

MATAKANA REST STOP

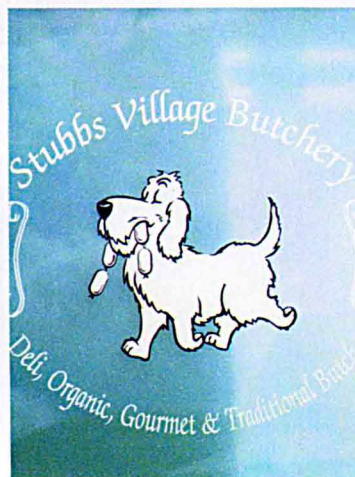
Don't just pass through the North Island village of Matakana, an hour from Auckland. Stay awhile and sample the area's fine food and excellent red wine. By Robert Milliken.



DAY ONE

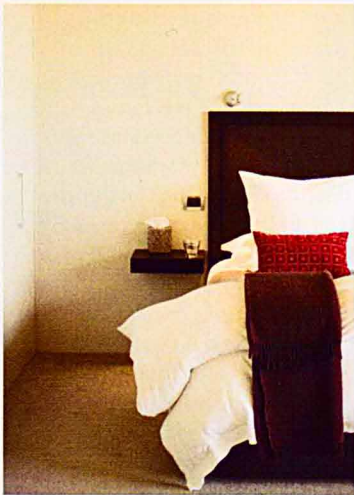
Until a few years ago, Matakana was a sleepy village that people bypassed en route to the Bay of Islands and other exotic reaches of New Zealand's North Island. Now, it is a place where discerning Aucklanders and overseas visitors not only stop, but even stay a night or two. Its location, only an hour's drive from Auckland, near some of the east coast's great beaches and the stunning Tawharanui Regional Park, already gives Matakana an edge. But what has really put it on the map is its newfound status as a wine town. Since a handful of entrepreneurial producers twigged in the mid-1990s that the well-drained soils in Matakana's gently rolling hills were ideal for growing wine grapes (especially merlot, cabernet franc and malbec), about 16 vineyards have sprouted around the town. Good restaurants, cafes, delis and a food market followed, turning Matakana into a food and wine destination where you can almost feel the frontier energy. Time your visit for a Saturday morning, when the **Matakana Farmers' Market** is held in Matakana Valley Road, the village's main (and seemingly only) street. This is one of Matakana's main attractions, so be prepared to jostle through the throngs packed around tables selling locally grown organic herbs, honey, fruit, vegetables, jam, garlic and olive oil. A "Bar Code Free Zone" sign above one of the stalls is an indication of the feisty spirit of these growers, who used to take their produce to Auckland before they formed their own market. Now there's a constant stream of Aucklanders who call in to pick up weekend supplies as they head to their beachside baches.

Like much else in Matakana, the market closes for the weekend around 1 pm on Saturday, but **Stubbs Village Butchery** (2 Matakana Valley Road; +64 9 422 9650; www.stubbsvillagebutchery.co.nz) stays open until 4 pm. This latest addition to the food scene opened in November last year and owners James and Rebecca McCarthy have decked it out in the style of an old-fashioned country butcher, with Victorian-era tiles on the walls, plus two large crystal chandeliers. Before cocktail hour rolls around, catch a matinee at **Matakana Cinemas** (2 Matakana Valley Road; +64 9 422 9833; www.matakanacinemas.co.nz). The Tivoli,



Coast watch

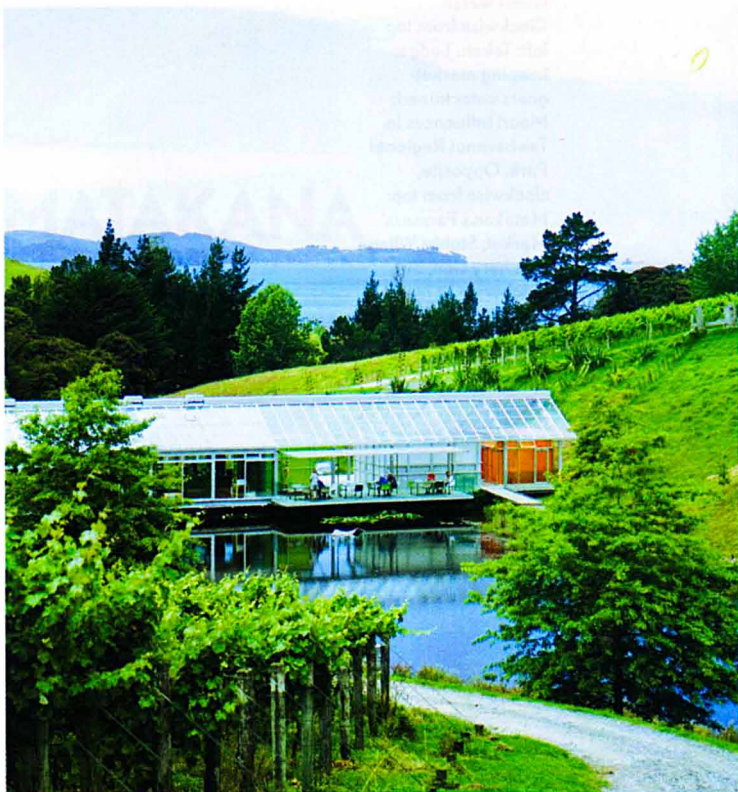
Clockwise from top left: Takatu Lodge; keeping market-goers entertained; Maori influences in Tawharanui Regional Park. Opposite, clockwise from top: Matakana Farmers' Market; Stubbs Village Butchery sign; the butchery is lit by a chandelier.



