

# Book In for a Long Lunch With Boutique Gin and Wine Tastings at The Runholder, Martinborough's Elegant New Hospitality Hub



Photo: Courtesy Of The Runholder

The town's newest – and largest – cellar-door restaurant is geared up to amplify everything the Wairarapa region has to offer.

Words by SASHA BORISSENKO · Updated on 13 Oct 2023 · Published on 05 Oct 2023



Five years ago, my last wine-centric Wairarapa trip saw me nursing a twisted ankle at wine festival Toast Martinborough. Regrettably, I'd worn heels – a rookie move that revealed my inexperience to fellow winery

hoppers.

So this time, wearing better footwear, I jumped at the chance to salvage my reputation at The Runholder. The newly opened Martinborough venue is the new flagship for wineries Te Kairanga and Martinborough Vineyards, and distillery Lighthouse Gin.

Less than two hours' drive from Wellington, over Remutaka Hill, it's owned by Foley Wines – whose parent company also runs Wairarapa luxury lodge Wharekauhau , along with several other local and international wineries and brands.

Martinborough is a small town with no shortage of wineries , but The Runholder stands out thanks to its size (it's the largest cellar-door restaurant in the area) and its elegant design.

You can see straightaway that Christchurch's Nott Architects took inspiration from the region's woolsheds, mirrored in the high sloping ceilings and slatted wood. The building sits among Te Kairanga's vineyards, treating you to 180-degree views of the surrounding vines with your meal.

The building holds a 100-seat restaurant, private dining room, barrel hall and gin distillery – plus a tasting room where you can see Lighthouse Gin's 700-litre German still through a huge pane of glass.

Despite its open-plan, Scandinavian minimalism, the restaurant feels comfortable, with an open fire, sage green walls and soft lighting. Soundproofing means there's no need to shout across the table, and the sustainable, produce-forward meals are presented on carefully selected ceramics from The Alchemist's Table.

Currently on the menu are pizzas, charcuterie boards and sharing plates; come December, you'll be able to order à la carte bistro dishes such as Wairarapa aged Wagyu with foraged pistou, bone marrow jus and smoked salts, and whole line-caught fish. Don't let the polished surroundings fool you – head chef Tim Smith is keen to cater to a variety of tastes and budgets.

Before this, the Australian-born Smith worked in Indonesia for 10 years –

including at Bali's Potato Head, which was included in this year's World's 50 Best Hotels. At The Runholder, he pays homage to Martinborough's history, produce and people, while working as sustainably as possible.

"I want to have full traceability of where all the protein is coming from – how each meat has been farmed, who farmed it, and how it gets here. We're going to treat each animal with absolute respect," he tells *Broadsheet*.

All the meats are cured in-house or smoked and grilled in a handmade charcoal-flame grill. Smith says that besides the pizzas, which he wanted to be authentically Italian, everything has a proud New Zealand focus.

Smith's passion for sustainability and amplifying local producers stems from growing up near an oyster farm in Tasmania. "You'd get into the ocean and catch oysters, and I fell in love with that. It's a great illustration of what I'm about – it's natural and delicious in its purest form."

One key supplier is Tora Collective, founded on the South Wairarapa coast by Troy Bramley and Claire Edwards. At Runholder, I try the pair's kingfish which is cured for a delicious starter with lime, shallots and crisped kumara, and their hand-caught salmon is seared and served on a bed of grains and poached tomatoes.

Bramley comes from a long line of fishers. He and Edwards want to change the face of the fishing industry by only taking from the ocean what's needed and delivering it straight to the restaurant's door. "The idea that small is not effective needs to change," Bramley tells *Broadsheet*.

To drink, there's an array of Te Kairanga and Martinborough Vineyard vintages. Te Kairanga's chief winemaker, John Kavanagh, uses traditional techniques with a scientific focus and says he prides himself on "celebrating the character of each wine".

Book in for a guided wine or Lighthouse Gin tasting experience and you'll take away much more than a full belly and pleasant buzz.

If you're keen to visit Martinborough's newest addition, the area makes for a charming weekend away. Book in at the historic Martinborough Hotel , and you'll be ideally situated for long lunches and leisurely tastings. After my day enjoying all of the above, I was ready to sink into my well-fluffed pillows at the 1882-era stay - and plot my next trip to this gem in New Zealand's small but mighty wine capital.

**The Runholder**

89 Martins Road, Martinborough

**Hours:**

Thu to Mon 11am-4pm

Tue & Wed closed

*The Runholder's hours will be extended to dinnertime come summer.*

therunholder.co.nz

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