

The capital's food festival

Sarah Lang salivates over the delights to be found at Wellington on a Plate.

No doubt Aucklanders flinch when New Zealand's political capital calls itself our culinary capital. But having lived in both cities for long stretches, I can say we are seriously spoiled for choice, range and quality down in Welly, particularly given its compact size. Remarkably, according to *Lonely Planet*, Wellington has more restaurants, bars and cafes per capita than New York.

The Cuba St precinct alone boasts restaurants Logan Brown, Matterhorn, Ombra, Duke Carvell's, Cuba St Bistro, El Matador, Scopa, Floriditas, Grill Meats Beer, Arthur's, Loretta, Laundry, Plum, Olive, Havana and The Flying Burrito Brothers — and that's not counting the cafes and all the cheap-and-cheerful eateries.

Recently, the trend toward casual dining — eating out more often but paying less — has seen fine-dining restaurants open more casual sister eateries: Logan Brown with Grill Meats Beer, Capitol with WBC, and The White House with Charley Noble.

We're also fond of our tapas and sharing plates (Ombra, Havana, El Matador), and our gastro-bars (Little Beer Quarter, The Hop Garden) proudly serve local craft beers from the likes of Garage Project, ParrotDog and Tuatara alongside first-rate food.

The region also has an impressive roll-call of boutique food producers such as Zany Zeus and Kingsmeade cheeses, Parkvale Mushrooms, Bees Blessing honey, Lot Eight extra-virgin olive oils, Big Bad Wolf charcuterie and the Wellington Chocolate Factory.

What better place, then, for the country's chief culinary festival? Turning six this year, Visa Wellington on a Plate (August 15-31) is bigger and better than ever. Its centrepiece is DINE Wellington, where 98 regional eateries offer lunch and dinner menus that showcase local produce and culinary flair for seriously reasonable prices. Add 100-plus special events and you get something for everyone, from fine dining accompanied by an orchestra through to roasting then eating a pig on a spit. The festival runs not just in the city centre, but also in the suburbs, the Hutt Valley, the Kapiti Coast and the Wairarapa.

If you're contemplating a winter getaway, August is a capital time. The festival takes over town, with themed shop windows, pop-up bakeries and oyster shacks, and cooking demonstrations at high-end supermarket Moore Wilsons. Last year 3500-plus out-of-towners made a special visit; this year they can also catch the Lux 2014 festival of lights (August 22-31) and craft-beer celebration Beervana (August 22-23).

Wellington on a Plate is a win-win for more than just the tourism folk and the credit-card sponsor. Restaurateurs get to turn what was once a quiet month into a busy one. Chefs get a chance to experiment.



Mediterranean Osteria del Toro features tapas that are so more-ish they threaten to ruin your appetite for the luscious pinot noir slow-cooked pears.



Local food producers get to show off their wares.

And we diners get our pick of Dine Wellington's locally sourced, imaginative menus, served with regional beverages.

The lime-and-coconut cake with Bees Blessing honey-infused cream was honestly the best dessert I've ever eaten.

Because they're all set menus, I didn't think many would cater to incurable vegetarians like me. But it is usual to have two options per course, and often one is meat-free. If my stomach and wallet could cope, I could eat at different restaurants every day of the festival.

The three Dine menus I previewed pushed the boundaries of vegetarian cuisine — in a very good way. At retro-themed Beach Babylon in Oriental Bay, the lime-and-coconut cake with Bees Blessing honey-infused cream was honestly the best dessert I've ever eaten, and the Zany Zeus paneer kofta Fijian curry with wild rice was incredible; the fondues were fab, too.

In town at Mediterranean restaurant Osteria del Toro, the more-ish tapas nearly ruined my appetite for the luscious Pencarrow pinot noir slow-cooked pears with Zany Zeus organic-milk fritters.

