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New York Gets a Slice of Kiwi

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By Lettie Teague

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 Lambert and a wine list weighted to New Zealand selections beyond the usual Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir.

Supporters of the restaurant's Kickstarter campaign got in on the action last winter; the Musket Room's owners put up a \$20,000 request to open the "upscale, casual neighborhood restaurant." By the end of February, they had received far more than that figure: \$25,636, 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's co-owner Jennifer Vitagliano (Mr. Lambert 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. Lambert 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. Lambert was her "souvenir."

Mr. Lambert is a veteran of several high-profile New York restaurants, including Saxon + Parole and Public (most of the Musket Room staff 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 custard 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 sounded, it was the promise of an all-New Zealand wine list that drew me there for dinner on a recent Saturday. There are very few New York wine lists that give lots of space to Kiwi wines. Or, as Musket Room General Manager Nathan Wooden said, "Even with some of the best somms in the country, New Zealand is kind of a black hole of their knowledge base."

Mr. Wooden is in charge of all

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the non-New Zealand selections, which currently represent about 60% 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 sommelier based in Auckland, whom I contacted by email.

Mr. Douglas explained that Mr. Lambert 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. Lambert's "textured" dishes, he explained, and that diners could navigate without needing to talk to a sommelier (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's "New Zealand-ness."

Right now, the burden of explaining the wines falls upon Erin Scala, the restaurant's young and energetic sommelier. Ms. Scala is another former member of the Public restaurant team and unlike the somms cited by Mr. Wooden, she has a very strong grasp of wines

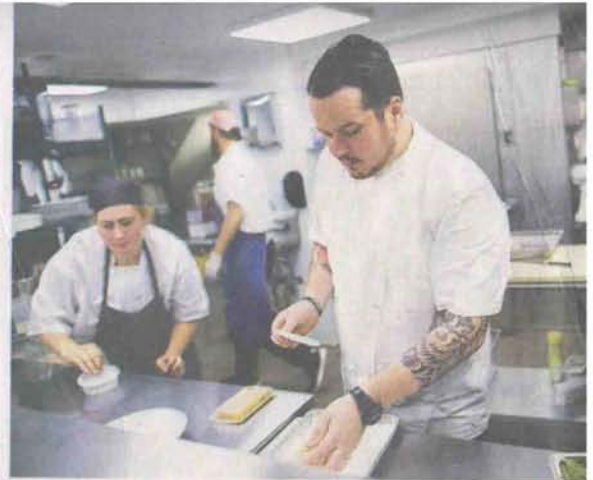
from New Zealand—not to mention a great deal of enthusiasm.

When I expressed interest in the 2010 Milton 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 big fan of the Loire Valley grape and was always looking for wines made outside of France. Ms. Scala practically dashed away to get a glass—along with a glass of the less esoteric but still good 2011 Craggy Range Sauvignon Blanc for my dining 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 (\$92), the 2010 Ata Rangi Pinot Noir (\$92)—its price has been lowered by \$10 since I dined there—and the 2010 Spy Valley Gewurztraminer (\$73). At \$47, the 2011 Greywacke 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. Lambert's cooking does New Zealanders proud, I hope the Musket Room will soon also have more—and more reasonably priced—New Zealand wines.



From top, chef Matt Lambert, sommelier Erin Scala and some of the New Zealand wine selections at the new Manhattan restaurant the Musket Room.

