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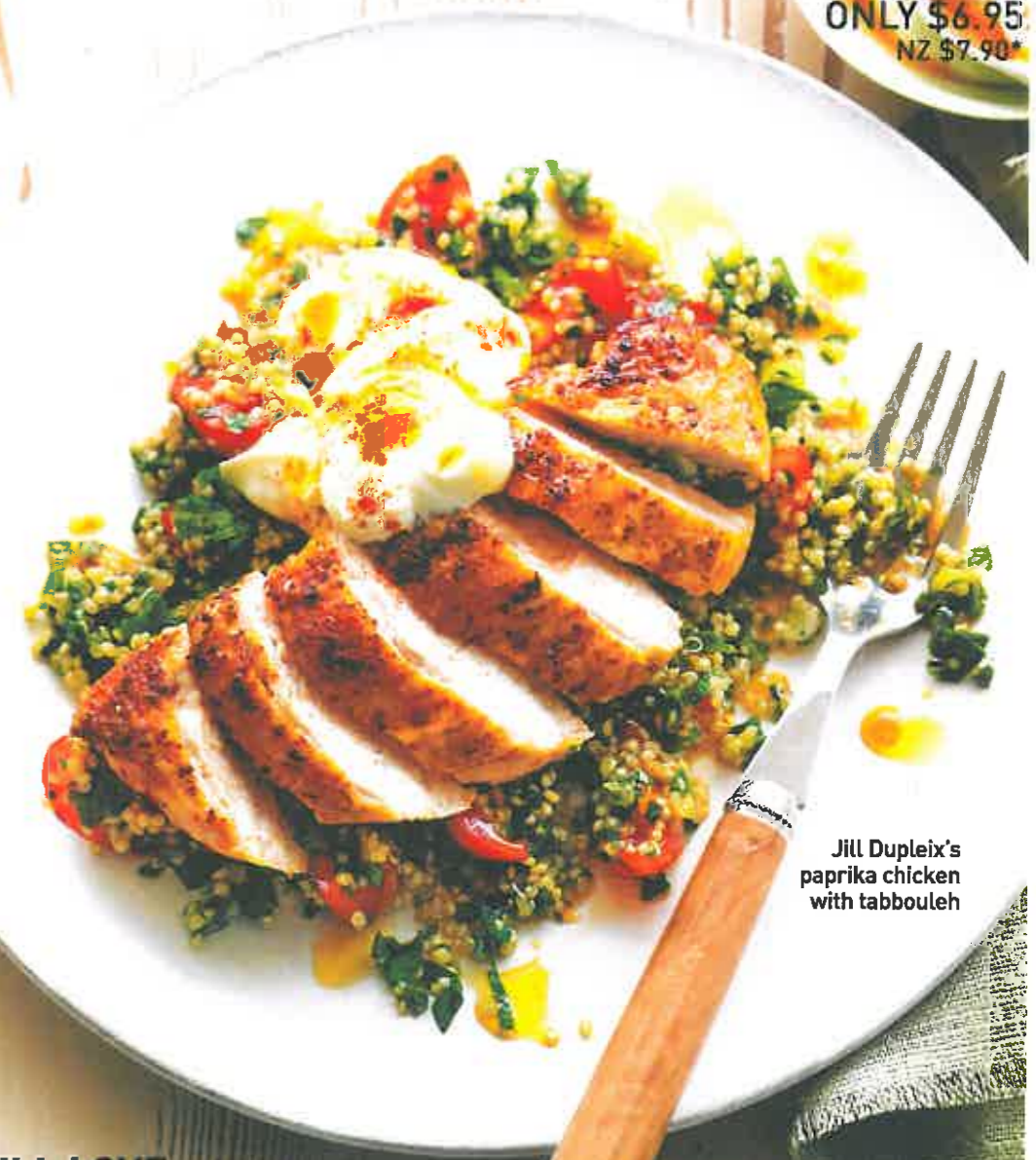
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the guide.

central otago

From world-renowned pinot noir to stone fruits and artisan cheeses, Matt Preston discovers there's much to love about New Zealand's rugged Central Otago region.

