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CAPITAL GAINS AS CANBERRA RESHAPES IT'S DINING AND DRINKS MENU

MIRANDA Devine, one of News Corp's most outspoken columnists, pulls no punches. In a recent diatribe against Canberra, she berated public servants in the nation's capital for their love of high-class restaurants and cafes on every corner, among other things. A writer for the Canberra Times newspaper immediately took issue, claiming that Canberra is Australia's best kept secret with food, wine and culture to match any state capital without the traffic and crime.

Both are right. Over the past three years there's been a flood of new restaurant and cafe openings across the precisely-planned city where it takes mere minutes to drive anywhere. There's only one standard - excellent - even at the local PappaRich outlet in the Canberra Centre shopping mall. There is a downside to this frenetic culinary activity, though. Competition has become so fierce that eateries that don't meet the city's exacting standards close in record time. According to Australian National University (ANU) academic Andrew Hughes, Canberrans are discerning even at cheap and cheerful eateries.

Much of the new sophistication can be traced to Sasa Sestic, the founder of ONA coffee, who won the 2015 World Barista Championship title. His mission is to make Canberra the capital of great coffee. He's succeeding, too. His protégé Hugh Kelly, ONA's head trainer, won the Australian Barista of the Year title in 2016 and 2017 at the Melbourne International Coffee Expo and is off to Seoul in November for a crack at global glory. ONA head roaster, Sam Corra, took out the National Brewers' Cup championship at this year's expo and will battle his peers in Budapest for the international taste-off.

But let's start with Canberra's craft beer prowess. Top of the heap is the BentSpoke Brewing Co in Braddon, helmed by Richard Watkins, one of Australia's most decorated brewers, and Tracy Margrain. Two of its beers - Crankshaft and Barley Griffin (ha, ha) - were ranked in the top 20 of GABS Hottest 100 Craft Beers. Close to 20 beers are brewed in-house from lagers to barrel-aged Belgian brews. The hand-crushed cider made from apples from nearby Batlow is also a stand-out.

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Microbiologist Lachie McOmish founded the Wig and Pen Tavern & Brewery nearly 25 years ago. Now located at Llewellyn Hall on the ANU campus, the ales and beers quench the thirsts of students and locals. Over 16 different brews, including seasonal and annual releases, are brewed in the English pub-style premises, so there's plenty of reasons to come back time and again.

Zierholz Brewery, as you would expect, specialises in German-style beers. Available on tap all over town, owner Christoph Zierholz dishes up Ruby Ale, Baltic Ale and much more at his original brewery and pub in Fishwyk, and a buzzy outlet at the University of Canberra.

We pulled up at Murrumbateman for a cup of coffee and couldn't find a designated

parking spot. On weekends Canberra's surrounding wine country, only a 30-minute drive from the CBD, is a popular day trip for Canberrans and tourists. Wines from the ACT need no introduction to wine lovers and more than 30 of the 140 wineries of the Canberra District Wine Region have cellar doors.

The name on everyone's lips even before you set off is Clonakilla Wines. Winemaker Tim Kirk's father John first planted the vineyard in 1971 on his 17.8ha farm, but Tim was the guiding force behind the winery's be-medalled shiraz/viognier blend.


Helm Wines also dates back to the 1970s and is another Murrumbateman must-visit. Using a minimalist approach to winemaking with modern and traditional techniques, the rieslings and cabernet sauvignons are in a class of their own. The Long Red Shiraz at Eden Road Wines is a major magnet in drawing repeat visitors.

Apart from Murrumbateman, if you are in Canberra for longer than the weekend, Lake George, at a million years old, is one of the oldest lakes in the world. It is home to Lerida Estate, where the low-yielding vines deliver the essence of the region's terroir. Technically in New South Wales, the lake fluctuates with the rainfall but full or near-empty, nothing diminishes the impact of Lerida's winery designed by star architect Glenn Murcutt. The boutique Lake George Winery was one of the pioneers of the area and is a consistent gong winner for its pinot noirs and chardonnays.

Other names to note are Lark Hill Biodynamic Winery, Affleck Vineyard and Contentious Character Vineyard. On the way to or from Murrumbateman, pull in to Hall (population 332), where Brindabella Hills Winery, Capital Wines and Pankhurst Wines provide tastings of exceptional quality, too.

You would have to get a job transfer for six months to have a ghost of a chance of experiencing the full spectrum of Canberra's dining options. Thankfully, the city's organised layout makes things easier for the short-term visitor. The best eating is found in six major clusters - the North Quarter near the centre of town, Braddon, New Acton, Dickson, Kingston and Manuka and Northside. We started at Akiba, winner of the People's Choice Award in the Australian Financial Review's Top 100 Restaurants 2016 rankings. As busy as all get out, owners Peter and Michael Harrington specialise in fabulous cocktails, steamed buns, dumplings and fried noodles.

Canberra is packed with international students and diplomatic staff from Asia, many of whom congregate in Dickson's mini-Chinatown for top value venues like The Scholar and Jimmy's Place. The Kingston Foreshore, near the Old Bus Depot Markets, is Canberra's flashiest urban renewal project, packed with flashy apartments like similar developments in Sydney and Melbourne. Water views are "free" with the food at C Seafood & Oyster Bar, Molto Italian, Morks and the Local Press Cafe.

If you loved the local wines or didn't manage to get beyond the city limits, the Benchmark Wine Bar has long been a destination restaurant as much for the fine dining menu as the seriously good wine list. But whatever restaurant you choose on a brief trip, it's certain you will make a mental note to visit the nation's "Bush Capital" much more often. 



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