

WORDS: Darryl Moore  
PHOTOS: Richard Bloom

# WINED AND DINED

Darryl Moore explores the Bhudevi Estate, a contemporary vineyard and gardens in Marlborough, New Zealand



**T**he Marlborough region located at the north eastern corner of New Zealand's South Island is internationally renown for its wine growing prowess. It is blessed with a convivial microclimate of warm dry summers, cool winters with clear sunny days, frosty but generally devoid of snow, and benefits from the rainshadow effect of a mountain range to the west, which pre-emptively precipitates trans-Tasman cloud drifts.

Central to the area is the Wairau Valley an alluvial plain sandwiched between the western Richmond Range and the eastern Wither Hills, and bounded to the north by the Pacific Ocean at Cloudy Bay. Located primarily on river beds, the valley boasts young, fertile, free draining soils with a high composition of river stones that reflect light and heat, enhanced by pure natural spring creek waters. The distinctive terroir produces the characteristic sharp, dry flavours associated with Sauvignon Blanc, the dominant local grape variety which has defined the region's global brand.

Unsurprisingly given the economic importance of wine production to the region, the landscape is dominated by endless rows of vines extending in all directions. The New Zealand equivalent of green belt zoning prevents the intrusion of much else, and home building is regulated by resource consents which limit new building construction to 'lifestyle block' properties with vineyards.

But it was not a viticultural penchant, which originally enticed two Americans, Bruce Miller and Jane Casey, respectively an art dealer and art historian, specialists in the Asian Medieval period, to visit the locale. They travelled from their base in Bangkok to tie the knot in the Blenheim District Court and honeymoon in the area. Their attachment to the place grew on subsequent visits until they instructed an estate agent to inform them of any suitable available properties. Despite having no intent to purchase a vineyard they were drawn

to an eight hectare property in Rapaura, with a modern house surrounded by fields of Sauvignon Blanc vines, which they sealed a deal on in 2008.

### Modern design

The house designed by Christchurch based practice Modern Architecture Partners, bears a countenance of contemporary clean lines and rectilinear geometry, fashioned from concrete and stone. A separate studio to the rear, bounds a courtyard containing a pool and outdoor eating area, whilst a unique Turrell-esque ocular feature in the roof of the passage to the carpark provides the opportunity for sky gazing contemplation.

As part of the original development, landscape designer Ben McMaster was drafted in to create a garden to surround and compliment the architecture. The tasteful showcase garden featured a contemporary arrangement of hebes, grass areas, gravel paths and most impressively a formal reflecting pool stretching out into the distance towards the Richmond Range, perfectly borrowing the impressive landscape.

Upon occupancy Miller and Casey immediately stamped the place with their own identity, naming it Bhudevi Estate after the Sanskrit word for the Hindu Earth Goddess. They converted the vineyard to organic production, eschewing pesticides and fertilizers in favour of composting with Japanese kelp undaria, locally harvested from the Marlborough Sounds.

Next on the agenda was transforming the garden from its conspicuously modern formality into something fitting both partner's agendas. Despite no formal training in garden design, Miller drew upon his professional eye for aesthetics and experiences of making two former gardens. One a water based garden in Thailand featured ponds integrating indoor and outdoor spaces, whilst the other was of a productive nature in Nepal, highlighting the importance of growing in conditions lacking in fertile space.

At Bhudevi a few key points were paramount in the brief he composed for himself, primarily that the house should feel as if it was built in →



**“MILLER DREW UPON HIS PROFESSIONAL EYE FOR AESTHETICS AND EXPERIENCES OF MAKING TWO FORMER GARDENS”**



**PREVIOUS PAGE**

The architectural curiosity of the oculus neatly frames the sky and adds illumination the passageway

**TOP**

Various Hebe species clustered on the native berm

**BOTTOM LEFT**

The stone bridge across the creek facilitates the circuit path around the garden

**BOTTOM RIGHT**

An Asian 10th century lion statue sits sentry over a bench





the garden rather than the garden applied as an afterthought around the house, and that the garden would be a peaceful place, almost church-like where all the senses are drawn back to the purpose of being there in that specific place. As with the original hortus conclusus typology, a sense of enclosure was considered essential, and achieved by planting trees around the perimeter of the property, effectively screening neighbours and providing vertical accents in the level landscape.

Canopies were commissioned to form extensions from the roof around the house on three sides, providing sheltered spaces between the house and garden. All traces of McMaster's original design, with the exception of the reflecting pool, were duly removed, as were some vines to widen the original layout.

The areas adjacent to the house fell to Casey's remit, and were fashioned into more formal garden areas, accentuating but softening, the architecture. Borrowing the language of traditional European design and planting, a series of distinct areas were created including a citrus garden with seating, a rose garden, a fern garden on the eastern side off the kitchen, and beyond that a potager. The central courtyard is graced with the statuesque splendour of two rows of fan palms flanking the pathway, serenely standing in the flowing foliage and flowers of agapanthus. Horticultural assistance was provided by local gardener Kaye Green to finesse some of the details and instruct on the planting, drawing on her two decades experience at nearby Barewood House, which boasts a Garden of National Significance.

