

Gourmet Traveller

MATT SKINNER'S INSIDE GUIDE TO WELLINGTON

Wine guy Matt Skinner and his best mate sneak across the Tasman for an indulgent weekend exploring Wellington's food and wine scene. They leave mightily impressed as the city prepares to play host to Pinot Noir 2010.

It's both funny and sad that when you tell people you're planning a boys' weekend, the automatic assumption is that you're off to drink your body weight in beer, to pester members of the opposite sex, destroy some public property and to spend at least one night in a cell. Are we really that predictable? Well, the weekend I was planning was to be quite different.

For starters, there were only two of us going. Granted, this can still be a dangerous thing – although as fathers of toddlers we were far more excited by the prospect of an unbroken night's sleep than the lure of loose women and cheap booze. And then there was the itinerary, which broke heavily with tradition by omitting the obligatory trips to casinos, footy matches and strip joints in lieu of visits to farmers' markets, swanky restaurants and wine bars. As I said, this was a boys' weekend with a difference – an altogether metrosexual weekend, if you like – and the destination was Wellington, New Zealand.

There's plenty to love about Wellington. Just a snip more than two and a half hours' flying time from Australia's east coast, the New Zealand capital, located on the North Island's southernmost tip, is a compact melting pot of culture, politics and the arts. Its 390,000 inhabitants enjoy a high quality of life at a relatively low cost, all of which is set amid a backdrop of hilly, green, open spaces and pristine waterways. Throw in a large student population, a steady influx of diplomatic bigwigs and a city where you can walk safely at any time, and it all bodes well for Wellington's thriving food and drink scene – a scene that proudly boasts more restaurants per capita than New York.

My last trip to Wellington was for Pinot Noir 2007, a world-class three-day wine industry event consisting of seminars, tutorials, workshops and plenty of tastings. Before that event, I remember colleagues from around the globe whipping themselves into an email frenzy over the quality of Wellington's coffee, cafes, cocktails and food. Could it really be that good? Yep, it was, and I've been looking for an excuse – boys' weekend or otherwise – to return ever since.



And so with 48 hours up our sleeves, things get off to a good start when we check into the compact, 10-room waterside Ohtel (+644 803 0600, 66 Oriental Parade, Oriental Bay). If you prefer your hotels with a front desk, a separate concierge, a fully kitted gym and a helipad, then there's a good chance that Ohtel won't be for you. But, on the other hand, if you like a familiar smiling face at both ends of the day, clever and spacious rooms, big cosy beds, large bathrooms and a range of small-scale local beers in your fridge, then you would be mad to stay anywhere else. Walking distance from everything and nothing being too much trouble, Ohtel was living proof that great things come in small packages.

With the clock ticking, we head into the night in search of a pre-dinner drink. Bars are one of the things that this city does well and we've heard plenty of great things about Arbitrageur Wine Room (+644 499 5530, 125 Featherston St), all of which turn out to be true. The room itself is long, cavernous and noisy, and home to one of Wellington's best wine lists. The list is long and well considered. However, that doesn't mean it's going to be easy for Joe Average to understand, so they've incorporated a colour-code system that groups wines by weight and style and allows you to pair them with one of the many sharing plates on the menu. It might sound complicated, but we got into it and it is brilliant. If you prefer talking to a real person, then Stephane or one of his team will be happy to guide you.

Dinnertime means decision time as Wellington is home to a handful of the most awarded restaurants in the country. Take your pick from recent recipient of the Cuisine NZ Restaurant of the Year award, Logan Brown (+644 801 5114, 192 Cuba St), or maybe last year's winner Martin Bosley's (+644 920 8302, 103 Oriental Pde), or the new kid on the block The Ambeli (+644 385 7577, 18 Majoribanks St). We opt for the new kid and strike one of the best food experiences we've had in recent memory. The Ambeli combines good, honest Mediterranean cooking with the freshest local produce, a sharp wine list and the type of front-of-house service most restaurants would kill for. Highlights included scallops with broad beans, seared tuna with tapenade, a mouth-watering combination of chorizo and squid, and, of course, part-owner/sommelier/front-of-house star Shae.

We convince each other that a couple of quiet negronis would be the perfect way to wind up the day and make a beeline for Motel Bar (+644 384 9084, Level 1/4th Forresters Ln), which proves harder to find than you might imagine. With the Get Smart-like journey to the first floor out of the way, we plonk ourselves at the bar and marvel at the bartender's skill. A few hundred metres down the same lane you'll find Alice (+644 385 2242, end of Forresters Ln), a kooky bricks- and-mortar homage to Alice in Wonderland. It has one of the best dance floors around and makes a mean negroni.

The next morning, after a (I'd urge my wife to look away now) great night's sleep, we're ready to eat again. Brekky at Floriditas (+644 381, 2212, 161 Cuba St) has been strongly recommended. Floriditas is a breezy space in buzzy Cuba Street serving up delicious breakfasts and super-charged coffees. Saying that, good coffee can be found across the city, with diehards flocking to Caffe L'affare (+644 385 9748, 27 College St) for their daily caffeine hit or, as they say in Wellington, "to smash a couple of flatties, bru!"

Saturday is market day in Wellington, with the weekly veggie market held in Waitangi Park (opposite Ohtel). If that's not enough, Sunday plays host to Martin Bosley's City Market (Chaffer's Dock Building, 1 Herd St, 8.30am to 12.30pm), where a host of small-scale producers from in and around Wellington sell, enthuse about and, if you ask nicely, let you taste their wares. If you're not done shopping after these two, the good news is that Wellington has a couple of world-class wine shops that are well worth checking out.

The first of these is Rumbles Wine Merchant (+644 472 7045, downstairs in the Dunbar Sloane Building, 32 Waring Taylor St), a subterranean utopia of all things vinous. Hand-penned staff picks and special offers set the tone at the door, while inside you'll find an incredible range of wines, beers and spirits, which includes the usual suspects alongside a brilliant selection of hand-plucked products from around the world. A hop, skip and a jump from Rumbles is Regional Wines (+644 385 6952, 15 Ellice St), another much-loved local store. This is where you come for an encyclopedic range of Kiwi wines, a cracking selection of labels from northern Italy, Germany and Alsace, and friendly advice.

By this time you'll more than likely be running short of hours, in which case you'd be well advised to head straight to the Matterhorn (+644 384 3359, 106 Cuba St) to recharge the batteries before making the journey back across the pond. In short, Matterhorn is like an adult version of Disneyland. Originally home to an iconic 1960s cafe of the same name, the Horn does great cocktails, great food, great live music, as well as having the city's best wine list and its best sommelier in the uber-talented Stephen Wong. By the time we've devoured a couple of cracking chicken schnitzels and several bottles of Nick Mills' mouth-watering 2008 Rippon Riesling, we give serious thought to missing our flight home and doing all those things that we were supposed to do on a boys' weekend away, but didn't – as far as you know!

PHOTOGRAPHY WELLINGTON.CO.NZ

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