



Fresh ingredients from the garden



Dining hall

Split PERSONALITY

A Japanese-style wellness retreat on New Zealand's South Island
is not as improbable as one might imagine

Step through the 250-year old Japanese gates into Split Apple Retreat in New Zealand's South Island and be prepared to be rendered speechless – for a short while at least. It's a common reaction from guests, according to Lee Nelson and wife Pen, who have created a secluded Japanese-inspired luxury wellness retreat that hugs a cliff top and boasts spectacular views of the Tasman Bay and the pristine Abel Tasman National Park. "We enjoy seeing guests enter, look up and then watch their reaction to the panorama, for an instant nothing else matters in the world but the beauty they see," says Lee, a retired US-trained physician, who has a passionate interest in wellness and longevity. Lee, who was diagnosed with prostate cancer 12 years ago, and Pen, originally from Thailand's Chiang Mai, holidayed in New Zealand in 1992 and then made



Healthy, fresh food predominates

it their home. Later they searched for 12 months for the perfect retreat location before discovering the pristine Split Apple region, named after a rock close to shore that resembles an apple cut in half. It is a 75-minute drive from Nelson, which regularly tops the national statistics for sunshine hours. It then took four years to create a haven where

guests can relax, rejuvenate and feel totally pampered. There's an emphasis on functional healthy cuisine, but banish thoughts of limp lettuce. Pen, who is a wizard in her kitchen, produces gourmet meals bursting with fresh flavours and sensational tastes. She turns ordinary food into the extraordinary, experimenting with healthy alternatives using fresh herbs and spices. Much of the produce is picked daily from the kitchen garden near the Japanese tea house, where guests can enjoy teas ➤



Balcony and Infinity pool



Rustic entrance



Staircase to rooms

“ I leave totally refreshed, vowing to eat better and make lifestyle changes – but not before taking one last look at that view ”

which Lee sources from a tea master in Macau. Pen says it's not hard to make subtle diet changes that enhance wellness. “Substituting healthy ingredients for unhealthy ones in recipes is easy once you know how. You can use apple sauce or pineapple for butter, cashew nut milk for cow's milk, and xylitol for sugar, they all contribute to healthy eating.”

The good news is red wine and chocolate are also fine in moderation, just as long as it is dark chocolate with at least 70-per cent cocoa. According to Lee, the three superfoods that should be eaten regularly for a healthy diet are pomegranates, blueberries, and wild salmon and he recommends reducing sugar intake and drinking more water and green tea. He often prepares wellness programmes at guests' requests and Pen also offers cooking lessons. On our first night we dined on tofu with black and white sesame seeds; spinach and pine nuts; miso soup, mahimahi, bluefin tuna, salmon and gurnard sashimi. We also had grilled mahimahi with Asian sauce made from lemon grass, tomatoes, shiitake mushrooms and szechuan pepper; and for the finale, a healthy blueberry soufflé. The verdict? Delicious.

The retreat, designed by Auckland architect, Ricky Do, has three luxurious

HEALTHY OPTIONS

There are a host of wellness destinations around New Zealand and Australia. Here are just a few of the best:

• Harmony Hill Wellness and Organic Spa Retreat

Located in a bush setting overlooking Hobart, you can stay in luxury two-storey cottages with a glass sun room and a spa bath or enjoy a simple day visit. A wide range of spa and healing therapies for the body, mind and spirit are available.

organicspa-retreat.com

• Saffire

Recently opened on the Freycinet Peninsula, Saffire (see page 20) offers a personalised, rejuvenating and indulgent experience in a luxury coastal sanctuary that captures the essence of Tasmania's east coast. A particular extravagance is the spa treatment that features blue sapphire dust.

saffire-freycinet.com.au

• The Spa at Kauri Cliffs

Another classically located lodge, this time in the North Island of New Zealand. The main lodge has an adjoining 72-hole golf course and the spa is located in a totara forest, a perfect place for numerous pamperings, such as Root Reflexology and a Zen Green Tea Massage.

kauricliffs.com

• The Bay of Fires Lodge Yoga Retreat

Set on a Tasmanian hilltop, 40 metres above the pounding sea and surrounded by Mount William National Park, this is a unique opportunity to practice yoga and meditation in a stunning natural landscape. Three-day yoga workshops are held annually in May.

bayoffireslodge.com.au

suites, (four if you book out the whole retreat) living room with stunning Asian antiques and artwork, dining room, infinity pool, heated outdoor spa, gym, sauna and wet steam room. There's a home theatre where you can watch movies, try meditation or head to the nearby beach, fish, go horseback riding or take a waterfront walk in the national park. Though ever since I discarded my shoes at the front door and wrapped myself in a Japanese robe, it's been difficult to leave my 'lotus' suite, with its 180-degree views of the island dotted ocean. I soak in the Japanese granite bath and sink into the king-size bed with the softest linen and switch on the 'Lee designed' entertainment system featuring Apple TV and internet radio.

Each suite has two outdoor private decks surrounded by a Japanese garden, one with a table and chairs and the other with sun lounges and an umbrella, and even in winter the sun shines here constantly.

Two days later, after a massage, facial and reflexology, I leave totally refreshed, vowing to eat better and make lifestyle changes, but not before taking one last look at that view – so beautiful, so blue, so unforgettable.

Sue Wallace