New York Gets a Slice of Kiwi

By Lettie Teague

June 7, 2013

Does any country get more love than New Zealand? It’s pretty, it’s green, it’s home to some great wineries and a world-class rugby team. And yet I don’t believe there has ever been a New Zealand-centric restaurant in Manhattan—until now. The Musket Room, which opened on Elizabeth Street just a few weeks ago, features the cooking of talented Kiwi-born chef Matt Lambard.

Supporters of the restaurant’s Kickstarter campaign got in on the action last winter; the Musket Room’s owners put up $20,000 to open the “upscale, classy neighborhood restaurant.” By the end of February, they had received far more than that figure: $256,352, to be precise. But can one actually open a restaurant in New York on Kickstarter funds alone?

I posed the question to a Musket Room co-owner Jennifer Vitagliano (Mr. Lambard and his wife Barbara are her partners). Ms. Vitagliano said the Kickstarter program represented only about 3% of the cost, but it helped with building the garden in the back. (It’s a lovely spot that’s currently off-limits to diners.)

Although Mr. Lambard was born in Auckland, he has been a New York resident for seven years. As he tells it, he followed an American girl home to Connecticut, where she told family and friends that Mr. Lambard was her “souvereign.”

The choice of high-profile New York restaurants, including Saxon + Parole and Public (most of the Musket Room stuff seems to have once worked at Public as well). His “modern New Zealand” menu features Asian-inspired fare and seafood dishes that include appetizers like cold smoked scallops, cucumbers and pears; sea beans (seeds that are carried by streams and rivers into the sea); and a mushroom tarte with raw mushrooms and herbs.

Entrees include fanciful-sounding dishes such as venison “with Flavors of Gin” and the proverbial “chicken and egg” as well as gnocchi made out of tofu sourced from nearby Chinatown. The grouper with fried Coromandel oysters is more directly tied to New Zealand. (Coromandel is a New Zealand town.)

As tempting as the menu sounds, it was the promise of an all-New Zealand wine list that drew me there for dinner on a recent Saturday. There are more than New York wine lists that give lots of space to Kiwi wines; or, as Musket Room General Manager Nathan Wooler said, “Even with some of the best somms in the country, New Zealand is kind of a black hole of their knowledge base.”

Mr. Woolen is in charge of all the non-New Zealand selections, which currently represent about 40% of the wines on the list and feature a mix of the well-known and the obscure. The other 40%, the Kiwi wines, were chosen by Cameron Douglas, a master sommeller based in Auckland, whom I contacted by email.

Mr. Douglas explained that Mr. Lambard had asked him to put together a list that featured lesser-known New Zealand wines as well as better-known brands. He chose wines that would work with Mr. Lambard’s “test and dishes, he explained, and that diners could navigate without needing to talk to a sommeller (though the restaurant employs one). Mr. Douglas is not at the restaurant, but he plans to visit in June, when he will increase the list. “New Zealand-ness.”

Right now, the burden of explaining the wines falls upon Erin Scala, the restaurant’s young and energetic sommeller. Ms. Scala is another former member of the Public restaurant team and unlike the somms cited by Mr. Woolen, she has a very strong grasp of wines from New Zealand—not to mention a great deal of enthusiasm.

When I expressed interest in the 2010 Mitton Vineyards Chenin Blanc by the glass, she was clearly delighted. “That’s one of the best wines from New Zealand,” she exclaimed. I told her that I was a fan of Pinot Noir by the glass—along with a glass of the less esoteric but still good 2011 Croppy Range Sauvignon Blanc for my dinner companion. The Chenin Blanc was simply outstanding, with a fine mineral quality and a savory edge. It was a great find if a bit expensive at $77 a bottle. (A glass cost $16.) When I remarked on the bottle price, Ms. Scala told me that the neighborhood clientele had no problem paying between $60 and $70 a bottle. (Nolita residents are clearly better off—or less cheap—than me.)

Other New Zealand selections included the 2011 Sacred Hill Virgin Chardonnay ($72), the 2010 Ata Rangi Pinot Noir ($190)—its price has been lowered by $10 since I dined there—and the 2010 Spy Valley Gewurztraminer ($57). At $47, the 2011 Greywacker Wild Sauvignon Blanc was the cheapest New Zealand wine I found on the list (save for a dessert wine). When I asked Mr. Douglas why the New Zealand selections were so expensive, he explained that it was due to the strong New Zealand dollar and the difficulty of importing wine from New Zealand into New York. A New York importer I spoke with assured me it was no more complicated to import wines from New Zealand than it was anywhere else. The mark-up seemed a bit high as well, the wholesale price of the Chenin Blanc is $20.

One of the most beautiful—and beloved—countries in the world deserves proper representation. And while Mr. Lambard’s cooking does New Zealanders proud, I hope the Musket Room will soon also have more—and more reasonably priced—New Zealand wines.