WORDS **MATT PRESTON** PHOTOGRAPHY **MARK ROPER**

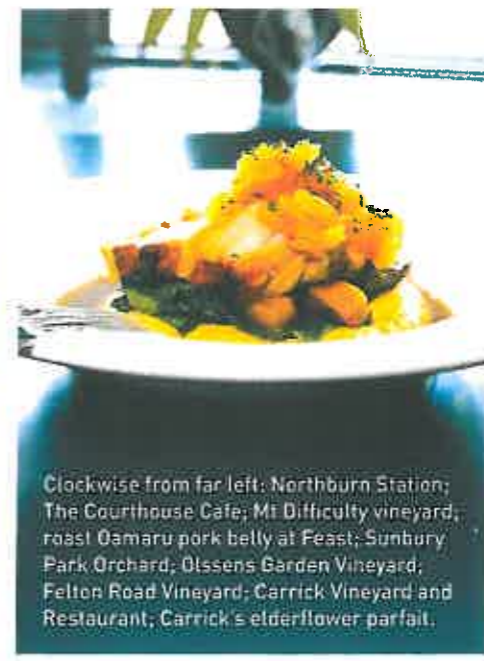
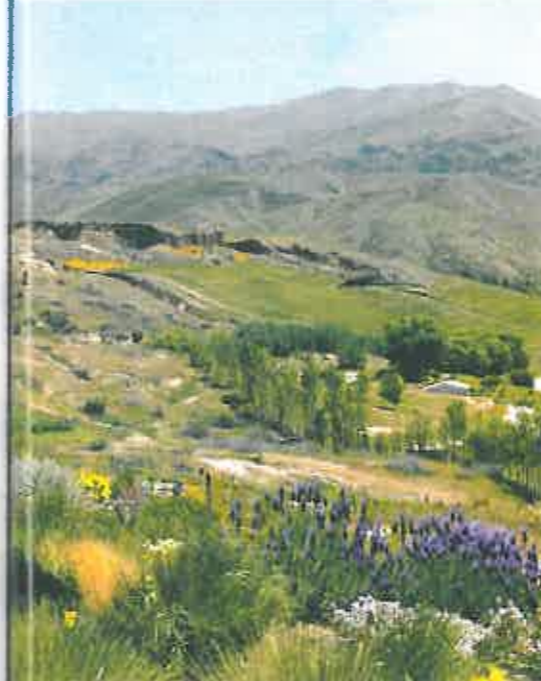
"Tussocks, rocks and sheep that seem camouflaged to look like tussocks" is how the Auckland taxi driver taking me to the airport described NZ's Central Otago. It's a slightly snide, and somewhat accurate, North Island summation of much of this South Island wine region, 45 minutes' drive east of Queenstown.

The cabbie's description does leave out the profusion of award-winning pinot noirs produced by cult vineyards, as well as the

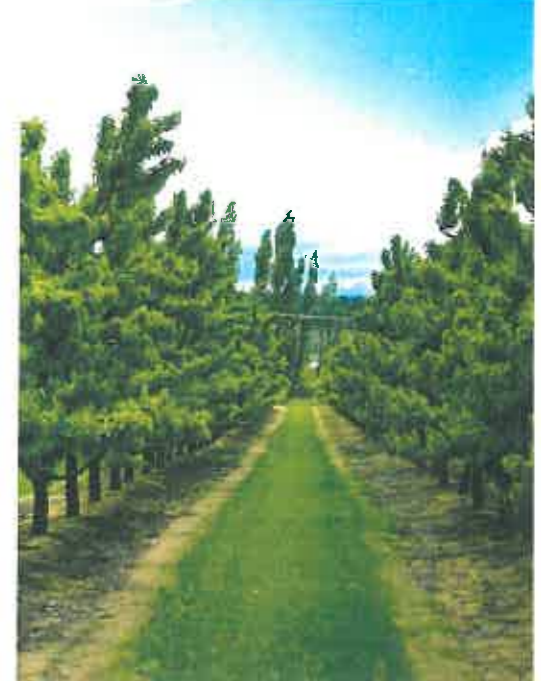
major gustatory attractions of the area. My taxi sage also fails to mention the continental climate: baking summers and icy winters that make the region a mecca for sun seekers, skiers and fruit orchardists as well as viticulturalists. Oh, and also the contrast of emerald lakes with scenery that ranges from lush valleys to moonscape-like shale hillsides covered in rabbits and wild thyme that fragrances the breeze. It's a ruggedly good, if tough, spot.

where to drink

If you're an Australian visiting Central Otago – and you're not there for the skiing – then chances are that you're probably there for pinot noir. With a variety of microclimates and soils found across the region, as well as cold winters and hot summers, this region is perfectly set to produce this most pernicky of grapes, as well as some rather fine rieslings and chardonnays.



