



The “Beer is Love” mural at hipster Golding’s Freedive bar, is an iconic piece of art for those familiar with the Wellington craft beer scene.

Hops, Beans, and Treats

BOUTIQUE FOODS, A CRAFT BEER WAVE, AND A HIPSTER COFFEE CULTURE REDEFINE NEW ZEALAND’S CAPITAL CITY BY MALAVIKA BHATTACHARYA

Wellington’s curved waterfront runs along Cook Strait, which separates New Zealand’s North and South Islands. On a chilly summer morning in December, the blue waters are ruffled into a million folds. Windy Wellington lives up to its moniker. I determinedly stick my face into the breeze, defying the Medusa hairdo I’m sporting, and let my guide from Zest Food Tours lead me towards a morning sugar fix.

We begin our food tour at Wellington’s fabulous waterfront. At **Gelissimo**, one look at the pastel-coloured gelato flavours on display and I’m ready for a tasting. I try the green mint and chocolate chip gelato and a blood-red raspberry and elderflower sorbet—both bursting with flavour. Owner Graham Joe then hands me a scoop of pale yellow gelato from a tub that isn’t on display. “It’s an olive oil gelato made with olives

from Martinborough, created especially for a chef’s dessert,” he says. With the texture of silk and the briny flavour of olives, this ball of sunshine is the perfect introduction to Wellington’s culinary scene (gelissimo.co.nz; *Taranaki Wharf*; starting from NZD4.5/₹204).

Through this excursion with Zest Food Tours, I’m privy to unique flavours that I might have otherwise missed. When I ask where I can actually order this wonderful creation, I’m directed to the Italian restaurant **Scopa Caffé Cucina** on Cuba Street (scopa.co.nz).

For any food lover who visits Wellington, **Cuba Street** is a point of convergence. A five-minute walk from the waterfront, this bohemian artery in the city’s compact centre, though only two kilometres long, is a hub of vintage stores, trendy cafés, bookshops, and buskers. Fringed leather, outlandish cowboy boots, and vintage clothing adorn

shop windows at stores like **Hunters & Collectors** and **Ziggurat**. **Slow Boat Records**, with its massive collection of new and second-hand records, is a vinyl geek’s dream. This area is also packed with independent food businesses, artisanal coffee makers, craft beer bars, and trendy nooks and crannies.

THE VITALS

Zest Food Tours A walking food tour covers both Wellington establishments and little-known businesses (www.zestfoodtours.co.nz; a 3.5 hour *Capital Tastes* food tour costs NZD179/₹8,112 per person and needs a minimum of 2 people).

Craft Beer College Sign up for a tasting tour with a local beer aficionado to discover Wellington’s craft beer scene (www.craftbeercollege.co.nz; set tastings start at NZD44/₹1,994).

PHOTO COURTESY: WELLINGTON TOURISM



Fix and Fogg’s peanut butter factory and store (left) is inspired by the journeys of Phileas Fogg, a wealthy English philanthropist, and Scotland Yard detective Mr. Fix from *Around the World in Eighty Days*; The traditional Greek biscuit, Koulourakia (right), available at the Mojo roasters, is made with spices and sesame seeds; A tasting plate of local best buys (below) assembled by Zest food tours at the Moore Wilson grocery store.

GUTSY GOURMETS

Eva Street, just off Cuba Street, is a graffiti-splattered lane housing some of Wellington’s coolest institutions. I step into **Wellington Chocolate Factory** and am transported into the Roald Dahl classic. The air is heavy with the scent of roasting cacao. Gunnysacks with organic beans from Peru, the Dominican Republic, and Samoa are stacked on the floor. Behind glass walls, molten chocolate bubbles and churns its way through elaborate machines. I taste a raw cacao bean and bits of chocolate as a staffer takes me through the different varieties. The Peruvian bar is made with high-quality criollo beans from trees in 2,000-year old Peruvian forests, and has undertones of raisin and apricot. The Dominican Republic bar is of 70 per cent single-origin cocoa, bitter with a citrus undertone. Chocolate appreciation, I realise, is as serious an art as wine tasting (www.wcf.co.nz; 5 Eva Street; a small bar of chocolate starts at NZD4.9/₹220).

Across the street, a white cloth sign

saying “Peanut Butter” flutters above a street-level window. **Fix & Fogg** is an independent peanut butter factory named after Detective Fix and Phileas Fogg from Jules Verne’s *Around the World in Eighty Days*. I peep through the window and see a handful of people in chefs’ aprons grinding, mixing, and bottling. One of them pokes his head out and offers me generous scoops to taste from the four jars on display: smooth, crunchy, dark chocolate, and smoky chilli. This little outfit offers tastings and sells jars right out of their shop window (www.fixandfogg.co.nz; 5 Eva Street; 375g jars from NZD8/₹362).

At the other end of the lane, somewhat confusingly also known as Leeds Street, the **Red Rabbit Coffee Co.** brews coffee from its speciality roasted beans (redrabbitcoffee.co.nz; Unit 6G, 14 Leeds Street; coffee from NZD4/₹179). Pair your cuppa with iconic salted caramel cookies from the **Leeds Street Bakery** next door (leedsstreetbakery.co.nz; cookies NZD4.50/₹200).

THE REAL ALE

Over a glass of Bobby Leach’s Mandarin Comeuppance (a fruity blonde ale), I discuss Wellington’s vibrant craft beer scene with Phil Cook of **Craft Beer College**, an outfit offering beer tastings, with which I’m taking a tour. “Things have really kicked off in the last five years or so,” he says. Wellington’s image as a



political centre has received a makeover in recent times, as the spate of boutique craft breweries went from five to 14 and over 20 dedicated beer bars mushroomed (www.craftbeercollege.co.nz).

