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Wellington, New Zealand – A Fantastic Foodie Walkabout

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Neil Miller gave up his day job to drink beer.



Food tour guide Stephanie Cutfield expounds on kumara, the prized New Zealand sweet potato. Photo by Katherine Rodeghier

A political speech writer in New Zealand's capital city, Miller had a fondness for the suds and started moonlighting as a beer writer for a local beer magazine. Then he began blogging about beer. Then leading beer-tasting tours. Soon beer became his occupation as well as his avocation and the allure of politics fell by the wayside.

"Wellington has a reputation as the best beer city in New Zealand" Miller told me when I joined one of his Wild About Wellington walking tours. "We don't make a lot of beer, but we drink a lot of beer."



Generous sample sizes of beer are set up for tasters at The Malthouse. Photo by Katherine Rodeghier

Young and hip, Wellington is no stodgy capital city. Nearly 60 percent of its residents are under age 50, compared to 45.1 percent in New Zealand as a whole. Last year Lonely Planet placed it at No. 4 in its list of Best in Travel cities. Compact in size, it's a miniature Hong Kong, with hills ringing its horseshoe-shaped harbor. While Auckland is spread out, you can get almost anywhere in the Central City on foot, which is why walking tours, particularly those devoted to food and drink, are so popular.

The first stop on my walk with Miller takes me to The Malthouse at 48 Courtenay Place in the heart of Wellington's nightlife district. On Thursday through Saturday nights this street is jammed with young revelers, some of whom have imbibed a bit too much. But as this was a weekday afternoon, I feel reasonably safe from getting vomit on my shoes, so I settle into the warm and cozy bar to hear Miller give his spiel.

Kiwis consume 77 liters of beer per person per year, making New Zealand the 14th biggest beer-drinking country in the world (the Aussies out-drink them, however). Miller says Wellington may be the not-so-flashy little brother to Auckland, which produces more beer, but here it's all about high-quality beers. We sample four: Three Boys India Pale Ale; Tuatara Pilsner; Epic Pale Ale, a very hoppy brew using hops from the U.S.; and Tuatara London Porter, an old-fashioned English-style beer that English home brewers and American microbreweries have been bringing back. Between tastings, servers bring out platters of pizza.

We barely make a dent into what The Malthouse has to offer. Rated Best Bar in New Zealand by Beer & Brewer Magazine, it serves the broadest range of beers in the country. It even has a "hopenator," a device that looks like a fancy espresso machine that infuses flavors to beer, such as coffee bean, chocolate, even fruit. The Malthouse's 168 beers, including 30 on tap, range in alcohol content from 3.7 percent to a whopping 18.2 percent for the \$30-a-bottle Tokyo from the BrewDog Brewery in Scotland, so potent it has been denounced by Scottish Parliament.



A Monteith Black is paired with blue cheese, red wine-poached pears and caramelized onion at St. Johns Bar. Photo by Katherine Rodeghier

We pass on the Tokyo because it's time for some serious food. We stroll down to the waterfront to St. Johns Bar at 5 Cable Street. Miller describes it as having a "colonial Humphrey Bogart look, like the Raffles Bar in Singapore." Originally an ambulance building, it still has a 1930s Art Deco style to it.

We sample three beers here, all made by brewer Monteith. Chef Kit Foe pairs each to a dish he's created. With the Radler, a flavored lager, he serves us pork belly with honey glaze and apple and ginger chutney. The Celtic Ale accompanies venison on a mushroom tart. The earthy red ale brings out the caramelization of the meat. For dessert, the Black, a Schwarz Bier, goes with a triple cream blue cheese served with red wine poached pears and caramelized onion. Sweet.

Wellington has more restaurants, cafes and bars per capita than New York City. On Zest Tours' Gourmet Walking Tour I find out how seriously Wellingtonians take their food.

We start out walking down Cuba Street, a once debauched, now bohemian section of the city with ethnic restaurants, cutting-edge shops and cafes catering to the literati. Victoria University is just up the hill.

Our first stop is Havana Coffee at 37 Wigan St. We head to the back where master roaster Joseph Stoddart is pouring Cuban coffee beans into the roaster set at 203 degrees Centigrade. The only New Zealand coffee roaster to carry real Cuban beans, Havana Coffee is one of the three original roasters that opened in Wellington in the 1990s. Now there are more than a dozen catering to the city's coffee craze. I look around and see burlap bags of beans piled along a wall labeled with their country of origin: Peru, Colombia, Bolivian, Zambia, Ethiopia, India, Vanuatu. I move into the café and order a flat white, the Kiwi lingo for an espresso served with two-thirds steamed milk. It comes with froth in the shape of a silver fern, the national symbol of New Zealand, and is almost too pretty to drink.



Master Roaster Joe Stoddart tends the roaster at Havana Coffee. Photo by Katherine Rodeghier

Next stop is Moore Wilson Fresh at Lorne and College streets. Why is our guide taking us to a grocery store, I wonder? But this is no ordinary market; it's where local foodies and chefs shop. A family business specializing in gourmet fresh foods from small, local providers, it's all word-of-mouth rather than advertising. When it opened in 1998, it drew lines zigzagging through the parking lot. I walk over to the produce bins and pick up a gold kumara, the prized New Zealand sweet potato, and peruse a refrigerator case of game meats, including bacon made from wild boar. In a tasting kitchen, our guide has arranged for us to sample single variety apple juices, aged New Zealand cheddar and a selection of Ruth Pretty jellies. I especially like the feijoa chutney—can't get this at home.

We continue walking, stopping at 19 Allen St. and the Kura Gallery, selling in ethnic art and a range of contemporary and indigenous New Zealand gift items. But we're not here to shop, but to taste New Zealand honey from a display set out just for us. The Kamahi has a lily-of-the-valley scent, the Rata a medium flavor from the flower that grows on New Zealand's South Island. My favorite is the Manuka because it not only tastes wonderful, but is said to have medicinal properties. I make a note to pick some up at the airport on my way home.

The hour is getting late and I'm ready to bail on the walking tour to allow time for an afternoon nap. Then I learn we're walking across town to Bohemein Chocolates, 109 Featherston St., and can't pass up a chance to sample my favorite treat. Owner George Havlik, a pastry chef who chose to specialize in chocolate, is waiting for us. He uses the best Belgium chocolate and mixes it with all sorts of unexpected ingredients, which, oddly enough, work. I taste the pineapple black pepper ganache, the wasabi cream and the balsamic vinegar and honey ganache and I'm sold. There will be no waiting to buy at the airport this time. I make my selection, stuff my chocolates into my jacket pocket and head back to my hotel. No time for a nap? Who cares. Between sleep and chocolate, chocolate always wins.

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