Clockwise from far left: Northburn Station; The Courthouse Cafe; Mt Difficulty vineyard; roast Oamaru pork belly at Feast; Sunbury Park Orchard; Olssens Garden Vineyard; Felton Road Vineyard; Carrick Vineyard and Restaurant; Carrick's elderflower parfait.



FELTON ROAD VINEYARD

OK, I must admit I'm a bit of a starstruck fan of this small, artisan, organic and biodynamic producer of pinot noir, chardonnay and riesling, which was established in 1991. Visiting Felton Road Vineyard is something of a pilgrimage, if only to have winemaker Blair Walter point out the rows of vines that represent where the grapes for the Block 5 and Block 3 pinot noirs come from. Objectivity goes right out of the window and the wines taste even better here than they do back at home – the stellar pinot noir is all red fruits,

FEAST FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY: JANYNE HARMAN

chocolate and the occasional whiff of duck liver parfait. Damn, Felton Road risks turning me into one of those dreaded, self-obsessed wine snobs. While I'd rather drink their dry riesling (which approximates the sort of sugar you'd find in an Aussie riesling from the Clare Valley), like many in the region Blair makes a sweeter version, where high fruit acidity balances elevated levels of sugar to make a wine that is sweet and elegant without being cloying. A tasting at Felton Road Vineyard is must on any Central Otago visit. **Felton Rd, Bannockburn, +64 3 445 0885.**

MT DIFFICULTY

Mt Difficulty's pinot noirs are the stuff of legend, whether it's a 2008 that is loaded with black cherry flavours or their single-vineyard wines such as the Pipeclay Terrace or Long Gully pinot noirs, which can tip the scales at a hefty NZ\$90. Those with less-deep pockets should taste them at the cellar door but leave with a bottle of Mt Difficulty's citrusy dry riesling or their very sweet Mansons Farm pinot gris, which just cries out for some goat's cheese or even pork with apple sauce. **Felton Rd, Bannockburn, +64 3 445 3445.**

the guide.

CARRICK VINEYARD AND RESTAURANT

This is a must do. Even if you don't come here for lunch (see Where to Eat), come to Carrick to try the excellent flinty, well-structured chardonnay. **Cairnmuir Rd, Bannockburn, +64 3 445 3480.**

OLSENS GARDEN VINEYARD

Set in a pretty little garden, the kookily quaint cellar door at this 10-hectare family-owned and -operated vineyard is worth visiting for a savoury rosé, a classic gewürztraminer, a fabulously lush Annieburn riesling that's loaded with sugar, and the 2008 Jackson Barry pinot noir, which is rich and lingering. **306 Felton Rd, Bannockburn, +64 3 445 1716.**

ROCKBURN

The industrial estate location is hardly the most romantic but the wines make up for it, including a very well priced chardonnay for NZ\$23 a bottle. **Cnr Gair Ave and McNulty Rd, Cromwell, +64 3 445 0555.**

WOING TREE VINEYARD

The vineyard wraps around an 80-year-old pine tree that used to be where local lovers went "parking". There's some mighty good loving, too, in the bottles of grog made from the surrounding vines. The 2008 Beetle Juice pinot and the 2009 Blondie (a white wine made from red pinot noir grapes – like Champagne) represent good value if you can't stump up the NZ\$85 for the incredibly intense and concentrated Sandstorm Reserve pinot noir. All are made by Carol Bunn, and her medal-winning 2007 estate pinot is no slouch either. **Opposite the Big Fruit sculpture, Shortcut Rd, Cromwell, +64 3 445 4142.**

NORTHBURN STATION

Set by a babbling brook and offering tastings that are all cleverly matched to little canapés, Northburn Station likes to do things a little differently, whether it's selling their own station-grown lamb from the cellar door or acting as an agent for a local whitebait fisherman. Try their pinot noir and the riesling, which are standouts. **Cromwell-Tarras State Hwy, Cromwell, +64 3 445 1743.**

64 delicious.

