

Melbourne by design

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARAH BURTON

Between coffee and cocktails in Melbourne, SARAH LANG meets two expat Wellingtonians taking their jewellery global.

A man with a mohawk and too many earrings to count is reading *The Great Gatsby* over a short black in Captains of Industry: Gentleman's Outfitters and Café. Other regulars are sipping flat whites at tables (well, desks) that have built-in Singer sewing machines. They look like locals, which figures. This place isn't easy to find, tucked away on the first floor of a converted warehouse in a surprisingly quiet inner-city laneway.

Off the central café space are three small studios/shops, belonging respectively to a bootmaker, a barber, and a jeweller. Inside one, sketching jewellery designs, is former Wellingtonian Welfe Bowyer, 35. "This place [Captains] is a little bit secret," he tells me. "The great thing is that my studio is separate but not isolated, with the energy of the cafe, and clients can come for coffee." Cafe customers often peruse his display case of jewellery outside his studio door.

Bowyer, who creates annual collections and does personalised commissions, devotes days or weeks to designing and making each piece of jewellery, which combines precious metals and gemstones. He designs for both sexes, but many of his unusual, textured designs have a masculine vibe. "Men are wearing more jewellery now." He uses only ethically-sourced local gemstones, mainly from Australia, certified as fair trade and conflict-free.

Bowyer, who is a little reserved, completed a Bachelor of Architecture (with first-class honours) at Victoria University. He then lived briefly in Berlin, before moving to Melbourne (with Eastbourne-bred wife Shayna Quinn-Bowyer) for an architecture job in 2009. "I was experimenting with jewellery, and got a lot of word-of-mouth requests, so I spent two years fitting that around my day job." He would often come into Captains for coffee, and chat to the guys who worked here.

In 2012, when a studio became available at Captains, Bowyer left architecture to become a jeweller.

"After two hard years, I began making a living from it." Welfe Jewellery is now stocked in three shops in Melbourne, one in Sydney, one in Wellington (Precinct 35 on Ghuznee St), one in Hong Kong, one in London, one in Riyadh, and (as of this summer) in New York, Chicago and Toronto stores. For three years, Bowyer has also taken part in Paris Fashion Week trade shows.

So why move to Melbourne? "It's a cliché but Melbourne really is a bigger version of Wellington," Bowyer says. "It's very receptive, international and supportive." Jewellers here share advice and recommend each other, and Bowyer collaborates with Captains' resident bootmaker Theo Hassett on belts and wallets with precious metals and leather. Hassett is also a Kiwi. "A lot of people make the leap over here." I must admit I'm tempted myself.

But I'm only here for a weekend, long overdue for a break from parenting a two-year-old, and staying at new boutique hotel QT Melbourne, the seventh in a chain of design-focused hotels opened in September in the heart of Melbourne's CBD. With its hand-crafted black steel and exposed-concrete ceilings, this industrial-chic hotel is a design buff's dream. Guests, and patrons of in-house coffee bar The Cake Shop, sit on pods of designer furniture in bold, eye-popping colours. It's hard to tear your eyes from the unusual art commissioned especially, including a colourful neon and electric-cable mobile hanging from the ceiling, and many digital artworks playing on screens. Screens also play scenes from black-and-white movies, in a nod to the site's former occupant, the Greater Union Cinema. My favourite thing, though, is the floor-to-ceiling interior wall called "Readers Digest," made from 6,000 discarded books with their spines showing.

Up the brass staircase is the excellent (if meat-heavy) Euro-style restaurant Pascale Bar & Grill, where you can see the chefs making meals in an open

Jeweller Nina Gordon



kitchen. Another dinner option, in the same building but with a separate entrance, is a busy casual eatery called Hot Sauce Laneway Bar with its Korean and Japanese-style tapas dishes and eyebrow-raising Japanese game shows playing on TV screens. They also do a good cocktail, though arguably the city's top cocktail spot is the 11th-floor bar Rooftop at QT, via talking elevators which deliver one-liners like 'Looking good' in various languages. There's fierce competition for a couch or table in the split indoor-outdoor space, but it's worth it to see the views of Melbourne's CBD.

