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Grilled salmon at Lonsdale Street Roasters, the acclaimed Hotel Hotel, and breakfast at A. Baker are a few of Canberra's newfound delights

DEBORAH

The first time I visited Canberra I thought it was the most exciting and cosmopolitan place I'd ever been to. I was seven years old at the time and it was also the first trip I had taken in an aeroplane — a fact that may have influenced my impressions.

I've been back many times since and, although the city is not without its charms, I've always found it wanting. I'm happy to declare my bias here: I'm not a big fan of small to medium-sized cities anywhere. I like big bustling metropolises and I like small little villages and towns; but for me small cities always feel like they are trapped between a rock and a hard place. They're too big to be considered charming and too small to be taken seriously as a major centre.

The history of Canberra doesn't help matters either — just imagine what Sydney or Melbourne could have been if one of them was made the capital. Then again, imagine what Canberra could be if there was a high-speed rail link connecting it to the two state capitals.

But before our Canberra readers start an angry email to me, I'll get to the point: Canberra has suddenly become cool, and I don't mean in the climate sense. There is a newfound energy in Canberra that has seen restaurants, hotels and cafes open all over the city.

Milanda Rout, our senior writer and former Canberra-based political reporter for *The Australian*, travelled to her old stomping ground for this issue to find out what's happened in Canberra that led *The New York Times* to label it Australia's "decidedly hipster underbelly". Her story starts on page 34.

One of the most successful mixed-use developments in any Australian city has been the New Acton precinct in Canberra by the Molonglo Group, which is home to, among other businesses, the acclaimed Hotel Hotel. Co-director of Molonglo, Nectar Efkaripidis, told Milanda: "What we wanted to do was inject a bit of messiness. It's what we have in the big cities as they layer over time. You cannot have the good and the interesting without the grit and the messiness." We also sent a video crew to Canberra and you can view that on our website.

Speaking of metropolises... for our fashion and cover shoot this month our fashion team travelled to New York for an exclusive shoot with Tiffany & Co.'s incredible Blue Book collection of high jewellery.

I hope you enjoy the issue.

David Meagher
Editor

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QUITNE A CAPITAL CITY

AS COOL AS ... CANBERRA? FORGET YOUR IMPRESSIONS OF OUR STAID, LIFELESS ADMINISTRATIVE CENTRE — A HANDFUL OF ENTREPRENEURS ARE DOING THE CITY A REAL PUBLIC SERVICE

STORY **MILANDA ROUT** PHOTOGRAPHY **SEAN DAVEY**

At 8pm on a Friday night, so the joke goes, the busiest place in Canberra is the airport, followed closely by the road to Sydney. Former prime minister John Howard refused to live there and American author Bill Bryson once suggested the helpful marketing slogan: "Canberra: why wait for death?" The land of roundabouts, of politicians, of public servants, of overpriced mediocrity in well, everything, has had 102 years' worth of insults thrown at it. And deservedly so (I know, I lived there for two years). But it is time to draw a line in the sand and say it — out loud — Canberra has become cool.

Now at 8pm on a Friday night, you may find people having a drink at Monster Bar at Hotel Hotel in New Acton (the décor has been described as *Madmen* meets Nordic cool), others queuing for a Peruvian pork belly sandwich at a food truck in Braddon or dancing until the early hours in a converted shipping container on the edge of Lake Burley Griffin. This is Canberra, but not as we know it, and not as I knew it when I fled — sorry, left, in 2013. Even *The New York Times* noted the transformation, declaring Australia's capital as having a "decidedly hipster underbelly" in a piece last May (written by former local and now longtime New Yorker Emma Pearce). This validation was just what the town was looking for and was endlessly rehased by chuffed Canberraans.

So why has Canberra become cool? And more importantly, what took it so long? According to the architects, developers and restaurateurs behind Canberra's evolution into a hangout worthy of hipsters, it is all Walter Burley Griffin's fault. Or perhaps more accurately, the public servants who have since interpreted his vision for a "utopian garden city" in the decades that followed. A city planned by public servants primarily for public servants does not leave much to the imagination or chance or any type of change. There were no inner-city transformations like Fitzroy or Brunswick in Melbourne or Surry Hills in Sydney because there was no inner city. It was all planned suburbs connected by freeways and roundabouts and single shopping strips.

"Canberra's biggest failure is that it is designed around a car," says Nectar Efkaripidis, co-director of the

Molonglo Group, the company behind the New Acton development, which has been a game-changer for the capital. "If you build suburbs where the only way to connect people to social locations is to get into a car and drive down freeways, you don't interact with anyone. You wake up in the morning and you live in your own private property, you get into the bubble of a car and go down the street — where are the connections with other human beings? You don't have any of what makes inner-city living so rich. When you are in Brunswick (in Melbourne's inner north), you walk down the street to get a tram, you engage with a human being even if it is only standing at the traffic lights or getting a coffee. These are priceless experiences that build connections between human beings. You didn't have them in Canberra until they started to build inner-city density."

