



ADMIRABLE **NELSON**

The laid-back pace of life in the rural haven of New Zealand's South Island belies the variety of vineyards, breweries, dairies and other small-scale yet big-hearted producers, says Michael Raffael, who visits the coastal city of Nelson and the countryside beyond

PHOTOGRAPHY BY EWEN BELL





Below: a local artist's ethereal patterns etched into the sand at Nelson's Tahuna Beach.
Top: exploring the region's wineries, cafés and coastline





Below: an afternoon walk along the Tasman shoreline. Opposite, clockwise: local peanut butter; Baron Hasselhoff at his stall; gluten-free biscuits; sampling at Founders Brewery; Golden Bay's fishing fleet; local boysenberries; Moutere-made chutney; evening draws in along the coast

'Historically, it was intrepid explorers that charted these seas, but today, container ships thread between Haulashore Island and Boulder Bank to tie up at the wharf'

Travel information

New Zealand is 12 hours ahead of GMT. Its currency is the New Zealand dollar. Nelson's coastal position means it enjoys a temperate climate. Highs can approach 30°C in the summer months of December, January and February. Temperatures drop to around 10°C in winter, with July the coldest month of the year.

GETTING THERE

Air New Zealand (airnewzealand.com) flies daily from London Heathrow to Auckland, via Los Angeles, with a flight time of 23 hours. The airline also operates up to 11 flights a day onwards to Nelson, with a journey time of 1 hour 20 minutes.

Qantas (qantas.com.au) also operates flights daily from London Heathrow to Auckland, via Sydney.

RESOURCES

Tourism New Zealand (newzealand.com) is the official tourism website, featuring travel, accommodation and numerous activity ideas.

Nelson Tasman Tourism (nelsonnz.com) provides a wealth of advice for touring the region, from vineyard and brewery visits to cycling routes and natural wonders that would suit fans of Middle-earth.

FURTHER READING

Southern Exposure (Globe Pequot Press, £9) by Chris Duff. An award-winning writer embarks on a precarious solo kayaking adventure around South Island, taking on the thunderous Tasman Sea, rocking up on the uninhabited West Coast and experiencing the raw beauty of New Zealand.

It's spring. A sky-blue, ice-blue market day in Nelson. Everyone knows everyone. Charlie the craft baker takes a tray of cinnamon rolls from the oven. Terry sells bottles of tequila made at his Takaka distillery. 'Urban hippie' Takehito hands out tasters of his miso paste and Pic Picot does the same with his peanut butter. Doris the bratwurst lady puts another knobliener on the griddle while Warren waxes lyrical about the virtues of his honey and its 'unique manuka factor'. The whimsical Baron Hasselhoff offers gluten-free, organic, vegan 'snickerdoodle' cookies, and 80-year-old Pete spreads black beech spatulas, palette knives, slotted spoons and 'dibber-dabbers' on a trestle table. Does he make them himself? 'Yes. It's called retirement.'

Nelson, a regional capital on New Zealand's South Island, thrives on characters like these. On the surface, they're all 'chur' (cheers) and 'g'day'. But peel back this friendly exterior and they have sinew to match the sweetness. Pic sailed yachts around the Pacific before his eyesight started failing. Charlie used to cook for Hugh Hefner at the Playboy Mansion. Coffee-roaster Dan Hennah Jr supplied hot drinks to *The Lord of the Rings* crew while they filmed on South Island. His father won an Oscar as the movie's art director and set decorator.

But Nelson isn't Middle-earth. While the city's Monopoly-board houses are scattered over the surrounding hillsides, the centre is a much neater arrangement. Cruciform main streets, such as Trafalgar and Hardy, heave with cafés and galleries. Yes, it has a rugby ground at its heart, of course it does. This is, after all, New Zealand. But it also boasts a public croquet lawn.

