

CREATING SUNSHINE

THE COMBINATION
OF ONE PROPERTY
OWNER'S FERTILE
IMAGINATION AND
A STRONG WORK
ETHIC HAS RESULTED
IN THE CREATION OF A
DELIGHTFUL NINE-HOLE
GOLF COURSE ON THE
OUTSKIRTS OF KERIKERI

When John Levers began his search for a property in 2010, his main criteria was that no neighbours be in view, something he has achieved.

But Levers is no hermit; indeed, he is a most generous and amiable host. Which is why, when one of the guests at Puketotara Lodge near Kerikeri asked if it would be possible to practise golf on the property, Levers promptly mowed a fairway and a green – complete with homemade flag – on his airstrip.

The guest, a Japanese golf professional, loved what Levers created. The visitor's enthusiasm was irresistible to a man who loves a challenge, and sitting astride a borrowed digger, Levers set off across his property on what was a voyage of discovery.

Gradually bush, scrub and tobacco weed gave way to reveal land that was golf course friendly.

Almost before he knew it, Levers had carved out six holes. Then, once the earthworks were done he set about spraying and weeding, ordering in truckloads of top soil and seeding the greens with proper green mix.

All this on what was originally a 30-acre lifestyle property, an undulating piece of land on which had stood 750 olive trees and 20 avocados.

To backtrack a moment, what Levers has achieved in three short years is nothing short of remarkable, especially when you consider his situation before buying the Far North property.

Confined to a hospital bed in Sydney, he was undergoing tests that would confirm a medical condition that meant his days as an airline pilot were over when he spied the Kerikeri property online.

He rang the real estate agent immediately and two weeks later, when he was discharged from hospital, he flew to New Zealand to view the lodge and its land. That was in the morning. By afternoon he'd put in an offer and the deal went unconditional within a week.

"I had a vision as to what I wanted and when I walked onto the property and took in the view and the land I knew it had potential, that it could become something special," he says.

Levers laughs when he tells how he always planned to retire to the Bay of Islands, but he's far from retiring; indeed, as well as buying the lodge he bought a local business, since sold, and is currently in negotiation to buy another. This former flier is an all-action man.

The first step in his new life was to turn the lodge, formerly run as a retreat, into a B&B. While the lodge bedrooms received cosmetic changes the biggest redevelopment took place in the heart of the home, the kitchen.

Levers' partner Mutsuo Hatada is also a chef, and he has sole charge of the kitchen. In fact, the old kitchen was ripped out and in its place two were created, one a proper restaurant-quality kitchen, the other more upmarket residential style.

In the adjoining living and dining areas the original native timber has been retained. Floor to ceiling doors which open onto a wide deck that wraps around three sides of the main house help to keep the rooms bright.

Sensibly, Levers and Hatada have created a place where the view is king. Yes, the bedrooms are comfortable, generous of size and well appointed, but they are the aperitif to the main course, the show-stopper of a vista that includes much of the lodge property plus a broad sweep of landscape – green pastures, green trees and faraway hills.



Clockwise from above: the pristine waters of the Puketotara River at the foot of the property; view of the clubhouse from the golf course; Hannah beside her namesake hole; John Levers with dogs Hannah and MoMo.

In early spring, the view inspires a Johnny Cash moment, seemingly 40-plus shades of green.

In front of the tiered deck, which is boarded by planters of herbs and robust bushes of sweet-smelling lavender, a lush lawn slopes down to a wooden fence. Here, alpacas Zoro and Denny plus a couple of Scottish Highland cattle and two horses vie for guests' attention.

Walk down to view the animals up close and it's likely you will be accompanied by Labradors Hannah and MoMo and probably one or two of an interesting collection of cats that also call the property home.

From the house, remnants of the olive orchard can be seen; what was 750 trees is now 200. Out of view is Levers' preferred planting – grapes. One of the first things he did upon buying the property was to plant a north-facing slope in vines. In the future he will harvest his grapes and have them turned into wine at the nearby Marsden winery.

No doubt some of that wine will be consumed by members of PEGS, aka the Puketotara Estate Golfing Society, at the clubhouse which sits on the banks of the picturesque Puketotara River at the furthest corner of the property.

It's a cheeky and cheerful construction, a fine example of Kiwi ingenuity, a caravan and a sturdy wooden deck lean-to. An old couch, an eclectic mix of chairs, a sun umbrella and a BBQ suggest that this is a popular spot to pause post-round, the perfect place to quench the type of thirst that results from playing a round of golf.

Membership may be exclusive – currently standing at 15 and Levers intends limiting it to 25 – but the dress code is casual... very casual.

Some of the members are neighbours. Levers might not have wanted to be able to see their homes from his own but he is more than happy to enjoy their company. The club has a patron, 84-year-old Leon Brown, who is not the sole octogenarian, another member is aged 80.

Members pay \$5 per week, which covers the cost of the bread and tomato sauce that is part of the club's Saturday afternoon tea ritual. Anything left over goes in the Christmas fund kitty and there's always a proper prize-giving held at the end of the year.

By his own admission, Levers is no golfer; in fact, prior to buying Puketotara he'd been on a golf course just twice in his life, and one of those occasions was as a caddy. While he jokes that his best hole is the 19th, the fact is it's his drive (pardon the pun) and ambition that have seen his daydream become a reality.