TWO PADDOCKS

If Mt Difficulty and Felton Road are the best-known Central Otago vineyards, then Two Paddocks must be in a close third place, thanks to ownership by actor Sam Neill and movie director Roger Donaldson. This is no vanity project, however, as the estate pinot noirs – especially their rarer single-vineyard wines – show. **315 Strode Rd, Alexandra, +64 3 449 2756.**

Other pinots you should look out for include the recently lauded Mount Dottrel, the smart drops from the dinky Pisa Range Estate, a 2007 Aravin that's more about plummy, spicy fragrances than unbridled power, and Peregrine. The latter has a very flash cellar door in the Gibbston Valley on the way from Queenstown to Cromwell, which houses a good standard pinot and great premium pinot in their Karearea – but, like many at the top end round here, it comes at a price... NZ\$65 a bottle.

For an unusual approach to wine tasting, visit **The Big Picture** (cnr Sandflat Rd and State Hwy 6, Cromwell, +64 3 445 4052), where you watch an aerial film of the region's vineyards, then virtually drop in to six of them for tastings. The wines are ranked in front of you as you watch the movie and each tasting is led by a video from the respective winemakers. The aroma room will also help you get to grips with some tell-tale fragrances of wine.

where to eat

Let's be brutal. If you come to Central Otago for great fine dining, you'll be sorely disappointed. If, however, you set your heart on honest cafe food lifted by the excellent local wines, you can be satisfied eating out in the region without having to cross the borders into nearby Arrowtown, Queenstown or Wanaka.

MT DIFFICULTY

It's not just the ripper pinots that Mt Difficulty is famous for. There's also this cracking cafe with a broad, shaded deck boasting magnificent views from its prime site high on the hillside above Felton Road. Werner Hecht-Wendt is a master when it comes to slow-roasting duck, which is good news given the robust pinot on offer.

NZ cheeses such as Whitestone Windsor Blue and Retro Organic Catlins Camembert dot a cheese platter, along with a delicious gingerbread that makes the most of that blue. For a sweet finish, maybe it's a rhubarb and white chocolate cheesecake or an inventive passionfruit and lemon pot with green tea ice cream. There are a number of gluten-free options, too. **See Where to Drink.**

BANNOCKBURN CAFE

A great short black, stunning carrot cake and the chance to experience a true South Island culinary moment – the cheese roll – are all fine reasons to come to this great new cafe. Owner Jan Hawkins' enthusiasm is also infectious. Please note that the cheese roll is a strange, pan-fried concoction of bread filled with a mix of cheese, evaporated milk and French onion soup mix! A good one will make even the burliest Otago prop forward go a little misty and want to hug his mummy. **430a Bannockburn Rd, Bannockburn, +64 3 445 1553.**

CARRICK VINEYARD AND RESTAURANT

Another stand-out for lunch – and not just because I love their crispy lamb sweetbreads with cauliflower puree, bacon and the sharpness of caperberries. Chef Janet Lyall's menu plunders the nearby hills, whether it's for wild rabbits, hare or local lamb to shred and turn into a salad with beetroot, walnuts, snow pea shoots and mint. Also look out for local elderflowers, perhaps flavouring a fine parfait served with a rhubarb and raspberry compote. **See Where to Drink.**

FEAST

Despite the mall location, this could still be Central Otago's hippest cafe, and with the experienced Paul Stevenson on the floor there's service and an interesting wine list to back that claim. Drink a Northburn Station riesling or a rather good pinot from Lochburn. Eat the carpaccio of hare loin with roasted garlic and watercress or a salad of baby beets, blue cheese, walnuts and pear, but give the flaccid pizzas a miss. **7 The Mall, Cromwell, +64 3 445 3020.**



Clockwise from top right: local South Island koura; idyllic scenery; Two Paddocks pinot noir; Pisa Range Estate; Sunbury fruit orchards; Northburn Station.



the guide.