Efkaripidis, an architect, was convinced by his brother Jonathan to return home to the family business in 2004 after spending a decade in London. Their father had bought a former government site sandwiched between Canberra's CBD and Lake Burley Griffin with the aim of turning it into a mixed-use precinct, with offices, apartments, hotels, cafes, restaurants and bars. It would be something Canberra had not seen before, something you might find in Tokyo or New York or Sydney.

It started in 2008 with one building that had offices, apartments and a cafe, then turning a former hotel for public servants into a hotel, then a hole-in-the-wall espresso bar called Mocan & Green Grot (which also doubles as a hand-made bike shop) in 2011, two restaurants and finally the stunning Nishi building, which houses cinemas, apartments, a government department (it is still Canberra, after all) and the recently opened and universally acclaimed Hotel Hotel.

"What we wanted to do was inject a bit of messiness. It is what we have in the big cities as they layer over a period of time," Efkaripidis tells WISH. "You cannot have the good and the interesting without the grit and messiness, and that requires us to see things that we don't necessarily want or even like but we need to accept them because diversity matters. Without it, we are down a dead road. We need multiple voices, we need multiple environments, we need people's thoughts and ideas. That is what places need and that is what Canberra was lacking because it was defined as a single utopian vision."





MONSTER	LIGHT LUNCH
	12 PM - 5 PM
SALAD	WARMED CHEESE WILD RICE, BLACK BARLEY, 14
CANDIED ALMONDS	ROSE 16
PASTA	FINE ARABBIATTA
FISH	CONTRI MOO OOLABA ALBACORE TUNA 33
	JAMON, TURNIP, RADISH
SANDWICHES	
PORK BELLY	BAHN MI 13
REUBEN	CORNER BEEF SAUERKRAUT, 13
CURRIED EGG	9
SMOK TOSTADA	12
TOMATO PROVOLONE	9
BAVEY JAFFE	18
SAVOURY TART	10





Left: A. Baker café and bakery, with fresh loaves and slow-cooked eggs with cured and smoked salmon belly. Right: Mosaic & Green Grout Espresso Bar with owners David Alcorn and Myles Chandler



Architect Ronan Moss, who designed Westside Acton Park, a pop-up entertainment space constructed from shipping containers on the edge of Lake Burley Griffin, also blames the public service for Canberra's staid history. He says the process-driven mentality of the place meant there was not much opportunity for entrepreneurs to do anything risky, whether in food, fashion, architecture or music. Westside, which is a two-year precursor to a major mixed-use development of the area, was until recently among only a few commercial projects given the go-ahead on the lake despite it being the architectural centre of Canberra. Imagine life being banned from the shores of Sydney Harbour.

"When I was growing up here, basically myself and all my friends left Canberra because there was no opportunity," Moss says. "But I think it is at a point now where enough has happened and there has been the transformation of places like Braddon and New Acton and Westside. So what this is doing is turning it into a place of opportunity. There is a new culture and demographic of people living in Canberra now; they are risk takers and know a lot of what is going on around the world. There is a push by younger entrepreneurs to try and get involved and give ideas a nudge and add to what is an interesting growing culture."

One of the key changes which have allowed entrepreneurs to act on their ideas in the capital was a complete rethink in urban planning by the ACT government. "The approach that typified Canberra's first century was that everything was planned within an inch of its life," Chief Minister Andrew Barr tells WISH. "We

"THAT BIG UNIVERSITY TOWN CULTURE IS KICKING IN NOW, WHICH HAS BEEN GREAT FOR A MORE HIPSTER, BOHEMIAN CULTURE"

now have a little bit more of what I call organised chaos. Less regulation, less red tape and allowing entrepreneurship and a bit of creativity to emerge, and lo and behold, you scratch the surface in this city and it is actually there. The city's population and demographics are quite young, we are the second-youngest city in Australia, so there is a big appetite for this."

Barr says the significant growth of students in the capital — there are 44,000 students across five university campuses in a population of almost 400,000 — has helped provide consumers for the growing food, wine and arts scene. There are also more people living in Canberra's CBD ("We cannot keep spreading out as we will cross the NSW border soon, so the city has to grow up") which has meant moving away from the traditional Canberra swath

of suburbia and into high-density living. "That big university town culture is kicking in now, which has been great for the creative arts and for a more hipster, bohemian culture — basically anything but the grey-suit public-service approach to life," Barr says. "In order for a city of this size to stand out and differentiate ourselves, we have to be prepared to push boundaries and do things a little bit differently. The conservative image that the city had in its first century is gradually being shrugged off and we are prepared to take a few more risks."

