most important items from our wine and food odyssey don't weigh a thing. They are photographs and memories – and they're priceless.

John Corbett writes for alimentary.co.nz. He travelled to Central Otago with the assistance of Tourism Central Otago.



Fact file

Where to stay:

Central Gateway Motel, 67 Inniscourt St, Cromwell, ph 03 445 0035, centralgateway.co.nz
Carrick Lodge Motel, 10 Barry Ave, Cromwell, carricklodge.co.nz
Aoturoa Luxury Villa Accommodation, SH6, Central Otago, aoturoa.co.nz
Hawkdun Rise Vineyard Accommodation, 241 Letts Gully Rd, Alexandra, vineyardstay.co.nz

Where to eat/drink:

Feast Bar & Dining, 7 The Mall, Cromwell, ph 03 445 3020
Carrick Wines, Cairmuir Rd, Bannockburn, carrick.co.nz
Mt Difficulty Wines, Felton Rd, Bannockburn, mtdifficulty.co.nz
Lazy Dog Restaurant & Cellar Door, corner Gladsmuir Rd and SH6, Cromwell-Wanaka Highway, lazydog.co.nz

The Cider House Cafe & Bar, SH8B, Cromwell, ph 03 445 3470.

Shaky Bridge Cafe, Dunstan Rd, Alexandra, shakybridge.co.nz

Speargrass Inn, SH6, Alexandra, speargrassinn.co.nz

Courthouse Cafe, 8 Centennial Ave, Alexandra,

packingshedcompany.com

The Fridge, 48 Tarbert St, Alexandra, ph 03 448 6212

Lake Roxburgh Lodge, 20A Tamblin Drive, Lake Roxburgh, lakeroxburghlodge.co.nz

Jimmy's Pies, 143 Scotland St, Roxburgh, ph 03 446 8596

What to see and do:

Wine and food touring: Self-drive or take a touring service such as Pinot Thyme Tours,

pinothymetours.co.nz

Central Otago Farmers Market, Cromwell, centralotago.co.nz

Otago Rail Trail, otagoentrail.co.nz

Goldfields Heritage Trail, goldfieldstrust.org.nz

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