MICHELIN-STARRED CHEF MATT LAMBERT'S 'RETURN' IS EXACTLY THAT

Article by *Phoebe Holden*. April 07, 2026

Internationally acclaimed Aotearoa chef Matt Lambert and his wife, Barbara, have opened *Return*, a fitting name for their first venture since stepping away from their Michelin-starred New York restaurant, *The Musket Room*

On April 1st, the doors to *Return* opened. Sitting at 165 Ponsonby Road (formerly *Ponsonby Road Bistro*), the highly anticipated restaurant marks a significant chapter for the Lamberts, whose New York restaurant, *The Musket Room*, was awarded a Michelin star within four months of opening in 2013 and retained the coveted celestial distinction through to 2020.

The name (literally) reflects a homecoming to Aotearoa, but also a return to independent hospitality. Matt is an Auckland-born chef and restaurateur with a reputation for taking modern Aotearoa cuisine to the global stage. He began his career in West Auckland as a dishie at 14, before training in Auckland and Wellington and later working at *The Grove* under the guidance of Michael Meredith.

Now closed, *The Grove* wasn't just pivotal to Matt's professional life, but his personal life too, it was there he met his wife, Barbara. Originally from Connecticut and holding a fine arts degree from Salve Regina University in Rhode Island, Barbara moved to Aotearoa in 2005 and worked front-of-house at *The Grove* before the pair married and relocated to New York in 2006. She went on to play a central role in building *The Musket Room*'s international reputation, overseeing both front-of-house and operations.

The couple describe *Return* as *"an intimate, New York-style dining experience"* and a *"more grown-up version of The Musket Room"*, refined yet relaxed, with a strong sense of purpose. The philosophy is intentionally concise, offering a small menu and working closely with local farmers and growers. The menu takes cues from the format of *The Musket Room* with dishes structured across snacks, entrées, mains and desserts, focusing on individual plates, a refreshing departure for those experiencing shared-plates fatigue.

Guests can choose from three menu options: à la carte; the six-course tasting menu, *Short Story*; or the ten-course tasting menu, *Long Story*. Dishes will evolve with the seasons and reflect Lambert's approach to modern Aotearoa cuisine, with snacks including his take on *'fish & chips'* and under mains *'steak and cheese'* a play on the classic Kiwi pie, reimagined as roast beef fillet, puff pastry croutons, garlic and thyme jus, and a blue cheese cream. A selection of familiar-sounding (though sure to look anything but) desserts, including pavlova, round out the menu.

The energy in the room aims to follow a similarly balanced approach. *"At Return, the standards are serious, but the environment is welcoming. This is not fine dining, it is intentional dining. Nothing here is accidental; everything is deliberate,"* says Matt.

"Return seeks to represent New Zealand in a way that is both authentic and forward-looking. We want to champion local biodiversity, support small producers, and contribute to a more sustainable hospitality ecosystem."

Barbara adds, *"After so many years in New York, coming back to New Zealand and opening Return feels like a full-circle moment. We've poured everything we've learned into this space, but at its heart, it's about creating something warm, generous and deeply connected to people and place."*

With a capacity of 62 guests, 50 seated at tables and another 12 at the bar, *Return* is open Tuesday to Saturday for dinner. Bookings are recommended, with a small number of tables reserved for walk-ins. Outdoor tables are also available when weather permits on a first-come, first-served basis.

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