

IT TAKES A
VILLAGE



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A guide to Matakana and its surrounding districts

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Chapter 1

first words

In 2002 my family built a beach house at Ōmaha, marking the start of a love affair with the beautiful region that has Matakana Village at its heart and, at its edges, a string of glorious beaches, bays and estuaries, most with a view out to either that beautiful and mysterious island Te Hauturu-o-Toi Little Barrier, and Kawau Island, or north to Cape Rodney. All those years ago, most of the rural land was in traditional dairying or sheep farms, with a handful of orchards. But the new-generation horticulturalists and grape growers were already present, and soon they would become much more noticeable.

About the time we were building our house, the Matakana market was opening and a small number of restaurants, cafés and places to stay were setting up. Back then I was the food editor for *Cuisine* magazine, which had become a strong advocate for and champion of locally grown, seasonal food and artisanal food manufacture. I could see that the Matakana district was becoming a little epicentre of that movement, and so in 2008 I published the book *Matakana* to celebrate the food heroes who were making it all happen.

Ōmaha Beach with
Te Hauturu-o-Toi
Little Barrier Island
in the background.

That book is long out of print, and in the interim the district — which in my definition stretches from Pākiri in the north to Pūhoi in the south — has gone from strength to strength. The population has grown significantly, with even more new businesses and initiatives successfully taking off in that time. Matakana has become an exciting and popular destination for weekends away from the city. Many people have chosen to live in the region, and it is high on both international (in pre-Covid days) and domestic tourists' lists of must-visit places.

There are new places to stay, from lodges with breathtaking views to cosy little hideaways. Cafés abound, and there are excellent restaurants and winery experiences. In researching and writing this book I spent time with a whole bunch of new local heroes who are passionate about sustainability and ethical lifestyles and who are working hard to provide great food and drink for locals and visitors alike. They're bringing new excitement, new directions and new possibilities to Matakana. This book is all about celebrating their talent, their vision and their commitment.



The Big Ōmaha wharf.

I may now be able to spend almost all of my weekends and summers at Ōmaha, but I first fell in love with the area when I was a small child, when my parents used to take us to stay with friends on Takatū Peninsula. On the way, my father would stop the car outside Matakana's general store — back then the only shop in town — and he'd buy the *Herald* for himself and my mother and ice creams for us, and then we would carry on along the dusty, winding road to Christian Bay.

I can remember looking down from the top of the ridge at an unspoilt sweep of land below, the Ōmaha Beach spit, at the time accessible only by boat or over private farmland: no causeway, no man-made rock groynes to protect the beach, and no holiday homes. I could not have possibly imagined that I would live on the edge of that beach more than fifty years later. And there was no clue that the region would produce everything a keen cook like me would need and want to create delicious meals.

There have been other personal connections to Matakana over the years. We took our children sailing on our yacht throughout their childhoods, and often headed for Bon Accord Harbour on Kawau Island, a safe haven in almost any weather. We explored the coastline, anchoring in Mahurangi Harbour and at Leigh and catching fish, scallops and crayfish in the bay. Once our children had grown up, we spent several holidays on the beachfront at Ōmaha with friends, loving the sandy beach, the golf course and the terrific produce growing in the vicinity.

Our close friends Richard and Christine Didsbury reintroduced us to Matakana over thirty years ago when they first holidayed in a caravan at their newly purchased farm at Brick Bay, and they later shared their vision for the Matakana Farmers' Market and the brilliant village and cinema complex which is now the heart of the region.

For me, the growth of the Matakana Farmers' Market in the village is the single best change in this region. I have always loved the idea of artisan producers and growers meeting and talking with their customers, developing and testing new business ideas; to my mind, the farmers' market movement is the most significant advancement in New Zealand during the thirty years I have written about food. My Saturdays would not be the same without



Saturday morning at the Matakana Farmers' Market, located on the banks of the Matakana River.

an early-morning visit to the market where, over the years, I have watched a fantastic array of enthusiastic stall-holders, some merely passing through and others dedicated to the long-haul commitment of their weekly appearance there.

