

TRAVEL

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New Zealand's Hawke's Bay is prime dining, drinking destination

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When you walk down the street in the center of Napier, a coastal town in New Zealand's Hawke's Bay, a wine-producing region, you nearly expect to spot Greta Garbo, in full flapper regalia, crossing the street. The town, a perfectly preserved Art Deco masterpiece, would make a fine set for one of her films.

In most cities, Art Deco buildings were built amid the architecture already standing, but in February 1931, a 21/2-minute earthquake decimated Napier. The city was almost entirely rebuilt in the then-modern style, which borrows elements from around the world: thatched roofs from the Spanish mission style, ornate flourishes inspired by ancient Middle Eastern architecture, and chrome accents that nodded to the era's developments in technology, like speedy cars. And this being New Zealand, there was a heavy Maori influence in the buildings' decorative motifs.

But the earthquake had a much more profound impact than the transformation of the cityscape. The tectonic plate shift affected the soil and viticulture improved. The region was already attractive to wine-makers, who appreciated that the earth had little top soil. The grey gravel here absorbs the sun's heat, so cabernet sauvignon and merlot grapes grow easily and ripen quickly, lending the region's Bordeaux-style reds a full-bodied freshness. Some of the wineries that are thriving today were set up as far back as the 1920s. But the earthquake was the final coup that set the stage for Hawke's Bay to become a prime dining and drinking destination.

Napier is home to restaurants that rival some of Europe's finest and to robust reds and complex Chardonnays that have put New Zealand on the world's wine map. And like Art Deco, which takes inspiration from all different cultures to form a distinct style, the culinary scene takes pages from other global traditions. Together, it adds up to something uniquely Kiwi.

I learned the hard way how seriously Kiwis take their food. Upon arriving at the airport in Auckland, a customs agent asked if I had any produce with me. Just the apple I didn't eat on the flight, I told him. He instructed me to note that on my customs form. Immediately. If I didn't, I'd be slapped with a \$400 fine.

I came to understand - and appreciate - the reason for this severity during the Hawke's Bay Food & Wine Classic, a 10-day festival that started modestly in 2012, and has grown to attract an international crowd to its summer and a winter events. Each encompasses cooking demos, tastings with wine-makers, and dinners at the wineries with, of course, custom-designed pairing menus.

Twenty-five wineries have opened in Hawke's Bay since 1995, bringing fresh enthusiasm to the region. Some pay homage to the area's pre-wine-centric past, such as Mission Estate Winery, which features a stately building that once housed the French Catholic missionaries who came to New Zealand in 1851.

Others cast a more modern impression, such as Elephant Hill Estate Winery, which was started in 2003 by Roger Weiss, a German businessman. The sleek building that houses the cellar and restaurant has regal white furniture and floor-to-ceiling windows that provide sweeping views of the Pacific. In the restaurant, Ashley Jones, a baby-faced Australian chef, has a relaxed approach to creating dishes that suit the ultra-modern space, such as smoked venison with beetroot, grilled leek, shitake, and juniper. "Food has to be open and you have to be open and think about different lenses of interpretation for wine with food together," he said. "Different wines allow you to figure out what kind of depth you want to create. But at the core of good food is good company."

Forward-thinking fare is served with a relaxed vibe throughout Napier. Mr. D's, a sleek, modern eatery with an open kitchen and a cafe vibe, has a rock'n'roll attitude, not least because of the Rolling Stones posters that adorn the place. (Chef-owner Dave Griffiths named the restaurant after "Dancing with Mr. D," a song on the Stones' underrated album "Goats Head Soup") He formerly helmed the kitchen at Terroir, a posh restaurant at Craggy Range, a winery just down the road. Here he blends refined European technique with clever flavor combinations, turning out dishes that, to quote another Stones tune, are "like a rainbow." My bone marrow ravioli, swimming in beef juices and salsa verde, packed a fortifying punch. The fresh pea risotto with goat cheese and crunchy raddichio was a fresh, bright signal of the imminent New Zealand summer. The culinary playlist gets edgier with Mr. D's signature dessert, a warm donut served with three syringes filled with chocolate, berry jelly and custard. Inject them into the donut, take a bite, sit back and wait for the euphoria. One punk icon's degenerate lifestyle is another chef's inspiration, it seems.

The next night my companion and I hit Bistronomy, situated just off of Napier's main drag. Bistronomy is a contemplative yin to Mr. D's deliciously boisterous yang. The blond wood geometric decor at once evokes the clean design sensibility of Scandinavia and the wise minimalism of Japanese tea houses. Those styles are also expressed in dishes such as carpaccio made of trevally, a tropical fish. It's vacuum-packed three separate times to intensely absorb the carrot and dill marinade and served with a scoop of piquant mustard sorbet. Local clams, adorned with saffron and pineapple, come on a bed of fluffy short-grain rice.

New Zealand consists of two narrow islands in the middle of the Pacific, closer to the base of the planet than nearly everything else. The nearest destination is Tonga, a cluster of South Pacific islands, a 2 1/2-hour flight away. In a nation this remote, "local" isn't a trend, it's a requirement. And between the land's rich natural bounty and what seems to be a universal entrepreneurial spirit among Kiwis, it's a requirement that makes for thrilling nourishment, as I learned on a visit to the Hawke's Bay Farmers' Market.

