FOOD & DRINK

Michelin Star Chef Matt Lambert Opens New Restaurant Return On Ponsonby Rd

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Barbara and Matt Lambert are opening Return, their first restaurant together since New York's The Musket Room.

By Kim Knight
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Viva

The tablecloths are white and the 10-course degustation will cost $225 but don't call Ponsonby's newest restaurant "fine dining".

"It's intentional dining," says chef Matt Lambert.

On Wednesday, he and wife Barbara open Return, a 62-seater in the heart of Auckland's most infamous dining precinct.

"I'm really excited to be talking to Ponsonby Rd again," Lambert told *Viva*. But what will he be feeding it?

"It will not be shared plates. Order the food you want. I hate going out to dinner and everyone's like 'let's just share' and they pick things I don't want and lo and behold, the only thing I liked was the one thing I wanted. I don't want anyone to experience that ever."

The restaurant is a New Zealand first for the couple, who met 20 years ago when they both worked at The Grove — he was a young chef learning from Michael Meredith; she was an American traveller working front of house thanks to family connections with restaurant owner Michael Dearth.

In 2013, the couple opened The Musket Room in New York, gaining a Michelin star in a record four months; an accolade they held until their shift back to Auckland in 2020.

Return (on the site most recently occupied by Luke Dallow and Thane Kirby's Gigi) has been described as "a more grown-up version" of The Musket Room. It will serve modern New Zealand cuisine including pāua, pavlova and a play on fish and chips, across an a la carte and two degustation menus (priced at $165 and $225 a head).

Lambert says he looked at several sites before settling on an address that had been "part of Auckland's hospitality fabric" for a very long time.

"Long before Return, it was home to Ponsonby Rd Bistro, a restaurant that played a meaningful role in shaping how this city ate and gathered. We are entering a continuum and will treat it accordingly.

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"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."

Bone marrow and kina will feature on the snacks section of the menu at Return, a new restaurant on Ponsonby Rd from Barbara and Matt Lambert.

The restaurant's main design features are a 16.2m-long swamp kauri counter top and a chocolate-brown travertine fireplace. Meanwhile, its logo features the titi, or muttonbird — a migratory shearwater with homes in the Northern and Southern hemispheres.

"I was playing with a lot of ideas for names," says Lambert. "Return felt bang on. The connotations of travel and my own journey is pretty awesome. Coming home — it's kind of huge."

Henderson-raised Lambert, who most recently worked for Rodd & Gunn's The Lodge group, said it was "special" to open a restaurant on home turf.

"This restaurant is for everyone. Like you can come in a Motorhead T-shirt and tight black jeans from West Auckland in the 1980s or from the surrounding areas in a suit ... if you have fun, then we did a good job. That's what restaurants are for, to be happy and fun."

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