The Nelson Tasman region was once a single province. Now it divides between Nelson City and the countryside of —————>>





Left to right: chic eats await at Harbour Light Bistro; exploring Nelson's heritage at Wakefield Quay House; Paula's Plate is perfect for sweet-tooths;

the Tasman District. And while historically it was intrepid explorers that charted the Tasman Sea, today container ships thread between Haulashore Island and Boulder Bank to tie up at the wharf.

Dutch navigator Abel Tasman first moored off the coast here in 1642, lost four men in a skirmish with local Maoris and left. Over a century later, Captain James Cook, while mapping the South Island coastline, named the westernmost point Cape Farewell. The first English settlers arrived early in Queen Victoria's reign. One of them, Somerset farmer William Cullen, planted a 14-acre apple orchard. The first Braeburn apple, a cross between a Granny Smith and Lady Hamilton, originated from a seedling grown here. Today, orchards carpet the landscape of the fertile Waimea Plains south of the city, and spread into the Moutere Hills to the west.

German immigrants followed the English. Sarau, the Lutheran community they founded, has become Upper Moutere, and Neudorf Road, its main artery, is home to a disparate group calling itself the Moutere Artisans. They include an olive oil producer, ewe's milk cheese maker, New Zealand's oldest inn, a knife maker, potter, sculptor and Swiss wild mushroom farmers Hannes and Theres Krummenacher, who planted pines that they inoculated with fungal mycorrhizae to yield crops of saffron milk caps.

Alex and Caroline, down the road, travelled the length of the country to get hold of old apple varieties suited to their Peckham's cider because strict laws prevented them from importing fruit trees. 'We found varieties like Kingston Black and Foxwhelp growing in private gardens,' says Caroline. 'We took cuttings, brought them



South Island's Farewell Spit can have a brooding atmosphere

Where to stay



Boat Shed Cafe is known for its seafood and Pacific Rim cooking

back and grafted them on root stock.' Cider and cider kir (inspired by the traditional French aperitif) aside, they also ferment boysenberries, a cross between raspberries and blackberries. It's refreshing to drink but even better with a scoop of vanilla ice cream.

Neudorf Vineyards offers another reason to raise a glass to the region. Its Moutere chardonnay can send an oenophile into verbal paroxysms. Wine writer Yvonne Lorkin dubbed it a 'five star, grilled stonefruit, zippy, tropical bomb whose shrapnel can plough through me anytime'. Owners Tim and Judy Finn started out in 1978 as back-to-the-land eco-warriors. Over time they've put down roots, evolved and laid down more than just a coating of sophistication.

Beyond these settled homestead communities of vineyards and smallholdings, the landscape shifts a gear or two. —————>>

Edenhouse If you happen to be famous – Sir Ian McKellen, say – and in need of quality privacy, you might well book at Edenhouse. It can only cosset a maximum of six people at a time, but has 12 staff. There's over 50 acres of grounds and eight acres of gardens manicured by Bobbie, who studied at the Chelsea Physic Garden. Peter can organise a bespoke helicopter flight over the Abel Tasman Park. Julia's 'home' cooking and Neudorf wines deserve each other. Doubles from £570. *Motueka, 00 64 3 526 8174, edenhouse.co.nz*

Moutere Inn This pub is probably the oldest on South Island and dates from 1850. It has simple en suite accommodation but is an ideal place to hang out when checking out wineries, artists and artisans in the area. From £30. *Upper Moutere, 00 64 3 543 2759, mouterein.co.nz*

Ratanui Lodge A stone's throw from Golden Beach, where road signs warn of penguins, this is a friendly and comfortable lodge. Doubles from £105. *Pohara, Golden Bay, 00 64 3 525 7998, ratanuilodge.com*

Split Apple Retreat A luxury lodge, small and extravagant, built into a cliff face overlooking the ocean. Owned by an American ex-doctor-cum-poker maestro. Doubles from £755. *Motueka, 00 64 3 527 8377, splitapple.com*