Miller meanwhile went native with an area between the buildings and southern boundary, creating a densely planted berm, flanking each side of a creek describing an eastward serpentine flow across the property. Drawing upon his prior garden experience with endemic species in Thailand, he employed a similar strategy using consciously arranged New

Zealand species. It suggests a stylised naturalism and articulates Miller's attempt to approximate the feeling encountered in the bush. Whilst to locals the plants may invoke prosaic associations, to Miller's outsider's eye they provide a distinctly exotic appeal, and ample design opportunities.

The planting avoids the popular South Island vernacular of prairie style tussock grasses and phormiums, in favour of a wider range of plants, grouped in semi-naturalistic arrangements focused upon overall structural impact rather than floral or colour aspects. The palette embraces psuedopanax, various hebe species, cortaderia, anthropodium, leptospermum, kunzea and coprosma, accented with the delicate arboreal delights of Sophora, and all enclosed by a back drop of *Dodonaea viscosa* to provide an ample shelter belt.

The design divides into western and eastern gardens, each with distinct characteristics, joined by a path that circumnavigates the site, whilst an existing bridge was retained to allow transit across the creek. Christo Saggars, a locally based, ex-pat Brit landscaper, provided contracting services and was responsible for a great deal of the formative restructuring of the site. Some serious terraforming was begun in 2009 creating 4-5m mounds to provide contoured height, breaking up the horizontality of the otherwise flat site, as well as providing screening from the sun and prevalent wind.

### Walk the walk

Sunken paths were created to allow comfortable passage through the garden for two people walking side by side. A boardwalk made from recycled eucalyptus and ironwood timbers provides a structural backbone, whilst enclaves provide seating to encourage dwelling. The central path branches off into other areas including a sunken rock garden featuring rocks harvested from local farms. The space recalls Japanese gardens, an influence from Miller's

Asian experiences. Lichens and mosses growing on both the rocks and wood provide a natural link between the materials and confer an assumed patina of age on the garden.

The original creek was deepened and weirs inserted to disrupt the flow, which whilst aesthetically enhancing, provoked unexpected complications. It allowed a lot of biomass to sink and vegetate, something which has been addressed by various means including weed mats, although a successful long term solution is still to be found. Also along the banks a number of *Alectryon excelsus* were

**"A SENSE OF ENCLOSURE WAS CONSIDERED ESSENTIAL, AND ACHIEVED BY PLANTING TREES AROUND THE PERIMETER OF THE PROPERTY, CREATING EFFECTIVE SCREENING"**