Matakana Village is a great boon to artisan producers, cooks and growers, and the area surrounding the village is mostly pleasant rolling countryside with pockets of small, caring communities.

The district offers an enormous range of things to do. The coastline is gentle, sometimes spectacular, and there's always some hidden cove or beach for getting away from the crowds.

This book is not intended to be an official and all-encompassing guide to the region, but rather to share my own taste of the food, wine and pleasures of the area and provide insights into the community's many sustainable businesses.



from the beginning

One of the most interesting historical stories, or mysteries, of Matakana is told by a series of unearthed kauri stumps. Just off the road along the Ōmaha Flats, a parade of massive, ancient tree stumps can be seen lining the driveway leading to the mandarin farm of the late Tony Gibbs. They are the stumps of swamp kauri and were found buried in the deep peat soils on the property, uncovered and moved into their present positions when the orchard was established. There's another recovered stump on display in the grounds of Sculptureum on Ōmaha Flats Road, discovered and removed from deep in the soil when the surrounding gardens were being built.

There has been significant geological interest in these mighty treasures. Even with carbon dating, no firm conclusion has been reached about their age, although some suggest that these trees could have been buried up to 50,000 years ago after seismic action sank the land, burying the forest, and then later raised it. It may also have been seismic action that caused the low-lying land to sink further, below the water table. The land seems to have risen around 2 metres or more since the sinking, a process

that continues today. However, the gigantic stumps also appear to have been scorched, and there's evidence that their gum reached boiling point. Was it an earthquake, a tsunami wave, a volcanic eruption or some other feat of nature? We may never know.

Through local history we do know that in the seventeenth century the coastal area around Matakana was occupied by various iwi, which would have benefited from the rich seafood beds around Ōmaha and Kawau Bays, and would have fished in the waterways and harbours of the Mahurangi, Matakana and Leigh areas.

In the eighteenth century, battles were fought between Te Kawerau and the Hauraki tribes, which were known as the Marutūahu confederation and included Ngāti Pāoa, Ngāti Whanaunga, Ngāti Maru and Ngāti Tamaterā. In the early nineteenth century, attacks by Ngāpuhi raiders from the north left the area deserted for several years.

The arrival of the first Europeans in the 1820s led to a restless situation that lasted for several decades. Ngāti Raupō occupied the Tāwharanui area, while Ngāti Manuhiri occupied the area from Ōmaha to Pākiri. In 1841, a large tract of land known as the

The Gibbs family citrus orchard on Ōmaha Flats viewed from Omaha Bay Vineyard.

Mahurangi Purchase, which stretched from Takapuna to Te Ārai Point, was bought by the Crown. By 1844, 42 Europeans were residing in the Matakana area, many attracted by the abundance of kauri. Pastoral and timber licences were being issued and local Māori came under great pressure in attempting to retain their lands, and were forced to dispute them.

The region's wide, slow-moving rivers made it easy to transport timber to Auckland, and by 1853 a sawmill was operating on the Mahurangi River on the site occupied today by the Matakana Farmers' Market and village shops.

The survey and division of available land for settlement in the Matakana area was not completed until 1858. Once it was finalised, many lots were settled by free grants under an immigration system that selected useful colonists in Britain. Successful applicants had to pay their passage, but they could select their own parcel of land on arrival. Having a wife qualified a settler for an extra 40 acres. Once they had successfully farmed their land for a period of about five years, the settlers would be given title.

Those early farms in Matakana were mostly mixed farms raising crops and livestock, but the largest orchard in the country was established in the 1850s on the Matthews brothers' property near Ōmaha. Using seeds and cuttings collected from around the world, the Matthews' plant nursery, which was in business until 1880,

supplied plant stock for Sir George Grey's extensive and important gardens at Mansion House on Kawau Island.

The first public buildings — a church and a school — were erected at Matakana in early 1862. By 1865 the school was attended by twenty children, who often had a long and difficult journey to get there. In 1868 the first store, which also served as a post office, opened, and by 1875 there was a small library.

