



Raising the bar

Forget what you might have once thought about Canberra; Australia's capital is raising the bar, with more on the menu than ever before, writes Brittney Levinson.

Just a few years ago, the mention of Canberra may have conjured up thoughts of politics, roundabouts and memories of primary school excursions. But today Australia's capital city is in the midst of what some are calling a "renaissance", with a booming food and wine scene, an influx of contemporary art hotels and growing international interest.

And as Canberra's image gets a makeover, the business events sector is also refocussing its efforts to attract more international events and incentive groups.

Canberra Convention Bureau director of marketing and communications Giselle Radulovic says often people remember Canberra as the city they experienced on their primary school trip many years ago.

"The city's seen a bit of a renaissance in recent years definitely in terms of its

food and wine offering. There's a real burgeoning amount of great restaurants and bars," she says.

"There's a focus on creating entertainment precincts and dining precincts in Canberra, we've got a number of great hatted restaurants, a really keen focus on using local produce from the Canberra region and we can do that easily because we're so close to the regional areas."

One of Canberra's major drawcards as an incentive destination is the more than 30 cellar doors located within 35 minutes of the city centre. Made up of around 140 vineyards, the region produces award-winning cool climate wines, and with a variation of altitudes, every classic variety is grown somewhere in the region. Some highlights include Shaw Vineyard Estate, the largest vineyard in the region, that produces

Cabernet Sauvignon and Riesling varieties, and Clonakilla, home to the award-winning Clonakilla Shiraz Viognier.

Canberra is also home to the only truffle farm in the world situated in a capital city. Located in Majura Valley, The Truffle Farm Canberra is just 15 minutes' drive from the city and has plenty on offer for groups. Delegates can join the truffle dogs as they hunt for truffles, take part in an interactive cooking demonstration and enjoy a truffle lunch prepared by executive chef Damian Brabender. Truffle season in Canberra runs from mid-May to mid-September and is celebrated with a series of festivals and events by restaurants and venues across the region.

Within the city, the food and wine scene is bolstered by a long line-up of restaurants and bars, many of which focus on serving the best local and Australian produce. Taking



Opposite page from left: On the menu at Pialligo Estate; food and wine putting Canberra on the map.

Local connections

National Convention Centre Canberra (NCCC) is making the most of the city's bustling food and wine offering, partnering with local suppliers to showcase the region's produce to delegates. NCCC has partnered with Shaw Vineyard Estate to offer a local wine package and with BentSpoke Brewery Co to provide local beers. Executive chef Nikhil Jain also works with local suppliers such as Poachers Pantry and Pialligo Estate to add "local flavour" to the menus.

NCCC general manager Stephen Wood says local suppliers have also been used in the Centre's current refurbishment, which includes new furnishings, an upgraded reception and new seating throughout the Royal Theatre and theatrettes.

"It's important for us to be more than just 'present' in the community," he says. "We're part of Canberra and are active in the community through strong, local partnerships."

Wood says as more business events are being won, the city is seeing dramatic changes and, in turn, people's perceptions of Canberra are changing too.

"Attracting conference business to Canberra has a major ripple effect through the economy as conference delegates spend on accommodation, dining, attractions and retail," he says. "Canberra has grown up and genuinely stands in its own right as the country's capital with so much to offer."

inspiration from other cities across the nation, an array of small bars are also opening up throughout Canberra, many of them tucked away in laneways and underground.

Joel Gordon, general manager of Hotel Realm and Burbury Hotel & Apartments, both part of Realm Precinct, says in recent years consumers have demanded more "culinary flair" from Canberra.

"With an influx of out-of-the-box thinking coming from both local and interstate lovers of food and wine, the scene is on an upward trend, with new venues being introduced almost every week," he says.

Some of these venues can be found within

the Realm Precinct itself, such as French restaurant Buvette Bistro and Wine Bar, casual dining venue Ostani Bar and Restaurant and Chinese restaurant Chairman & Yip, which Gordon describes as "a Canberra institution". The precinct also features hatted restaurant Lilotang, well known for its Japanese cuisine and range of sake.

"Canberra has always had excellent produce, from the local wineries and farms that are only a short drive out of the city, to the many food festivals that are showcased throughout the year," says Gordon.

"It's now our job as hoteliers and restaurateurs to continue to promote the region and the local produce it has to offer our

domestic and international travellers, whilst remaining competitive and at the forefront of consumer expectations and local trends."

Canberra hotels are also creating a buzz, with a number of design-focussed, boutique properties popping up over recent years, including Realm Precinct's latest addition Little National Hotel, the art-driven Hotel Hotel, and TFE Hotels' award-winning Vibe Hotel Canberra Airport.