The Prince Albert Ideal for use as a Nelson base camp when heading off on a rambling holiday, backpackers will love this place, which has its own beer garden and does waffles for breakfast. It's simple, and if you're too grown up for dormitory sharing you can hire double rooms for £40. *Nelson, 00 64 3 548 8477, theprincealbert.co.nz*

Wakefield Quay House Calling this a guest house seems inappropriate. It's more of a hideaway. Though it's not quite this either, because Woodi is probably the most connected person in Nelson and knows the town inside out. The rooms have one of the best views anywhere and Johnny, a Maori sailor, has his own five-berth yacht for hire. Doubles from £140. *Port Hills, Nelson, 00 64 3 546 7275, wakefieldquay.co.nz*



Left: fishermen bring in flounder as their catch, while others net whitebait from Waimea Inlet, devoured in places like the Boat Shed Cafe. Below: view of the tidal river at Collingwood, Golden Bay

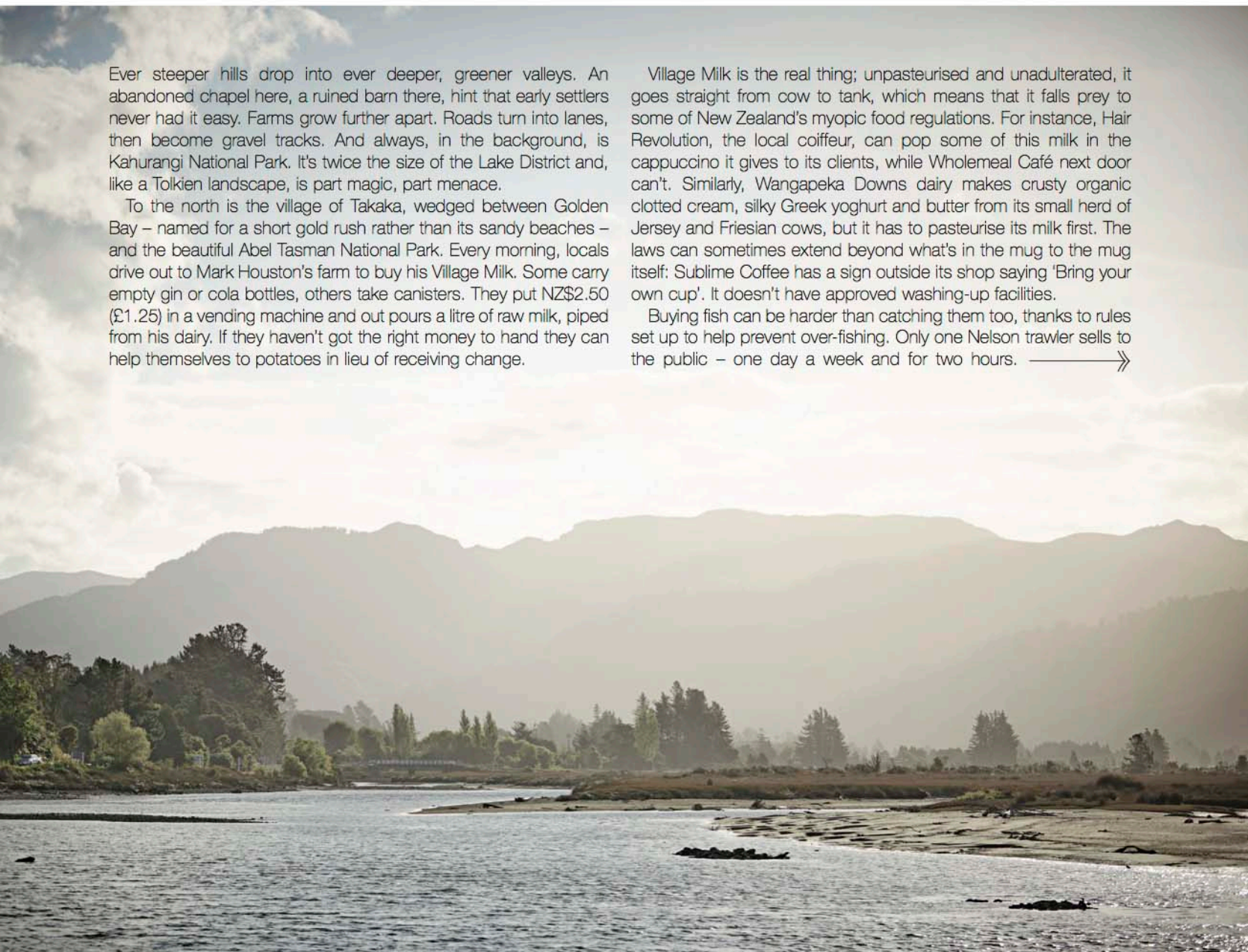
‘Transparent, like glass eels, inaga whitebait hatch along riverbanks, drift out to sea and come in on the spring tides, when fishermen dip their nets to catch them’