Behind a nondescript door adjacent to the bakery is **Golding’s Free Dive**—a quirky beer bar where hipsters flock for ever-changing beers on tap and an utterly mad vibe. Skis are suspended from the roof, upturned buckets double up as lampshades, and the walls are covered in murals (goldingsfreedive.co.nz; 14 Leeds Street; a mug of Pilsner costs NZD10/₹453).

Tuatar Brewery was among the pioneers on the scene, established in 2000, and named for the native reptile found in these parts. The Tuatar Iti beer I’d tried the previous night came in a bottle with spikes down the neck—a homage to its namesake and a creative marketing tactic (www.tuatarabrewing.co.nz; 7 Sheffield Street, Paraparaumu; an hour-long tasting costs NZD35/₹1,586 per person and needs a minimum booking of 8 people).

Phil takes me to **Garage Project**, another front runner in the brewing space. Located in an old petrol station in the grungy Aro Valley area, this microbrewery burst onto the scene in 2011 with innovative flavours and a new beer every week for six months. Brewing is in full swing: shiny vats are bubbling

LOUISE HATTON (CAFE), MALAVIKA BHATTACHARYA (COFFEE & FOOD)



91 Aro Street by the Garage Project brewery has a rotating menu of 20 beers on tap (top); Cuba Street with its hip craft beer bars and al fresco cafés is a Mecca for food lovers (bottom).

and spewing yeast. At the attached cellar door—a term I’ve previously only associated with wineries—there are a handful of beers on tap to taste and a wall lined with glass flagons to purchase. Locals stream in and out, refilling their containers with watermelon lager and Venusian pale ale. I taste a chilli chocolate lager called Day of the Dead, a dark, full-bodied beer with a lingering spicy flavour (garageproject.co.nz; 68 Aro Street; starts at NZD8.5/₹385 for a 330ml can). Across the street at their relatively new bar, **91 Aro Street**, I’m handed a delicate goblet of what looks like a pale rosé. The tap it’s poured from is labelled Rosé de la Vallée, but this is a beer bar, so, what am I drinking? Reading my confusion, Phil explains that this Pilsner infused with Pinot grapes from nearby Martinborough really blurs the lines between wine and beer.

Winding our way around the neighbourhood, we come upon the mustard-coloured facade of the **Little Beer Quarter**, a charming beer bar with an old-world English feel and 14 rotating beers on tap. I try a Pilsner by Panhead, another one of Wellington’s breweries (littlebeerquarter.co.nz; 6 Edward Street; starts at NZD8/₹362 for a mug of

ale). Outside, a sign bears the logo of the Yeastie Boys, an independent craft brewing outfit, named after the American hip-hop band Beastie Boys. For beer nerds like me, this tour is made better by the marvellous wordplay, history, and the stories of the places we visit. Garage Project’s Aro Noir, for instance, gets its name because it is brewed on the “dark side” of the suburb of Aro Valley, which doesn’t receive sunlight; their Trip Hop incorporates three different kinds of hops, and the brewer

is a fan of an electronic music style with the same name.

A few streets away at airy brewpub **Fork & Brewer**, Kelly Ryan, the in-house brewer, offers me a glass of cherry coloured liquid. “There was a raspberry explosion yesterday,” he says, showing me images on his phone of bright red splatters along the walls and floor of his brewing space. I taste the raspberry blend he’s experimenting with; it definitely has promise. Then I taste a sour Pilsner called Tainted Love, infused with passion



MALAVIKA BHATTACHARYA (BREWERY), DOUGLAS FEEBLES/AGEFOTOSTOCK/DINODIA (VISITORS)



fruit and juniper berry. I think I’ve found my favourite (forkandbrewer.co.nz; 20A Bond Street; starts at NZD9.5/₹430 for a 425ml glass).

BEAN TO BREW

The Kiwi preference for specially crafted beverages extends to the coffee scene as well. With over a dozen roasteries in the city, speciality coffee is the norm. The 13-year-old **Mojo HQ and Roastery**, run by a second-generation Greek family, is something of a Wellington institution. The boutique roastery operates over 20 cafés within the city. Their roasting operation, housed in the red-brick Shed 13 along the waterfront, is open to the public. Here, I see a batch of beans being roasted while sipping a freshly brewed flat white—a Kiwi staple consisting of steamed milk poured over an espresso shot—accompanied by a buttery *koulourakia* or Greek wine biscuit (www.mojocoffee.co.nz; Shed 13, Kumutoto Plaza, Wellington Waterfront).

Flight Coffee is another among Wellington’s speciality coffee roasters, using beans from Kenya, Colombia, Ethiopia, etc. **The Flight Coffee Hangar** is their flagship café, housed in a former parking lot with pale wood interiors,



Max Patte’s iconic “Solace of the Wind” sculpture leans into the harbour near Wellington’s Te Papa museum (top); Nestled in the heart of Cuba Street, Iko Iko is a store filled with curiosities, stocking everything from local handicrafts to quirky toys (bottom).

a glass frontage overlooking the street and a high footfall of hip locals. Coffee roasting is a complex science and Sarah, the lead barista, shows me a chart that ranks various aspects—flavour, acidity, aroma—on a ten-point scale. (flightcoffee.co.nz; 171-177 Willis Street; Coffee Three Ways costs NZD14/₹634; espresso NZD4.5/₹204.)

I order Coffee Three Ways—a sampler featuring the same bean brewed in three different styles. It arrives on a wooden board, a trio of little cups containing an espresso, a flat white, and a dark cold drip, all brewed with Ethiopian beans. This artisanal presentation is unsurprising of course. In Wellington, brewing is serious business. ●

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