

**W**hen I was doing research on where to visit in New Zealand, I was told that if I wanted culture I should go to North Island and if I wanted scenery, South Island. But nobody told me that if I wanted to eat well, stay in Wellington.

Wellington, the capital of New Zealand, is nestled in a small bay, with homes perched on the hillside, and reminds one immediately of the San Francisco area on a smaller scale, a comparison Wellingtonians make with pride. Some even reveal that the city is located on a major fault and that its shoreline was extended by five blocks when an earthquake raised the seabed in 1840.

We visited the city for five days in March (on our way to Australia) and left feeling we needed to go back to savor more of the city and the country. After all, Wellington claims to be home to more than 400 cafes and restaurants in a regional population of 445,000. Reservations are not always required.

We ate good food just about everywhere, but the place that provided us a different cultural experience was Kai in the City, a seven-table, two-waitstaff restaurant whose owner, a Maori by the name of Bill Hamilton, entertains diners with song and chatter. *Kai* means “food” in Maori, the language of the indigenous people of New Zealand with the same name. Some readers may recall that a Maori musical group performed at the Central Pennsylvania Festival of the Arts many years ago.



For a *timatanga* (appetizer), Paulette, my wife, had the *heihei* pate—chicken liver and *kawakawa* (Maori pepper, bush basil) served with *tamarillo kinaki* (relish) and grilled *paraoa* (potato bread). I had *kai moana*—seafood chowder with fresh *ika* (fish), *koura* (shrimp) and *wheke* (squid) in a cream-and-tomato base served with fresh *paraoa*.

For our main course, Paulette had a free-range chicken breast with mushroom and port wine cheddar stuffing on *kumara roesti* (sweet potato) with *kowhitiwhiti* (watercress) and *kawakawa jus*. I had *kuku*—fresh steamed mussels in a creamy garlic and beer broth with fresh herbs. The mussels were so big that they

needed to be cut in halves and thirds before I could eat them. Paulette said she had never seen such big mussels—no pun intended.

During all of this we were enjoying glasses of Tohu Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc 2004, the first wine produced by a Maori-owned company. The wine went nicely with my dessert, a mixed cheese plate served with oat crackers and pate. Paulette enjoyed lemon pot de crème with spiced red tamarillos and ginger snap.



During the main course, the owner arrived and started chatting up the customers at each table. After he had made his rounds, he took up a guitar and sitting in front of the counter that divided the tables from the kitchen, he began singing Maori songs. When our hotel's concierge ordered a cab for us to go to Kai in the City, she exclaimed that we were in for an "interactive" treat. Even more than we could imagine.

Soon, Hamilton had all of us, backed up with song sheets, singing

along in Maori. After a few songs, he stopped by our table again and taught the two of us yet another song that included various hand gestures and other movements. We were off in a corner and out of the mainstream and thought nothing of it until he returned to his position at the front of the room and announced that the two of us were going to sing a song for the rest of the diners. And so we did.

Before we left, we were given a copy of the menu and a 20-page Maori-language phrasebook. The crowning touch of the evening was not the food or our duet, but our waitress' initial refusal of a 20 percent tip. We had to insist that she ring it up on our credit card. (And this was not the only time our tip was initially refused.)

For lunch one day on a food tour, we ate at Logan-Brown, a restaurant located in a restored bank building and across the street from a restaurant named the Flying Burrito Brothers. We sampled paula ravioli with fresh basil, coriander and lime beurre blanc and a Riesling from Central Otago, an area on South Island. Then we tasted pan-roasted lamb loin with sweetbreads and pinot noir jelly, complemented with a pinot noir from Martinborough, where we had gone the day before on a wine tour. Finally, we had Tunisian orange cake with blood-orange sorbet, washed down with a Riesling from the Marlborough area, like Martinborough, on North Island and not too far from Wellington.

Our hotel served wines from the Marlborough area at happy hours, when at different times we feasted on fresh calamari, or spring rolls or cheese (like wine, another product that New Zealand is famous for). One of our tour guides credited post-World War II Italian and Greek

immigrants with being the backbone of the fishing industry and helping to diversify the food selection.

When we stopped at Meat on Tory, a specialty meat deli, we were reminded of State College. Within blocks of Meat on Tory are approximately 2500 apartments with small kitchens and residents who don't have a lot of time to prepare elaborate meals. So the owner of Meat on Tory, Ian Domett, who calls himself a traditional butcher, provides not only food, but also advice on how to prepare it. All of the meats are free range, with rabbit selling well when we were there. He will prepare Beef Wellington to your specifications and you can also order sweetbreads, and raisins and prunes flavored with rum.



Also part of keeping the downtown viable is the Moore Wilson fresh food market, which a tourist might not see, but would still enjoy because many of the city's chefs buy their food there. The people who live in the 2500 apartments have their own butcher and grocer within walking distance.

They can also buy freshly roasted coffee (another reminder of State College) at the Mojo Coffee Cartel, which has outgrown its space and is moving the roasting part to another building, leaving the busy coffee bar behind. Up the street is Shoc Chocolaterie and Espresso Bar Chocolate, whose variety overwhelms the taste buds and reminds one of Hershey. And I don't have room to mention the many cafes serving such interesting fare as spicy Moroccan and halumi salad, Cajun spice chicken salad and snapper with roasted vegetables. The only pedestrian food we encountered was the over-priced breakfast buffet in our hotel.

Before you visit New Zealand, check the variety of Web sites that provide rich detail on the many things to do on both islands. And then go on a diet.

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What is a kiwi?

People from other English-speaking countries refer to citizens of the United States as "Yanks," but I've never heard anyone in the United States use the word.

On the other hand, not only do we call the residents of New Zealand Kiwis, that's what they call themselves.

I appreciated the shorter word on my first day in Wellington when a New Zealand resident held hostage in Iraq was freed after four months. **Kiwi hostage freed**, the Wellington newspaper proclaimed in what we in the newspaper business used to call Second Coming type (huge). **New Zealand hostage freed** would not have fit as well and it lacks punch.

Speaking of punch, this headline also caught my eye: **The call girl and the Kiwi**. I never read the story, but I think I'm better off letting my vivid imagination run wild.

The kiwi, as many probably know, is a bird about the size of the chicken, although its eggs are ten times as large. It hardly has wings and it doesn't fly. Some of the species are endangered. Kiwi are nocturnal and monogamous.

The fruit we call kiwi is really called kiwifruit and is native to China. Don't confuse the bird and the fruit or some Kiwi headline writer will have a field day.

It's not just about the food

Eating isn't the only thing to do when visiting Wellington. In our short stay there, we also:

- Went on a 2.5-hour city sights tour
- Took a guided tour through the Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand
- Spent a morning at the Karori Wildlife Sanctuary
- Explored the Wellington waterfront, including going through the Wellington Museum
- Rode the cable car to the top of one hill for a view of the city and the bay
- Twice visited the Botanic Gardens
- Checked out the Carter Observatory (near the cable car overlook)
- Walked among seals on a safari along the coast
- Went on a tour of four vineyards, a tour that included a one-hour train ride through country that looked just like Centre County

Wellington is a very easy place to book tours. We booked our hotel and tours online at <http://www.wellingtonnz.com>, Positively Wellington Tourism. The tourism center is located in a complex that includes the municipal building and city library and like everything else downtown is within walking distance.

We flew Air New Zealand, which treats passengers in coach as though they are in first class.