Ever steeper hills drop into ever deeper, greener valleys. An abandoned chapel here, a ruined barn there, hint that early settlers never had it easy. Farms grow further apart. Roads turn into lanes, then become gravel tracks. And always, in the background, is Kahurangi National Park. It's twice the size of the Lake District and, like a Tolkien landscape, is part magic, part menace.

To the north is the village of Takaka, wedged between Golden Bay – named for a short gold rush rather than its sandy beaches – and the beautiful Abel Tasman National Park. Every morning, locals drive out to Mark Houston's farm to buy his Village Milk. Some carry empty gin or cola bottles, others take canisters. They put NZ\$2.50 (£1.25) in a vending machine and out pours a litre of raw milk, piped from his dairy. If they haven't got the right money to hand they can help themselves to potatoes in lieu of receiving change.

Village Milk is the real thing; unpasteurised and unadulterated, it goes straight from cow to tank, which means that it falls prey to some of New Zealand's myopic food regulations. For instance, Hair Revolution, the local coiffeur, can pop some of this milk in the cappuccino it gives to its clients, while Wholemeal Café next door can't. Similarly, Wangapeka Downs dairy makes crusty organic clotted cream, silky Greek yoghurt and butter from its small herd of Jersey and Friesian cows, but it has to pasteurise its milk first. The laws can sometimes extend beyond what's in the mug to the mug itself: Sublime Coffee has a sign outside its shop saying 'Bring your own cup'. It doesn't have approved washing-up facilities.

Buying fish can be harder than catching them too, thanks to rules set up to help prevent over-fishing. Only one Nelson trawler sells to the public – one day a week and for two hours. —————>>





Above: oysters at Boat Shed Cafe; Mapua's Smokehouse; fish soup by Daniel Monopoli. Below: The Mussel Inn's green-lipped shells; Daniel Monopoli





Left: sunset seen from Wakefield Quay House. Opposite, clockwise: a balcony at the house; duck liver parfait at Hopgood's; Boat Shed Cafe; salmon and avocado at Hopgood's; Founders Brewery; Schnapp Dragon Distillery in Takaka; Crema coffee cart; seafood at Harbour Light Bistro; Founders Brewery lines up some tipples

'Maoris lived on Farewell Spit for centuries. At its tip, exposed at low tide, are tuatua, pipi, toheroa and tuangi shells, cockles and clams that were part of their diet'

A day-boat, it catches dabs, greenback flounders and English soles. Customers board the vessel where Jeff, Sue and their daughter Olivia serve them. Olivia provides the sales patter ('Soles are ugly on the outside but beautiful on the inside'), Dad picks the fish straight off the ice and Mum has to record every purchase for the authorities. By law, restaurants can't serve this particular haul, so sampling it depends on knowing somebody willing to cook it for us. Fortunately, our photographer, Ewen, has a contact: chef Steve Coyne at the Harbour Light on Wakefield Quay. Skinned and fried in butter on the bone, Olivia's soles (£5.50 a kilo) taste every bit as good as their distant cousins from Dover.