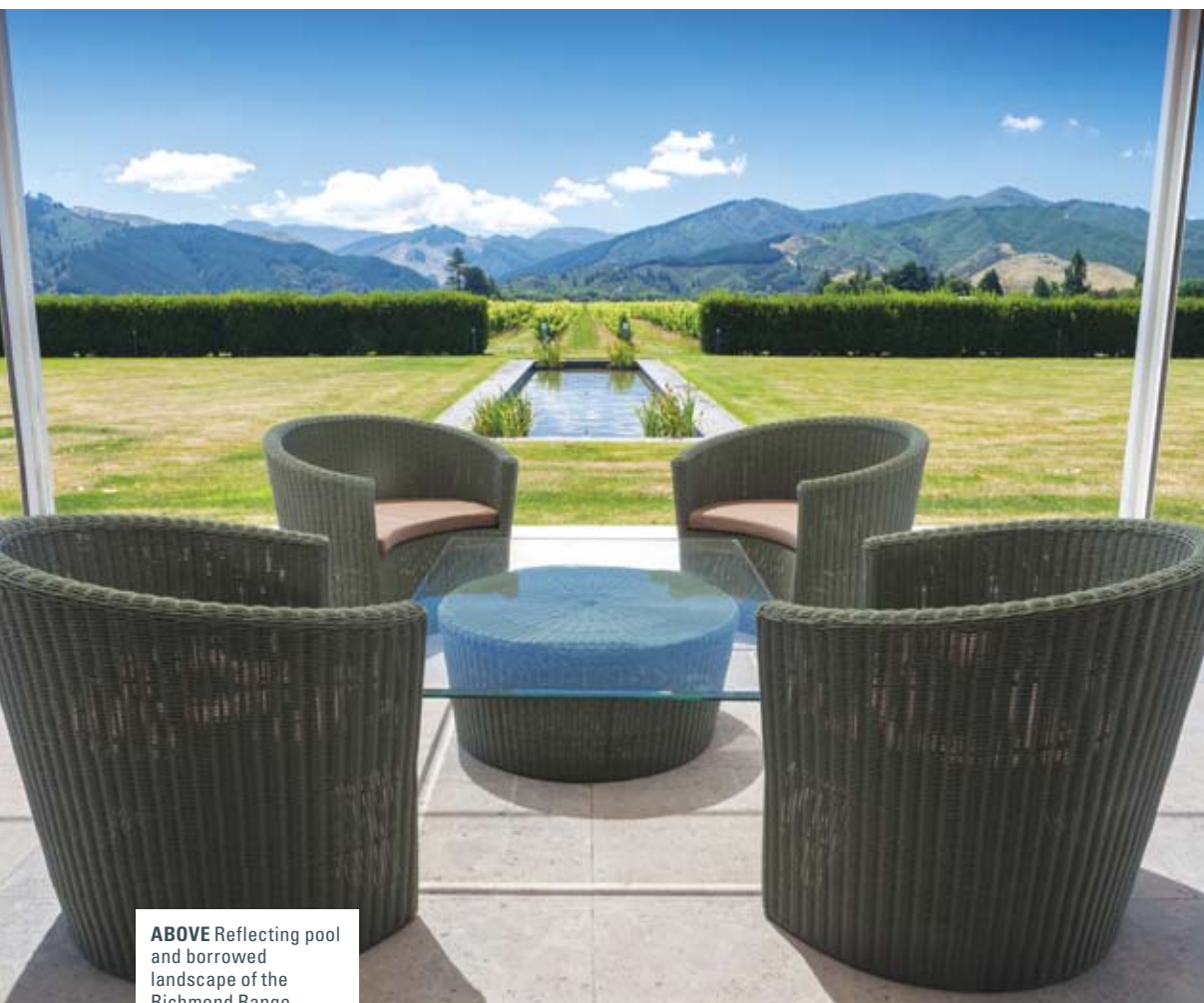


**TOP** The serpentine fresh water creek flows through the property

**BOTTOM** Palms and agapanthus provide a subtropical feel to the courtyard garden







**ABOVE** Reflecting pool and borrowed landscape of the Richmond Range

planted but have been unable to effectively establish, due to the vicissitudes of the rising and falling water-table ripping up the roots and leaving them exposed to extremes of either soaking or drying out. Despite the high water table, the landforms have necessitated the insertion of irrigation drip-lines throughout the planting, concealed beneath a wood chip mulch.

The eastern aspect of native garden is less dense than its western counterpart, intended as a socially orientated area, used for events and weddings, which contribute to the economic sustainability of the garden. Bhudevi is a key fixture on the annual Garden Marlborough charity fundraiser, a garden trail event and social highpoint for the area, drawing large numbers of hortiholics, bused in from near and far, to indulge in the local gardens open over a four day period.

### Sculpture garden

Integrating the owners professional interests in art into the estate, a dedicated sculpture garden on the western side of the house creates a dialectic between culture and nature, featuring 12th to 15th century Asian works. A few other pieces, such as a 10th century lion perched in silent mobility over a stone bench on the boardwalk, are judiciously scattered throughout the berm, creating visual anchor points but avoiding the impression of a theme park.

Given that the couple only occupy the

property for six months each year (the rest is spent in Thailand and travelling), Miller has entrusted much of the responsibility for the ongoing developments to full time gardener Mike Fee. Involved in the project since the early earthworks, Fee has been a mainstay of the progress, and has been instrumental in selection of plants and their subsequent management.

Intended future works include enhancing the existing accent lighting with functional lights, as Miller acknowledges that daylight hours are a scarce resource for those living busy lives, and preclude full enjoyment of the garden. He is also considering extending the native planting palette to include liverworts and carnivorous plants, as well as providing botanical labels to encourage active plant identification and enhance the visitor experience

Driven by Miller's design vision, the garden has evolved steadily and continues to do so. He is happy to take the time to create a garden that becomes somewhere to set aside daily concerns and to just experience being alive. Super-sizing the maxim about a job worth doing well, Miller contends that a job is worth overdoing, and that only gold standard solutions are acceptable for solving problems and achieving results. Whilst this has entailed a great deal of trial and error, something he resignedly accepts, he remains focused on the aspirations of the endgame, to create a garden that will mature and improve as it ages, much like a fine wine. ○



## LOCAL INFO

- Blenheim is one of New Zealand's sunniest towns, averaging 2500 hours of sunshine per annum (London average is 1500). Average temperatures range from 24°C in summer to 13°C in winter.

- *Pachystegia insignis*, commonly known as the Marlborough Rock Daisy, is as its name suggests is a small regional evergreen shrub of the Asteraceae family, bearing large daisy-like flowers on long stalks in summer. Its dark green leaves begin covered in silvery tomentum before turning glossy.

- Garden Marlborough - A spring celebration of Marlborough's landscape, with a series of garden tours, garden themed workshops and social events. Thursday 5 November to Sunday 8 November 2015 [www.gardenmarlborough.co.nz](http://www.gardenmarlborough.co.nz)