THE PACKING SHED GALLERY AND CAFE

Rebecca Farrell cooks at this cafe in her family's old fruit-packing shed that's surrounded by pretty gardens. Her simple, concise menu might offer mussels in a garlic cream sauce or hot-smoked salmon with a salad of pumpkin, sprouts and toasted seeds. It's also littered with her own preserved chutneys and fruits like brandy apricots served with ice cream. Yum! 68 Boulton Rd, Earnscleugh, +64 3 449 2757

THE ORCHARD GARDEN CAFE

The quaint little stone-flagged dining room feels like a welcoming farmhouse kitchen. From the blackboard menu, choose blue cod with a parmesan crust or honest tarts perhaps pairing sweet caramelised onions and South Island blue cheese with their delicate pastry. Located right off the Central Otago Rail Trail, it's one of the better dinner options in the area. 576 Dunstan Rd, Alexandra, +64 3 449 2865.

SHAKY BRIDGE VINEYARD CAFE

You can almost hear the old gold sluices working at this cosy brick cottage on the banks of the Manuherikia River. Sit outdoors on a balmy night and enjoy chicken liver paté or honey- and thyme-glazed chook on roast kumara. On colder days, hunker down inside and stick chef Craig Redmile's Fiordland venison with braised red cabbage to your ribs! Craig's food is big on flavour and among the best in the region. The bridge is worth an amble over in between main and dessert, too – just don't think too much about the road's name in case you get spooked! Graveyard Gully Rd, Alexandra, +64 3 448 5111.

THE COURTHOUSE CAFE

This cafe in and around Alexandra's tiny 1876 courthouse is our pick for breakfast or a light lunch. Good coffee, excellent plump sandwiches with inspiring fillings and everything from a full brekkie to French toast with bacon and banana are attractions. It's open for dinner on Friday and Saturday nights, and is run by Barry and Rebecca Farrell of The Packing Shed. 8 Centennial Ave, Alexandra, +64 3 448 7818.

LAZY DOG CAFE

This is a large cafe-diner on the road to Wanaka where, alongside cafe favourites, they specialise in dishes from owner and chef Dean's native South Africa, such as spicy homemade boerewors sausages. Gladmuir Rd, nr Wanaka Rd, Cromwell, +64 3 445 3211.

Other cafes in the area include **Gallery Fare On 6** (344 Kawarau Gorge Rd, State Hwy 6, Cromwell, +64 3 445 4151) or the rather dinky little **The Bank Café** in Clyde (33 Sunderland St, +64 3 449 2955).

You can also get counter meals and a glass of fine Speight's Gold Medal Ale (the ale of choice round this way) at the **Dunstan Hotel** (35 Sunderland St, Clyde, +64 3 449 2817) and **Victoria Hotel** (Melmore Tce, +64 3 445 0607). The latter, in Old Cromwell Town, occupies two cottages built to house the hotel in 1899. Slightly more fancy – and older – is the **The Luggate Hotel** (60 Main Rd, Luggate, +64 3 443 8523), which is building a solid reputation for good tucker that's a little more adventurous, with wild rabbit, quail, lamb shanks or chowder often on the menu. Note that it seems impossible to open a country pub in the South Island and not to have a seafood chowder on the menu – which is fine by us!

Otherwise, if you're prepared to drive just out of Central Otago the other way you'll find far more choice – and generally more aspirational food – in Arrowtown. Our picks would be lunch (and fine wines) at the sleek winery restaurant at Amisfield or dinner at Saffron followed by drinks at their cool, very snug bar across the alley.

produce

Central Otago is renowned in New Zealand as a fruit-growing region and in season you'll find a plethora of roadside stalls selling everything from strawberries, cherries and stone fruit to free-range eggs and local veg. Locals swear by the likes of **Webb's** (State Hwy 6, Cromwell, +64 3 445 1217) but it's also worth noting **Glennvale Orchard** (Ripponvale Rd, Cromwell, +64 3 445 0733), which is one of the few offering the chance to pick your own cherries. Just don't ask orchardist Robbie Jones for serving suggestions – he doesn't eat them!

If you're heading through Alexandra, drop in to see Scott Macdonald and his offsider Bodean at **The Fridge** (48 Tarbert St, +64 3 448 6212). At this butchery-deli, you'll find local meats and fine merguez or haggis sausages ranked alongside house-cured and -smoked smallgoods, and saffron grown at Bannockburn by Maurice Watson. Don't miss their reassuringly old-fashioned and extremely porky pork pies.

Down this way you'll also find top-notch dried and fresh apricots (in season) at **Sunbury Park Orchard** (1042 Earnscleugh Rd, Alexandra, +64 3 449 2806). The superbly plump and tart Moorpark apricots are the ones to covet among the three varieties Wayne and Mary Ashton grow.