This informal approach can be found across Nelson Tasman, where restaurants are rare. Instead, everyone eats out in cafés. Some stay open all hours. Some do the bulk of their trade during the day. Some are more like bistros.

As in the market, it's a close-knit fraternity. Daniel Monopoli, chef-patron at The Boat Shed Cafe, is across the road from Steve and supplies his fellow restaurateur with herbs. The Shed dishes up cockle and snapper chowder – creamy as a French *bourride* – Tio Point oysters, grilled prawns with Kumara tortellini or rock lobster with chilli and Neudorf's koroneiki olive oil as though they are everyday fodder. And here, at least, they are. In season he also has inanga whitebait. These bear no relation to the British homonym. Transparent, like glass eels, they hatch along riverbanks, drift out to sea and come in on the spring tides. Fishermen dip fine-meshed nets against the current to catch them.

Laurie Christian, netting on the Appleby river near Mapua, has hunted them for 40 years. Emptying the meagre contents of his net into a bucket on the back of his truck he comments: 'Enough for a

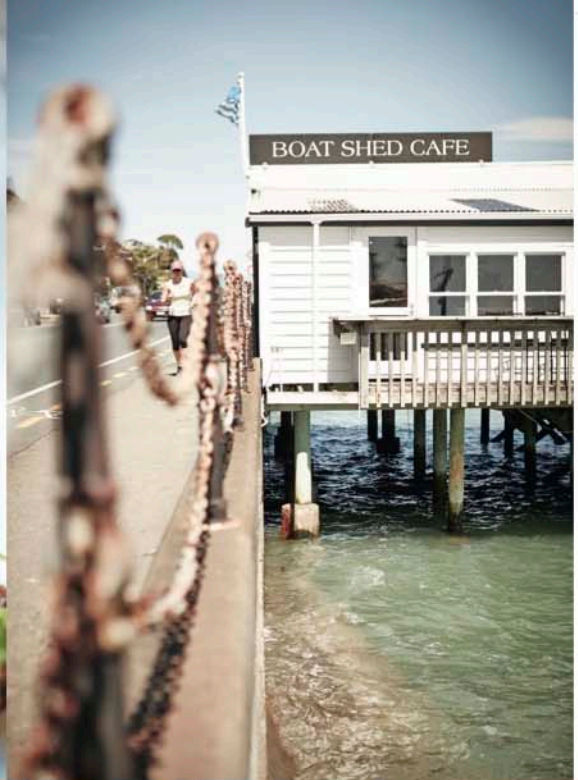
patty for the cat.' That patty is a delicacy. At the Nelson Carnival, it's a kind of fishy tortilla in a bun. Julia, the private cook at Edenhouse, a lodge tucked away in Orinoco Valley, fries little tasters to dip in melted butter with Neudorf's verjuice. 'I like to add about half an egg to a pound of whitebait, just enough to bind them,' she says.

Local shellfish are also sought after. Farewell Spit curves like a curlew's beak for 26km off the northern point of South Island. Less than a mile across, it's uninhabited now, but Maoris lived on it for centuries before Europeans arrived. At its tip, exposed at low tide, are tuatua, pipi, toheroa and tuangi shells, cockles and clams that were part of their diet. Only a colony of gannets feasts there now.

One native mollusc, however, has floated to mainstream popularity: the green-lipped mussel. Sealord, a company half-owned by Maori, exports it to the world. Eaten fresh in a Sicilian fish soup at Jellyfish Café, Mapua, yards from the ferry to Rabbit Island, they're plump and luscious. The Mussel Inn at Onekaka, Golden Bay, does mean moules marinières too, but this brew pub is best known for its Captain Cooker beer. The name commemorates the pigs that Captain Cook released onto the island during his first voyage. A red-brown beer, it's flavoured with manuka tips and local hops. It's a standout beer in a region that is the focus for real ale on South Island. Nelson Tasman's reputation for craft beers was forged a generation ago when former All Black Terry McCashin bought the Rochdale Cider Factory to set up a micro-brewery.