As a person who never does things by halves, Levers' creation of six holes served only to fire his enthusiasm. But while he was willing and able to spray and weed and tinker with grass mixes, he knew that ultimately to create a worthy course he needed professional guidance.

Which is why he contacted Sports Surface Design and Management where he was referred to consultant Will Bowden, the former greenkeeping columnist for The Cut.

Bowden made the trip up from Auckland and was



PUKETOTARA

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NB: As well as rooms at the lodge there is a cottage that sleeps six on the property. It is pet friendly (well-behaved dogs only).

Nearby golf courses: Waitangi, Kerikeri, Kauri Cliffs (30 mins), Carrington, Whangaroa, Okaihau
Local attractions: Stone Store, Marsden Estate Winery, Makana Chocolate Factory, Mahoe Farmhouse Cheese, Waitangi



bombarded with questions from Levers. What could be done? Should the course remain as six holes or was it possible to create nine? Could they create a par-4 option and a course that was more than just pitch and putt?

After some consideration, Bowden reached the conclusion that, yes indeed, nine holes was possible. He came up with a design and work started in earnest last September.

Levers was soon back in the driving seat, going where no man had dared. He recalls that while clearing scrub he poked the nose of his trusty steed, another borrowed machine, over an incline. When he found he couldn't reverse up the hill, he lowered the mulcher on the back and drove forward.

"I knocked through the scrub and I broke the mulcher as the area was full of rocks, some of them massive boulders," he says. But what he uncovered will without doubt become the highlight of the course.

The stand of young kauris revealed now guards the approach to the par-3 fifth which sits in a gully. From an elevated tee golfers are encouraged to try to shoot for the green while trying to avoid the kauris and the groups of pongas on either side of the tiered green. Miss the green and you are courting trouble. A hillside looms right and should your shot go long or left you'll have to deal with a sharp uphill slope back to the green.

Close by are the three ponds, two of which are natural –

uncovered during the earthworks – with the third man-made. Levers explains that natural springs necessitated lots of drainage so the creation of a third pond made good sense. In time the ponds will be planted with water lilies.

Walking across the course with Levers it is clear he has a vision, that as he looks across the newly planted fairways covered with a faint tinge of green, he sees the finished item.

He points out areas covered with an assortment of rocks, big and small, that have surfaced during the earthworks or been dug out, and he talks about how, in time, they'll be covered with native trees and bush. In his mind's eye he sees the mature manuka, kanuka, kauri and rimu, the trees labelled with information about their species: a ready-made nature lesson for tourists and lodge guests.

Just as there are ups during the creativity process, there are downs. The course was seeded in November, which turned out to be the driest November on record. That put grass growth a month behind schedule. The drought broke in early December with 200ml rain recorded in two days and a lot of remedial work needing to be done. But Levers is hopeful the course will be fully playable in February.

Is Levers another Michael Hill? Will he be content to stop at nine holes? He laughs and pauses to take in the view of his property. "What we've done is to create a way of life. Our guests will come to this tranquil retreat and they won't actually need to leave the property. They can walk through the bush, fish, do archery, and they can play golf." 🏌️



FRESH IS BEST

Cooking is in Mutsuo Hatada's blood. Originally from Kyushu Island, Japan's third-largest island, he recalls how in his youth he spent a lot of time in the kitchen helping his mother prepare food for the family.

Hatada, who has five brothers, says that eventually he took over the cooking as his parents were busy with the family-owned construction business.

As an 18-year-old he moved to Australia, where he worked for five years, and he then moved to New Zealand where he was based in Christchurch, in 2002 moving to Auckland where he became a larder chef at well-known restaurant Prego.

Part of that job was to create starters, a talent that can be much appreciated by guests at Puketotara Lodge.

Hatada's philosophy is that the best food is fresh, simple and tasty. The lodge menu, while not extensive, offers options sure to please all palates. Main course offerings include salmon, lamb and eye fillet but Hatada is also happy to create dishes at guests' requests.

Hatada is happiest when in his purpose-built kitchen, dreaming up a Kiwi take on his favourite Italian and Japanese foods. And he's more than willing to take the cooking outdoors, saying the pizza oven on the front lawn gets good use.

Where possible, Hatada sources food locally; indeed, he doesn't have to go far to choose vegetables, just to the far side of the driveway, where he has developed an extensive organic garden.

Walking through it, there is an abundance of produce: eggplant, capsicum, limes, broad beans, broccoli, cabbage, courgettes, beans, cauliflower, salad greens and varieties of Japanese vegetables. Nearby are fruit trees and avocados.

"It's cool being able to pick avocados from the trees," he says, and adds, "Knowing where the food has come from gives me a good feeling."

For Hatada, one of the joys of living and working at the lodge is the close contact with the guests. "It's interesting to see people in holiday mood, to see them so happy," he says. "It's also extremely rewarding to receive feedback from our guests."

The lodge offers guests breakfasts and dinners.



Chef Mutsuo Hatada enjoys creating delectable dishes from quality local produce, including fruit and vegetables from the lodge's extensive vegetable garden.