One of those people prepared to take a risk was Alastair Evans, who opened up Lonsdale Street Roasters on Lonsdale Street in the fringe city suburb of Braddon in 2010 after Barr rezoned the area in 2008. What started as a coffee roaster and a café in an old diving shop turned out to be a game-changer for the street, the suburb and Canberra itself. It was arguably the first inner-city café in the capital: there was a barista who actually cared about coffee, milk crates to sit out on out the front, fixie bikes hanging from the ceilings, hipsters aplenty and even a queue on a Saturday morning.

"It was 80-hour weeks," recalls the café's head chef and now co-owner, Paul Hutt, of the opening. "My wife would finish her work and come and help me make sandwiches at night and then we would do it all again the next morning at 6am. Every day just got busier and busier, the music got louder and louder. I remember we didn't want to open Saturday and then we opened Saturdays until 12pm and then people complained and then it was 1pm, then 2pm, then 3pm and then we would be back there on our day off on Sunday."



Alastair Evans and Paul Hutt, top right, are the co-owners of Lonsdale St Roasters, arguably Canberra's first genuine inner-city café

Five years on and Lonsdale Street is unrecognisable. What used to be an industrial strip of car yards is now filled with cafes, new apartments, vintage clothing shops, art markets, and even a collection of food vans in a former Beaurepaires depot — Peruvian street food, old-school milkshakes and cold-drip coffee are just a sample. Lonsdale Street Roasters has opened up a second venue a few hundred metres up the road. “The transformation is massive,” says Hutt. “It is unbelievable now. The cafes on the street have literally increased 10-fold.”

Hutt, who is from Auckland but has lived all over, says Canberra has a “very similar vibe” to Portland, Oregon (satirised for its hipsterdom in the comedy *Portlandia*). He says Lonsdale Street Roasters and Evans are also part of Stomping Ground Collective, a group of restaurateurs, architects and developers keen to help transform Canberra. One of their first projects, in conjunction with the ACT government, was Westside Acton Park, which opened in January and has hosted foodie markets, music festivals and street basketball. It is also home to the first rooftop bar overlooking the lake in the capital.

“We wanted to try and set up interesting spaces and create new ideas for the city. Sort of a feel-good collective,” says Moss, who is also part of the group. “It is made up of friends who are frustrated and interested in the city. One of the frustrations of Canberra is that you see its potential but it seems to be moving slowly. A big problem is population — it only has 400,000 people — it is the same size as Wollongong. It has a big national profile, architectural presence with the parliamentary triangle, but there aren’t actually that many people living here.”

“CANBERRA HAS ITS OWN UNIQUE THING GOING ON. PEOPLE JUST NEED TO COME AND TAKE A CLOSER LOOK”

Another person instrumental to the evolving Canberra food scene is Sean McConnell. The former Melbourne chef moved to the capital for family reasons in 2003. His first impressions were not great. “There wasn’t a lot going on,” he says of that time. “There were a handful of good restaurants and a lot of restaurants doing exactly the same thing — basically what Melbourne and Sydney restaurants were doing to years ago. Food had been changing and growing in popularity across the world, particularly in Australia, and I just think Canberra was just lagging behind. That lag has become smaller and smaller and at the moment, I don’t think there is one. And I think it has a lot to do with a few hospitality people who are driven and realising the potential of Canberra.”

McConnell first met Ekarpidis while he was working

for Silo Bakery in Kingston (one of the better eateries south of the lake) and agreed to head the kitchen at the growing Mocan & Green Grouit in New Acton. Next was Monster, the restaurant and bar at Hotel Hotel, which opened last year to critical acclaim and a full house. He says he wanted to get away from the reputation Canberra had for overpriced food as well as traditional hotel fare (there is not a breakfast buffet in sight).

“The whole idea behind Monster is that it is non-exclusive. Most days if you look around, you will see university students in one corner, you will see residents of the precinct as well as guests of the hotel rubbing shoulders with politicians and locals. That was the main concept behind it,” McConnell says. “I was asked to produce a menu that didn’t exclude anyone. We didn’t want to take it too seriously. We are obviously incredibly passionate about what we do but there is no fussiness to it, there is no smoke and mirrors, it is just good food.”

So Canberra has changed. There are options for a Friday night that don’t involve a trip to the airport. But is it cool enough to warrant a visit from other cities?

“Canberra has its own unique thing going on,” says architect Moss. “People just need to come and take a closer look.” Expat *New York Times* writer Emma Pearce agrees. “I’ve quite recently evolved from an ashamed Canberra native,” she admits to WISH. “It is still a weird, weird place but that is part of its charm. There is a lot of stuff going on both underground and government-backed. I used to do everything in my power to avoid having to go back when I came back to Australia for Christmas or whatever — not any more.” **W**