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Showing off its mussels

by Liz Breslin. Otago Daily Times. Photographs K. Stowell



A succulent bivalve opens the way for an annual festival in the North, writes Liz Breslin.

Battered mussels, mussel fritters with an egg or not, mussels in their shells, garlic or chilli, smoked mussels in pottles or strung on kebabs. No surprise then that this event, at the Fitzroy Boat Club, is the annual Great FitzRoy Musselfest.

Great Barrier Island is 90km northeast of Auckland and a 30-minute flight, or a four and a-bit-hour ferry ride, depending on sea conditions and which side of the island you're heading for.

Most ferries go south, docking near the cluster of baches and houses that make up Tryphena. About once a week, a ferry comes in to Port Fitzroy, up north.

We're staying in a boat-access-only bay on the mainland of "the Barrier", so we arrive at the Musselfest by boat, passing a mussel farm on the way and a small forest of masts across in Smokehouse Bay.



"Gin palaces," one local explains.

"They'll all clear out soon. February, the yachties come in."

The crossing is smoother than the morning's angry sky would have us believe; a stunning commute, if ever there was one. It's just before midday, the harbour is smoothing out and there are children already bombing off the pontoon.

First stop is the Fitzroy family fun day at the Port Fitzroy Landing Reserve, an alcohol-free complement to the revelries up the road. We're lured in by the sweet tones of local schoolgirl Stevie Mabey, singing her own rendition of Leonard Cohen's Hallelujah.

We stay for a few tunes from the main act, the Gerry and Sean band. Their guitar, harmonica, tambor drum and whistle suit the lazy heat of the day. And there's something very special about the combination of the harbour location and the tones of local bagpiper Soul O'Reilly.

His customised Red Band red-tag gumboots are an awesome detail to his traditional Highland dress and his rendition of Amazing Grace moves us to tears. Very outpost, very proud.

Hungry children. There are white fluffy rolls for sale: pork and gravy, lamb and gravy, chicken and gravy. Pita bread pockets. Avocados. And not a mussel in sight.

We walk the long way round to the boat club, past the ceramics and the woodwork, the bouncy castle and the black-plastic waterslide.

We stop for ice cream at the Fitzroy store, which sells everything. You also get great tidbits of conversational advice while waiting in line; how to make an awesome mornay sauce, that grapefruit and lemon Frujus taste really good mixed into vodka and a little bit of lemonade. We sit outside the bookshop in the shade, eat our ice cream, watch the world.

But there's mussel action to get to. After struggling uphill for all of two minutes, we're good and thirsty when we arrive at the boat club. Inside, there are nautical blue-and-white striped seats, a ceiling covered with boaty headgear.



And there are three distinct lines to negotiate. The first, to the women's toilet, we ignore. The second is for drink tickets and the third, the bar. Why the two-stage purchasing process?

"Licensing regulations," the bar staff tell me, handing over chardonnay in plastic.

"Cheers."

The "musselfest" has been going 18 years now, in various incarnations. Some years it's been two days, or three, even. My last visit to the festival was in 2002, when I came second in the "Ode to a Mussel" poetry competition.

I remember my entry started "Oh mussel you're so muscular and green lipped and beardy/ and I think you're amazing although others think you're weird-y ...".

The winner wowed the crowd, having them chant along with this rousing refrain: "Mussels, mussels, wine and beer". Which, come to think of it, pretty much sums up what I remember about the fest 15 years ago.



We don't luck into any poem-spouting this year. Music is in plentiful supply, though, as a mainstay of the festival, with the crowd congregating outside the boat club on the covered lawn, listening to the singles and duos playing, mostly covers.

Framing the watchers are the food stalls, selling their mussels in various permutations. The smoked kebabs are all sold out by 2pm, three hours in. We manage to score a single pottle and they are deep, sweet and just a little chewy.



I'm delighted, later, to find out from an internet search, that unoaked chardonnays such as chablis are considered great companion wines for mussels. I can confirm from my own research that chardonnay in plastic goes supremely well with steamed mussels, homemade aioli sauce and sunshine.

Time to go home. A friend, working out how many beersies he can have before the winding, big hour drive back south to Tryphena, says there are no drunk-driver restrictions on boats. Madness in the harbour, he tells us, after musselfest, some years.

We walk down the road behind a family carrying two big red buckets of takeaway mussels, and make it to the shop for supplies just before their daily five o'clock last orders.

And it is all quiet on the harbour front, other than the dive-bombers, who have moved from the pontoon to a stack of pallets on the wharf.

They dare each other precariously close to the little tinnies as we negotiate our way out into wider waters, replete with mussels, mussels, wine and beer.