Brewmaster Tracey Banner, of Sprig and Fern, heads off to the hop fields in Upper Moutere, brings back fresh cones and brews the same day for her Harvest Pilsner, which has twice won a gold medal from the Brewers Guild of New Zealand.

John Duncan's family has been brewing for six —————>>





'Every morning, locals drive out to Mark Houston's farm with their empty gin or cola bottles. Unpasteurised and unadulterated, his Village Milk is the real thing'

Where to eat

Prices are for three courses, excluding wine, unless otherwise stated.

Boat Shed Cafe Almost knee-deep in the sea at high tide, Daniel Monopoli's café-plus does simple-but-scrummy Pacific Rim cooking from £30. *Nelson, 00 64 3 546 9783, boatshedcafe.co.nz*

Harbour Light Bistro Chef Steven Coyne spent eight years cooking around the world on luxury yachts; his food is both chic and consistent. From £30. *Nelson, 00 64 3 546 6685, harbourlightbistro.co.nz*

Hopgood's Some of the most polished cooking in New Zealand but it's informal too. Great front-of-house staff and as much care spent on wine and beer as the food. From £35. *Nelson, 00 64 3 545 7191, hopgoods.co.nz*

Jelly Fish Café Thirty minutes from Nelson in a glorious estuary setting, the Jelly Fish has Mediterranean style cooking with fresh local produce. From £28, but a generous single course and drink will be less. *Mapua, 00 64 3 540 2028, jellyfishmapua.co.nz*

Café bars

Founders Brewery A collection of re-sited historic buildings in the middle of Heritage Park, this combines a retro setting with fine ales. *Nelson, 00 64 3 548 4638, foundersbrewery.co.nz*

McCashin's Brewery The largest local microbrewery, this pub also does delicious hot meat pies. *Nelson, 00 64 3 547 6876, mccashins.co.nz*

Melrose Breakfast, brunch, lunch and high tea in a historic house. Lavender pancakes, blueberry posset and rose lemonade. *Nelson, 00 64 3 548 9179, melrosecafe.co.nz*

Paula's Plate Paula Saengthian-Ngam was runner-up in New Zealand's *MasterChef* and has opened a bustling café with a mix of traditional and Viet-inspired dishes. *Nelson, 00 64 3 548 8057, paulasplate.co.nz*

The Milton Street Sprig & Fern Tavern Flagship tavern of the local brewery. Fantastic craft beer in a neighbourhood setting. *Nelson, 00 64 3 545 7117, sprigandfern.co.nz*

The Mussel Inn Somewhere near Takaka but always packed with those living within 30km. It's the 'local' most of us dream about. *Takaka, 00 64 3 525 9241, musselinn.co.nz*

generations. At Founders Heritage Park in the Nelson suburbs his café-bar serves a flight of ales to honour each of his ancestors. It opens with '1854', a dark porter, and ends with '2009', an IPA. Several of his beers reappear alongside other top tipples at Kevin Hopgood's Trafalgar St restaurant, an award-winning casual dining venue. He lists pairing notes for matching beers with his food: Dicks Dark from the Lighthouse goes well with a dish of beef carpaccio, fried egg, crispy potato, capers, parmesan and anchovy cream.

Duncan's cooking has a sense of place, like the wines from Neudorf Vineyard and the manuka honey. This viscous, complex and aromatic honey is sold as a miracle food for every ill, from skin care to cancer. A scale exists to measure its active ingredient, methylglyoxal. Setting aside its medicinal claims, it always tastes great. So does the beechwood honeydew honey, which bees gather from the tree's sap. No two monofloral bush honeys are alike.

