

[Home](#) / [The Life](#) / [Good Food](#) /

[Review](#)

Is this Auckland's best restaurant?



Return shows New Zealand's priest-chef in full flight. (Image: Supplied)



[Eden Bradfield](#)

Sun, 26 Jul 2026

[Followed](#)

When I worked in the city, I always had a soft spot for The Lodge, where Return's owners Matt and Barbara Lambert both worked.

The food there was self-assured and never took itself too seriously: you got the feeling they understood this was food, primarily, for the besuited classes of the PWC building: they did not want a "journey", they wanted a good plate of grub as they discussed how much in underwriting fees they could squeeze out of Fletcher's latest capital raise.

Here was a chef in service to his craft and his audience. There was no ego.

À la carte

Return in Ponsonby is the Lamberts' first solo outing since returning to New Zealand. Famously, Lambert gained one Michelin star in his New York days, running The Musket Room.

Return sits in the former Ponsonby Road Bistro and the decor is much the same as it was prior: a large Rimu bar sits in the middle of the place, and the walls have the air of a nice airport lounge – perhaps Air France (certainly not the Koru Lounge, which these days feels more like a cafeteria overrun with polyester suits on laptops).

The atmosphere is hushed, and customers engage with each other in low murmurs.

The Libran and I order a martini as we sit at the bar (mine with gin, hers with vodka).



My Tanqueray 10 plays off the smallest dash of vermouth (Churchill would look towards France for his vermouth; I prefer a marginal amount of France in my own martini).

I should say here that Return offers both a short-tasting menu as well as a long one. They also offer a la carte. I can't tell you how pleased this makes me.

So often restaurants that offer tasting menus turn their noses up at a la carte, as if it is some cousin from a poorer branch of the family.

These tasting menu places often behave as if the chef is some pugnacious, saucy-mouthed dictator and you will sit there for four hours, and you will endure a story about the toothless farmer who grew the broccoli at the bottom of Mt Olympus.

What a relief to have the option of a la carte! What a relief if you only have a couple of hours!

We order a bevy of entrees.

The milk bread (\$18) is like those pull-apart breads you buy at the supermarket. It is soft and plump as if it has its own self-contained airbag system, and the brie butter, dusted with kawakawa, that accompanies it is similarly loquacious — think of half-melted, gooey and luscious brie at the end of a picnic on a hot day and you will have the idea.

Now that is cooking

The creamed paua fry bread (\$18) is nothing short of astonishing; it emerges in a paua shell propped up on a plate of various dried seaweed; it bursts into your mouth with a kind of unctuous vibrancy that recalls the ocean and perhaps the fried pizza one finds hocked at stands in Florence.

I watch the Libran's eyes as she eats hers — her face is always how I judge my own cooking — and her eyes are closed as if reminiscing, or perhaps closed in prayer.

The chicken nugget (\$38), with a generous dollop of caviar, calls back Lambert's cooking at The Lodge. It is, well, a chicken nugget. I've usually sampled these from the McDonald's drive-thru at 2am.

It's precisely what it says on the tin. Did I love it? No. Did I admire it on the menu, as a relic of childhood? Rather.



I am taken with the mushrooms on sourdough (\$18), which resembles a small plank of bread with a large fortified rectangle of a kind of mushroom terrine on the top.

It's bland, which is not an insult: it feels like eating a watercolour; it's a relief as a counterpoint to the paua, and the marinated fried bone marrow topped with kina (\$22).

In contrast, the bone marrow is indulgent, and the kina slips along your tongue like a bias-cut dress.

I want to talk to you about salad for a moment, which is so often treated with a shrug and tossed onto menus like a discarded condom.

Here the salad (\$29) has little pieces of charred vegetables; a slight puree underneath, bitter leaves that tremble as you eat them. It is resplendent in its understanding of how vegetables can behave.

For a moment there I ate it and was a little awestruck. I thought – now that is cooking.

As the starters continue, we're presented with a tuna crudo (\$39), which comes as a rosette with slight leaves of radish enveloping it; it looks either pretty or suggestive.

It is ethereal. It's accompanied by a little mascarpone, and the richness of the cheese plays off the lean, almost monastic quality of the radish and tuna perfectly with aplomb.

Tender and subtle

Return's service is impeccable, which is something I hardly ever find in NZ.

It's almost imperceptible: as you finish a glass of wine another is proffered, and because the Libran and I are wine nerds we engage in a game of blind tastings with each course.

Timing, too, is never an issue.

Never did we wait too long for a plate, or feel as if we were fed too quickly, as if we were geese being fed up to make foie gras.

The mains come out, which are slight. I do not suggest ordering a main if you are looking for something to keep you going, unless you have been shrunk down by a shrink ray or the like.



It isn't chips and steak and an egg.

The venison (\$56) is as close an expression of purity as I've tasted: buttery, effervescent, laid out in precise slices; it almost feels like eating duck. It's paired with gin botanicals, which feels intellectual in a non-cloying way.

Deer run in the hills, gin botanicals grow in the hills: so of course. It's the kind of cleverness that reminds me of Clown Bar in Paris. Pairings where you go: naturally, but they don't scream at your face with odious smugness.

I am still wondering and conflicted about the other main, "chicken and the egg" (\$56). The leeks whispered of their bolder brother, the humble onion.

They were tender and subtle.

The chicken, served with an egg yolk, felt reassuring. Mother's milk. And yet it's a dish I don't think is quite there yet. It's consummate, obviously. Yet I yearned for crispier skin: a slightly juicier flesh.

We finish with a melodious, custardy pumpkin pie, which sits on a small bed of cubed apples and is topped with candied nuts.

The Libran drinks a 10-year Justino's Madeira, which plays off the nutty and sweet-savoury quality of the pumpkin.

A place of quiet satisfaction

It's at this point I think about what the through-line is for Lambert's cooking – it's one of restraint, which is rare in these parts.

I recall the mushroom entree – its “plainness” was beautiful and yet complex. It didn’t need to shout.

Lambert’s cooking is some of the most interesting in NZ right now. He is operating in a different space to many chefs: his food is like Miles Davis during the 70s, all about space and what’s left unsaid.

Lambert is assured enough of an operator to know when to pull back: his food does not make you go “wow” all too much; rather, it sits in a place of quiet satisfaction.

In that way he’s kind of a chef-priest: by all means go there, and confess as you eat.

The flaws were slight, and I suspect the food will evolve as the restaurant matures. I’d rather eat interesting and considered food than a perfect yet never-evolving menu.

Return satisfies that in spades.

****** (4 stars out of 4)**

1 star – good

2 stars – very good

3 stars – excellent

4 stars – extraordinary

Return is open Tuesday to Saturday from 5:30pm.

165 Ponsonby Rd, Auckland.

About the author



Eden Bradfield

Guest writer

Eden Bradfield is a writer, enfant terrible and investment commentator. He also writes at [Edenbradfieldresearch.substack.com](https://edenbradfieldresearch.substack.com)

Latest from Eden Bradfield