At Duke Carvell's, we were warmly welcomed by Lorenzo Bresolin, known for his handlebar moustache,

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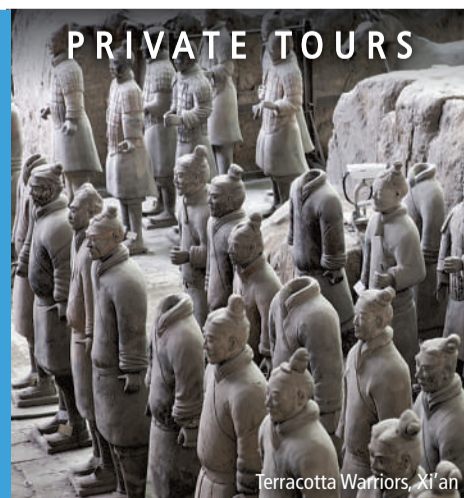
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Craft-beer celebration Beervana runs within the culinary festival, from August 22-23.

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At Duke Carvells the Bresolin brothers offer atmosphere and deliciously unusual dishes.

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wide grin, and peppy personality. He and brother Leonardo, who were judges on TV3 show *The Great Food Race*, own three popular eateries and come September will open another, The Bresolin, in the historic building that housed bar Bodega.

Being culinary royalty doesn't stop Lorenzo working the floor at Duke's — with its wonderfully old-world decor of chandeliers, candlesticks and portraits. Explaining the courses, he tells of how Eketahuna cheesemaker Biddy Fraser-Davies started out with one cow and now wins global awards.

She's responsible for the Cwmglyn Farmhouse Cheese of my main, served with sprouted legumes, baby gem, chervil nage, and mint. Who knew cheese and greens could be so artistically presented and, more importantly, delicious?

The other courses were similarly unusual and

Brothers Lorenzo and Leonardo Bresolin add personality to food.



tasty, with perfect portion sizes. The Bresolin brothers are also staging various pop-up events, including a five-night "reopening" of Il Casino, the iconic restaurant run by their father Remiro for three decades from 1976.

It's one of 118 special gastronomic events, divided into categories The Essential Ingredient, Second Helping, Hands On, Global Gastronomy, Big Day Out, The Chef's Apprentice, Pop-Ups, Moveable Feasts and Food for Thought.

They showcase regional food and beverages and show how innovative the cuisine scene can be. Adding sound to taste, courses are served between Wellington Musical Theatre renditions of Broadway songs at one event, and between NZSO performances at another.

Other highlights include a Forest and Forage degustation at Zealandia, vegan banquets, offal feasts, blind dining, foodie films with

dessert at the Roxy, a woolshed lunch, a World War I-inspired dinner, a behind-the-scenes day at Coffee Supreme, a session on matching glasses to wines, and a Meet the Maker tour (producers, not God).

Learn-then-eat classes span pork pies, creme brulee, cheese scones, coconut, herbs, pizza, dumplings and savoury nibbles. And yes, the Bake Club competition is back.

Even more competitive is Burger Wellington, where 69 Dine Wellington eateries try to outdo each other's burgers, served with a Garage Project beer.

It's not all about meat, either. In Boulcott St Bistro I salivated over the Portobello Peach burger: grilled Parkvale mushrooms with fennel, peach-and-raisin chutney and tomato-and-thyme aioli on a ciabatta bun, with chickpea chips. Gone are the days when vegetarians have to order the pasta with red sauce.

● VisaWellingtonOnaPlate.com




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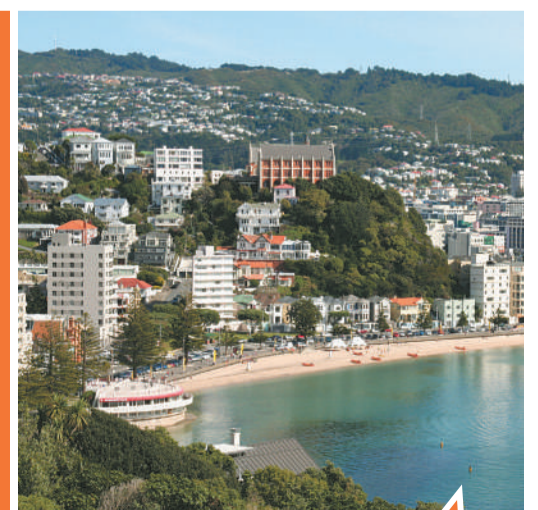
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