QT Melbourne has a partnership with Melbourne Street Tours, which you can book at the hotel lobby. Our tour guide is David Russell ("not Dave, not Davy"), a street-art photographer and commentator. "We're all really relaxed in Melbourne," says Russell, the most intense guy I've ever met. He also seems to be displaying some nostalgia. "It's crazy that I've gone from doing illegal graffiti in the 80s, to now being paid to promote street art."

Russell, 44, leads us through a warren of laneways including Hosier Lane, the city's most photographed place. Street artists here are so used to being watched that they've become almost performance artists. An Asian girl wearing black Doc Martens and a red baseball cap stands on a crate to paint Millhouse from The Simpsons, clearly aware of her audience. Nearby, an old, bearded man squats in a doorway with a paper bag. "How are you mate?" Russell asks. "Yeah, not so good."

Russell is careful to distinguish street art – an urban movement in art that's usually legal – from illegal graffiti. "Basically street art is pretty, and graffiti is all letters." While some walls are constantly painted over, the more impressive street-art works have semi-divine status and remain untouched. "It's an unspoken rule of ethics," Russell says. "So, rather than paying people to paint over graffiti, the council is now commissioning street art to prevent graffiti. That's smart." He also points out a street-art-style Coke ad on a high-rise building. There were heated words when one street-art crew accepted \$10,000 to do the ad; other artists considered it selling out.

The tour ends in a laneway where a door opens Arabian-Nights style onto the cavernous warehouse that's home to Blender Studios, a 14-studio art collective where various established street artists work from, and mentor some younger ones. We get a tour from the inimitable Adrian Doyle, an internationally-exhibited street artist who set up and manages both the studios and the street-art tours. He has a quirky dress sense, so I'm flattered when he compliments me on mine (thank the clearance sale at Melbourne label Dangerfield).

Blender also runs a street-art tour in Fitzroy and Collingwood. A 10-minute tram ride or a 20-minute walk from the CBD, this bohemian enclave is lined with art galleries, bars, restaurants and coffee houses, emerging-designer boutiques, pop-up shops, record stores and secondhand-book shops. If Melbourne is Wellington magnified, this is its Cuba Street precinct.

"I basically never leave Fitzroy and Collingwood. They've got everything," says former Wellingtonian Nina Gordon when she meets me at Archie's, a cafe on Gertrude Street in Fitzroy, near her home and separate studio. Wearing her own statement necklaces, chunky rings and oversized earrings, Gordon (nickname Flash Gordon) is her own best advertisement for her line Flash Jewellery: a sassy, street-smart label "to make women feel flash".

Gordon grew up rebuilding V8 Mustangs at her father's wrecking yard in Nelson, and doing jewellery night courses with her mum. At age 17, she put some silver in a mould to make her first ring, and knew that was what she'd do. What she'd always do. But she also needed to pay the bills. For a while she worked at a metal-design firm, making prototype buttons for police uniforms, and props and costume items for Weta Workshop.

By then living in Wellington, she worked as a roaster and dispatcher for Flight Coffee. Meanwhile she rented a bench at jewellery collective Workspace Studios at Toi Pōneke Arts Centre, and started making her own pieces. In early 2013, she launched Flash Jewellery with a party at Flight Hangar. A year later she moved to Melbourne with partner Rich Gibbins, to focus on growing Flash Jewellery's Australian market.

Currently Flash Jewellery is stocked in 15 New Zealand stores, one in Melbourne, one in Sydney and one in Brisbane. Gordon designs all the pieces, makes some herself, and gets others ethically made in India. Having just crammed a business management degree into one year, her current focus is consolidating the Australian market, and expanding to America when the time's right. "The opportunities in Melbourne are just insane. It's like Wellington in that no one has their elbows out. The big dogs don't mind – there's room for everybody."

Now 32, she plans to move back to Wellington at some point. "I miss the people and the place, the small-town familiarity. I cherish that. But Melbourne is great right now. It really is Wellington on steroids." ■

Sarah Lang flew Air New Zealand and was hosted by QT Melbourne. QT Museum Wellington (formerly the Museum Art Hotel) opened in January after an \$8 million refurbishment, becoming QT's first hotel in New Zealand.