Adding to this line-up, TFE Hotels have announced plans for a 132-room Adina Grand Apartment Hotel in Canberra, which will be designed by architects Bates Smart who were the brains behind Vibe Canberra. The contemporary hotel will be part of a \$300

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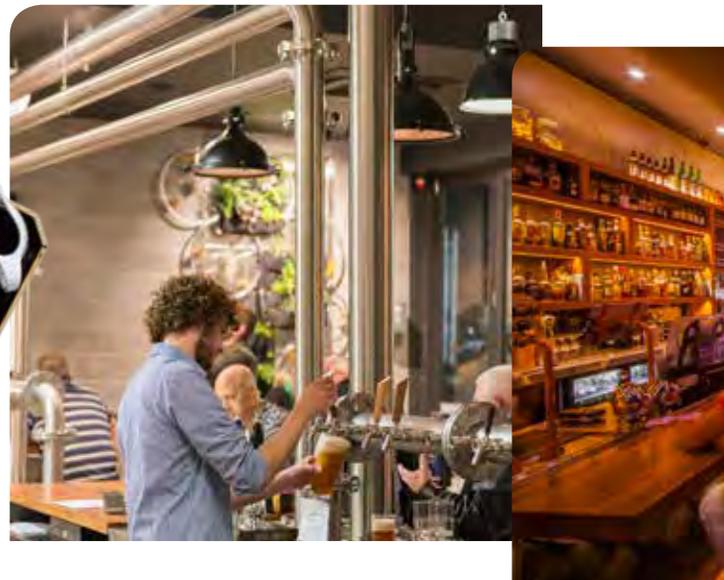
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From left: Lilotang serves up Japanese fare; BentSpoke Brewing Co; AKIBA brings "new Asian" to Canberra.



million development by Capital Property Group that is expected to be completed in 2020.

TFE Hotels CEO Rachel Argaman says the hotel will be a milestone addition to Canberra's burgeoning hotel scene.

"[Canberra] offers a wonderful selection of history, art, sporting and cultural events, and is gathering a following for its food and wine scene," she says. "I think we will see its popularity grow substantially over the coming years as increased tourism funds the development of more and more attractions for both the domestic and international traveller."

There's no denying the world is turning its attention to Canberra. Last year saw the launch of Canberra's first regularly scheduled international flights on board Singapore Airlines, connecting Canberra to Singapore and Wellington, New Zealand. Following the launch, Qatar Airways also announced plans to introduce a direct service between Doha and Canberra.

Radulovic says the Singapore Airlines service has been a great opportunity for the city.

"We now have direct international air access, so we can legitimately bid for Asia Pacific

events and international events," she says.

While the Singapore-Canberra route is gaining traction, Radulovic says the bureau is now focussing on building up the Wellington-Canberra leg.

"We're really keen to attract more New Zealand events into Canberra," she says. "That is going to be our focus over the next 12 months to really build our brand awareness in the New Zealand market."

And to do that, Radulovic says it's about looking at what Canberra offers from a different angle.

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Wine and dine

With so much on offer it's hard to name them all, but here's a taste of some of the hottest venues in Canberra right now:

Suke Suke – a lively Izakaya (Japanese gastropub) hidden down Verity Lane in the CBD, with a range of Japanese whiskies on offer, as well as sake, Canberra wines and more than 60 gins.

Bar Rochford – a sophisticated wine and cocktail bar that also serves up a dinner menu of European and Modern Australian flavours.

Pialligo Estate – located right next to Canberra Airport, here you can dine at the hatted Farmhouse Restaurant, buy award-winning bacon from the smokehouse and taste local wines from the Pialligo Estate Vineyard.

Monster Kitchen and Bar – situated on the ground floor of Hotel Hotel, this one's a favourite among hotel guests and locals who come to enjoy the locally-focussed menu that changes with the seasons.

BentSpoke Brewing Co – opened in 2014, this Braddon-based brewpub is home to more than 50 different types of beer and cider. The group has plans to soon open a production-scale brewery in the northern suburb of Mitchell.

AKIBA – inspired by the exciting atmosphere of East-Asian food halls, AKIBA showcases different culinary styles like Asian barbeque, raw bar and modern day dim sum, all while championing local produce.

Italian and Sons – stop in here for "old school" Italian dishes accompanied by an award-winning wine list of Italian wine and Australia-grown Italian varieties.

Aubergine – an intimate venue with a contemporary menu that's updated daily. Aubergine is headed up by chef Ben Willis, who also runs nearby Spanish restaurant Temporada.

"We're talking about the accessibility, about the evolving food and wine scene, and the other activities that you can do here that people may not be aware of," she says.

"You can get your group up at 5:30 in the morning, take a hot air balloon ride over the centre of Canberra, over Parliament House and the national attractions, land on the lawns of the Hyatt Hotel Canberra, have a beautiful breakfast and still be at your conference by 9:00am.

"What we're trying to show is that Canberra is not what you remember it to be, or not what you think it may be." **CTM**

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