Every weekend the market draws area chefs and swarms of cheerful regulars, such as the sweet 84-year-old former school teacher I met while I inspected a stand with more varieties of chives than I ever imagined possible. She self-consciously justified buying plants from the vendor, as her arthritis prevents her from growing her own. The locals browse hand-mixed mueslis, overflowing containers of ruby strawberries, and tangy vinaigrettes, jams and relishes made with local stone fruit by a small operation called The Damsen Collection.

Upon leaving Napier the next day and flying over the picturesque landscape, I realized what

makes New Zealand so enchanting: against the backdrop of scenery that looks unchanged since Neolithic times, the cities have a fresh new-world feel to them. Unlike Asia and the Middle East, there are no centuries-old temples or churches or mosques. Unlike Europe, there are no vestiges of Renaissance or Jacobean eras. It's a nation that seems to relish renewal, albeit not always for the most pleasant reasons.

This was brought into stark relief when the 90-minute flight delivered us in the South Island city of Christchurch, which was decimated by an earthquake in February 2011. There are still deep gashes in the urban streets and damaged buildings lining the once-vibrant shopping district. The century-old Christchurch Cathedral, caged in scaffolding, is cordoned off to the public. But nevertheless there's a palpable vitality in the city.

Not wanting to waste any time, I lit off with a tour guide named Glen from Christchurch Bike and Walking Tours. I opted for walking, figuring it affords a better opportunity to take in all the details. And boy, do details abound. As we walked past the centrally located North Hagley Park, Glen directed my attention to the streetlights, each one different from the last. By the end of this year, the Solidarity Grid, a Christchurch City Council-commissioned installation, will consist of 21 operational street lamps, each donated by a different city ranging from Belgrade to Sydney to Dusseldorf. (If I had whizzed by on two wheels, I definitely would have missed the miniature samurai figure perched between the gaslights on the pole from Sendai.)

We passed more rubble and a haunting setup of 185 white chairs - each a different style - in a greenspace surrounded by vacant buildings and construction. Each chair symbolizes one of the quake's victims. Just past that, Re:Start, a lively outdoor shopping precinct, is situated against a backdrop of steel infrastructure and cranes. The complex consists of colorful shipping containers that house retailers whose original locations were destroyed, food trucks, and picnic tables where locals happily loitered.

Speaking of outdoor dining, that's one of the reasons oenophiles visit Amisfield, a winery and bistro just outside of Queenstown. The next day, after an hourlong flight from Christchurch to Queenstown, we took a break at Amisfield during the three-hour drive to Wanaka. A much-buzzed-about stop for the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge during their royal visit to the island in 2014, the bistro is set in a stone building overlooking Lake Hayes. Chefs here showcase the region's seasonal bounty. My visit in November fell at the tail-end of whitebait fishing season. These tiny, tender fish are caught in mesh nets and eaten whole. If you ask a Kiwi about them, chances are you'll be regaled with nostalgic tales of childhood family traditions. At Amisfield they're served as lightly fried fritters on soft open-faced rolls. They're only mildly briny. It's their sweet, buttery flavors that made me understand why they have the cachet of truffles. And those sweet sea notes are a fine counterpoint to the mellow berry crispness of Amisfield's prized pinot noir rose.

Wasting no time in what was becoming an increasingly hurried pursuit to cover as much Kiwi ground as we could in a week, we continued on to Wanaka, where we stopped for a night at the elegantly rustic Riverrun Lodge, overseen by a soft-spoken woman named Meg who was constantly in motion, attending to countless tasks, as innkeepers do. If Aspen went on a Lord of the Rings bender, it would feel like Wanaka. Apparently someone already sent the memo to Colorado. At the Lodge I met several people on holiday from the nature-loving state, each an outdoorsy type who came to the region to hike and gawk at the wildlife. While I did spot many sheep and deer on a hike up the alpine landscape, I didn't have too much time to gawk.

There was one more town to hit before heading back to the northern hemisphere.

Queenstown, a lakeside getaway with a village-like vibe, is a thrill-seeker's destination. After all, it's where the first commercial bungee jumping site opened in 1989. Also, mountain bike trails, zip lines and ski slopes abound. The downtown calls to mind a college town in Western Massachusetts, with the addition of surfers walking around barefoot. Down an alley a few blocks away from the pedestrian-friendly grid of retail streets is where the Michelin-starred chef, cookbook author and prolific restaurateur Josh Emmett opened Rata in 2012. With natural wood decor, polished stone fixtures and a photographic mural of a lush forest, the dining room is slightly exotic but nonetheless cozy. Same goes for the bites such as the addictive yellow fin tuna accessorized with avocado, grapefruit, ponzu and wasabi peas.

The next day I boarded a flight from Auckland to Los Angeles. Rarely do I get excited about a 12-plus-hour journey across the planet, but happily, one of New Zealand's noted chefs, Peter Gordon, who owns restaurants in Auckland and London, consults with New Zealand Air. He designs meals such as my Moorish chicken in spiced saffron tomato broth, accompanied by white beans and cinnamon-roasted pumpkin hummos. I gazed out over the landscape as it passed at 575 miles per hour (or so), sipped Craggy Range's sauvignon blanc, one of Napier's finest, and savored one last taste of this spectacular country.

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