the Paradiso and the Roxy may not be original names, but movie buffs will relish the way the Paradiso's 30,000 multi-coloured ceiling roses and the Tivoli's chandelier try to evoke a bygone sense of occasion in cinema-going. For a small town Matakana has its share of upmarket lodgings: **Kourawhero Country Lodge**, (471 Wyllie Road, Warkworth; +64 9 422 3377; www.kourawhero.co.nz; doubles from \$810), which opened in late 2007, is the newest of these and offers 18 luxury suites.

Takatu Lodge and Vineyard (518 Whitmore Road; +64 9 423 0299; www.takatulodge.co.nz; doubles from \$426) has been around a little longer (it opened in 2005). Designed by Kiwi architect Steve McCracken, the low-slung lodge has the feel of a modern, exclusive hacienda, on a gentle ridge just outside town. The large, open-plan dining and sitting rooms, made from stone and local macrocarpa timber, blend easily with the surrounding vineyards. There are only four rooms. Try for one of the two on the northern side; both feature a fabulous view across the vines to Omaha Bay and Great Barrier Island beyond. After indulging in a bath beneath windows with panoramic vistas, open a bottle of Takatu's delicious pinot gris.

John and Heather Forsman, Takatu's owners, are typical of the new wave of enterprising people bringing high quality wine and food to Matakana. John, a pilot with Air New Zealand, had wanted to build a vineyard since childhood when he listened to his Italian-speaking »



De vine country

Clockwise from left:
Brick Bay vineyard;
a sculpture on the
Brick Bay Sculpture
Trail; a tiki necklace;
Tawharanui Regional
Park's gentle surf;
tasting the area's wines.

uncle telling wine stories. The Forsmans send their four varieties of grapes to be made into wine at **Te Whau** (+64 9 372 7191; www.tewhau.com), a vineyard on Waiheke Island, owned by Tony and Moira Forsyth, two of New Zealand's leading wine producers. For dinner, drive down the hill to **Cosi** (48 Tongue Farm Road; +64 9 422 7484; dinner for two \$90), a homely restaurant alongside Morris & James Pottery. Dean Betts, its American owner, launched the Fish Market restaurant in California 30 years ago, which has since become a thriving chain. Don't let the idea of chain food put you off, Betts' approach to cooking fish (fresh, not frozen; barbecued, not battered) was unconventional for America then, and still is. He and his wife, Toni, are ardent followers of the Slow Food movement and this is reflected in their food: organic vegetables and fruit, wood-fired sourdough, herbs from their own garden. The seafood at Cosi is local, fresh and presented unembellished (oysters from the Kowhai coast off Matakana) or with an Italian edge (snapper or salmon in a fresh tomato and garlic broth). Meat lovers are not ignored: there's "slow roast beef" and a prosciutto salad, and a good selection of local wines.



DAY TWO

Rise early, make coffee in your room at Takatu, then sit on the private deck off your bedroom and watch the sun rise across Omaha Bay. Breakfast in the main dining room later will set you up for a day of walking adventures: organic muesli with yoghurt and local plums and Yah pears, followed by ricotta hotcakes with organic blueberries from Omaha. It's about a 10 minute-drive to **Snells Beach** and **Brick Bay Sculpture Trail** (Arabella Lane, off Mahurangi East Road; +64 9 425 4690; www.brickbaysculpture.co.nz; open daily 10am-5pm). The two-kilometre trail is an outdoor-exhibition of 30-odd works by leading New Zealand sculptors. Some stand majestically on open grass, others float on a lake or hang in the native forest. All are for sale, with price tags ranging from \$800 to \$110,000. The trail was the brainchild of Richard and Christine Didsbury, who own **Brick Bay Vineyard** (+64 9 425 4690; www.brickbay.co.nz) next door, taking its name from the bay where bricks were made in the 1850s. Richard Didsbury is synonymous with the rebirth of Matakana. About six years ago he bought up much of the town, working with the council to establish Matakana as an intimate, sensitively developed "market town". Collapse after your sculpture walk in Brick Bay's **Glass House**, a hip but unobtrusive, glass-and-steel reception centre beside the vineyard and lake. It was designed »