On Sunday mornings from November to February, the best place to buy produce is the cute **Farmers' Market** in Cromwell's "old town" (Melmore Tce, +64 3 445 4840). You'll find everything from cherries, artisan bread and honey to cheese commissioned for the Gibbston Valley Cheesery. The carnivorous are also well served with Cardrona Merino lamb and game such as Brian Hemsley's guinea fowl and pheasants. You'll also often find Steve Clark from Cairnmuir Olives here selling his award-winning extra virgin oils. Our pick is his edgier Leccino. During the week, buy the oil direct from the grove in Bannockburn (119 Cornish Point Rd, +64 3 445 0920).

Another hero of the market is Michelle Casson, a tea importer and blender based in Queenstown who's a regular at the market, selling her green, black and white teas under the Stir Tea brand. She also has a range of wonderfully clean and vivid fruit teas made from ingredients such as dried Pakistani rose petals, rosehips from Chile and peppermint from the USA.

You'll also find Stir Tea on the shelves at a great foodie haven in Clyde called the **Central Gourmet Galleria** (27 Sunderland St, Clyde, +64 3 449 3331). Marianne and Mark Grimward turn an obsessive's eye to sourcing interesting products such as oils, chutneys, honey and choc-dipped apricots, as well as acting as an unofficial cellar door for smaller wineries such as Three Miners – try both the riesling and pinot; Clyde Village (a great value, light



Clockwise from top right: Cromwell farmers' market; try French cranes at the market; wild lupine flowers; pork pies from The Fridge; Rocky Ridge Lodge; Orchard Garden Cafe.



the guide.



local pinot); the award-winning Aravin pinot and the elegant 2008 Black Quail Estate pinot noir.

If you get peckish at the market, stop by the French crepe stall, or sneak down to the **Grain and Seed Café** (Melmore Tce, +64 3 445 1077) for a slab of lasagne, a sanger or a hot chocolate overlooking the lake. That's assuming you can walk past **Provisions** (Melmore Tce, +64 3 445 4048) without gorging yourself. Jane Shaw and Pauline Murphy's cottage is one of the most exciting foodie destinations in Central Otago, thanks to their obscenely good sticky buns. These are buns you would man a barricade to protect – all soft, buttery brioche and sticky, crunchy caramel. Their gingerbread isn't too shoddy, either, and while they have a good name for their roasted cherry chutney – this one is subtle when many can be aggressively vinegary – we reckon their nectarine chutney with lemon, fennel and cumin is even better.

where to stay

ROCKY RANGE LODGE

Set in the dramatic schist hills outside Alexandra, Lisa and Colin Strang's lodge not only offers four cosy rooms with stunning views, but also the chance to nip back there for dessert after dinner – perhaps a fine pannacotta flavoured with the couple's own thyme honey. From NZ\$375 per double per night, including breakfast. 159 The Half Mile, Alexandra, +64 3 448 6150, rockyrange.co.nz.

ORCHARD HOUSE

This B&B offers two cosy bedrooms (with ensuites and DVD players) in one wing of Trish and Fred Black's property, which snuggles in among the fruit trees and Trish's pretty cottage garden. From NZ\$250 per double per night, including breakfast. 90 Cromwell-Wanaka Rd, State Hwy 6, Cromwell, +64 3 445 4484, orchardhouse.co.nz.

AOTUROA LUXURY VILLA

Nestled in the crook of a bend in the Clutha River, this modern property between Wanaka and Cromwell has stunning views of distant snow-capped peaks. If you can't be bothered driving to the Luggate pub or Lazy Dog Cafe (see above) for dinner, the Davies will cook for you. A close friendship with Warwick and Jenny Hawker who own Pisa Range Estate means winemaker dinners are an option. The villa has four generously proportioned bedrooms – but, beware, no beer when we were there! From \$390NZ per double per night including breakfast. Wanaka-Cromwell Rd, State Hwy 6, + 64 3 443 5000, aoturoa.co.nz. **dl**

Thanks to Tourism New Zealand for assistance. For more information, visit: newzealand.com. Air New Zealand flies direct to Queenstown from Sydney. Daily connections from Auckland to Queenstown are available from all major Australian cities. Visit: airnewzealand.com.au.

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