Nelson itself isn't short on 'unique manuka factor', so to speak. Neudorf Vineyard has it, as does Hopgood's. It's also in unexpected spots. Wakefield Quay House, a weatherboard guest lodge decorated like an art gallery with a matchless view of Tasman Bay, drips with it. Melrose Café, set in a colonial mansion packed with bone china teacups and saucers has it too.

At low tide in the afternoon, Amber, a single mother to four children, goes down to an empty Tahunanui beach. Barefoot in the sand, she scores patterns, part mandala, part Maori god of the winds. She likes, she says, to watch the waves come in and eat her art. In the Wakefield Quay kitchen is a rocking chair designed by furniture maker David Haig. Its lines are as sinuous as Amber's circles, but it feels comfortable and permanent. When in Nelson, it may be possible to see Amber's art before it gets washed away and the beach is returned to its previous state. But like so much of this place, what you always leave with is a sense of its natural beauty. □

Michael Raffael and Ewen Bell travelled to Nelson, New Zealand, courtesy of Tourism New Zealand (newzealand.com) and Air New Zealand (airnewzealand.com).



Opposite: artful touches grace every inch of the Edenhouse gardens. Below, clockwise: sunrise over Golden Bay; the hives at Edenhouse; an abandoned farmhouse in Richmond; honeydew and manuka honey; Edenhouse bees; a Moutere beekeeper

GOURMET TRAVELLER
NELSON TASMAN





Above: a coffee fix; Woollaston winery; Edenhouse; winding route from Nelson to Takaka. Below: early spring vines at Neudorf Vineyards

'Viscous, complex and aromatic, manuka honey is sold as a miracle food for every ill, from skin care to cancer. A scale exists to measure its active ingredient, methylglyoxal'



Where to shop

Anatoki Salmon A fantastic experience: catch a salmon for free (with gear provided), then pay £10 a kilo to have it hot-smoked for you – perfect for picnics. *Takaka, 00 64 3 525 7251, anatokisalmon.co.nz*

Food Market There are about 200 stalls in Nelson's Saturday Market and there is no better place to get to know the region's producers than here. Also try the Wednesday farmers' market – smaller but more interesting, as the stallholders have time to chat about their hobby horses. *Nelson, 00 64 3 546 6454, nelsonmarket.co.nz*

L'Artisan The bakery smells of butter and fresh baking: great pasties and the cinnamon rolls are best ever. *Marble Arch Arcade, Nelson*

Neudorf Vineyards Sit up front in the plane to New Zealand and you may have your first taste of Neudorf's wines. It's known for its chardonnay but the riesling and pinot gris are both worth the detour. The Moutere Home Vineyard pinot noir is a concentrated, plummy treat. *Upper Moutere, 00 64 3 543 2643, neudorf.co.nz*

Schnapp Dragon Distillery Gins, malts, rums, all made in small pot stills from local ingredients. Even the agave for tequila is local. *Takaka, 00 64 3 525 9899, schnappdragon.co.nz*

Woollaston Money-no-object vineyard with art gallery, co-owned by a Las Vegas tycoon. Mahana méthode traditionnelle and a pinot rosé are ideal for daytime drinking with a stunning view of Tasman Bay. *Upper Moutere, 00 64 3 543 2817, woollaston.co.nz*

Don't miss

Farewell Spit Ecotours It's the one unmissable trip for anybody visiting Nelson – a drive along 26km of sands with only the seals and seabirds for company. *Collingwood, 00 64 3 524 8257, farewellspit.com*

The Gentle Cycling Company This clever company organises cycling trips to the microbreweries of Nelson Tasman, along with plenty of other sights along the region's specially mapped Great Taste Trail. There are plenty of other routes to choose from too, or just head off to explore on your own. *Stoke, 00 64 3 929 5652, gentlecycling.co.nz*

Wine Art Wilderness Guide Noel Kennedy knows the nooks and crannies of the region and can answer the most obscure questions on everything from Maori foraging techniques to Hobbit filming locations. *Nelson, 00 64 3 548 5515, wineartandwilderness.co.nz*