Gum diggers and kauri loggers worked around Matakana from 1863 to the mid-1880s, and by 1886 the area's giant kauri had almost all been felled. Fruit growing then became an important industry, with boatloads of fruit being sent from the district to Auckland — a road to Auckland would not be completed until after the turn of that century, with the very first car making the journey in July 1913. By that time, most local orchards had been converted into more lucrative dairy farms.

Shipbuilding was also an established local industry at this time, and several shipbuilders set up important yards in and around Matakana and Mahurangi. The only reliable way to travel to and from the region was by boat up and down the coast, and water transport was essential for access to Auckland. In the 1870s a weekly boat service connecting Matakana with Auckland took local produce to the markets.

Despite the notion of a 'Great North Road' mooted by early provincial government and granted £2000 for its



The upper reaches
of Whangateau
Harbour at low tide.

construction in 1855, the north was mainly without roads through most of the nineteenth century. This proposed road remained a firm line on the map, but the rugged countryside and bush between Auckland and Whangārei to the north made it difficult to build and maintain what was no more than a roughly cut track, occasionally passable by dray but frequently overgrown or washed out. It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that road access to the north became possible.

In 1902 the dairy factory in Matakana opened; the building still stands, next to tiny St Leonard's Church, which was erected in 1914 in the centre of the village. The post office opposite dates from this time. By 1930 the pupils of the district school had outgrown their building, and another site was found and a new building erected.

Tourism, one of the mainstays of Matakana today, has always formed a part of the district's livelihood. As early as the 1890s, visitors would come to view the



The Matakana Village Pub.

Matthews' ornamental gardens at Ōmaha, and once road transport opened up the area in the mid-1930s, the Matakana boarding house provided accommodation and meals for travellers; the journey was longer than a return day trip.

Electricity was connected to the area in 1936, but two years later extensive flooding set back the district when bridges and culverts were washed away.

During the Second World War there were forty-two small American camps in the Rodney district, many around Matakana, set up for training and rest and

recreation for upwards of ten thousand of the American troops who were sent to New Zealand.

A local hardware business was established by local builders Percy Smith and Norman Roke in the 1950s; it merged with the Matakana Timber Centre in 1989. The Matakana Dairy Company went the way of many small companies when it amalgamated in 1963 with the Rodney Dairy Company and the offices were transferred to Warkworth.

In the 1970s, Ant and Sue Morris established their pottery near the centre



Picking strawberries on the Ōmaha Flats.

of Matakana, once again giving tourists reason to visit the region. This was soon followed by the growth of viticulture and winemaking throughout Matakana and the surrounding areas, attracting a flood of visitors and subsequent interest in the region.

Wine had been produced as early as 1866, from peaches, and also in the 1940s when Russian immigrant Alexis Migounoff made his Lemora wine from lemon and orange juice at his Matakana orchard to sell in his shop on Great South Road in Greenlane, Auckland. The Vuletic brothers revived winemaking at their Antipodean Farm vineyard when they planted their vines on Tongue Farm Road in 1979, to be followed in 1988 by Mary Evans and David Hoskins' planting of their Heron's Flight vineyard. Many others have followed, and several of the region's current vineyards offer wine tastings at their cellar doors, some with food.

When the Brick Bay Investment Trust bought the Matakana timber yard in around 2000, it was fairly clear that the area would become a vital tourist destination; after all, Auckland was so close. The construction of the farmers' market, the Matakana Village shops and the cinema gave visitors a reason to visit regularly, and subsequently accommodation, eateries and other attractions for visitors have blossomed.

The region also continues to support many start-up food businesses, many of whom have made their first foray into the commercial world through the Saturday farmers' market. And with so many other attractions in the region, it's not surprising that there's a proliferation of new housing and small development blocks. The semi-rural lifestyle appeals to many people wanting to get away from the frenetic pace of the city while still being within an hour's drive of central Auckland.