

BRISBANE'S FRESH FACE

A flourish of hip new hotels, dining spots and micro-bars sees Queensland's once-dismissed capital on course to become one of Australia's coolest cities.

BY JENNY HEWETT

IT'S NOWHERE near after dark when I rock up to a converted warehouse in Brisbane's once-gritty nightlife 'hood of Fortitude Valley for a drink. At midday the scene here feels wholesomely irreverent, even in its urban context. A vintage wine press in the courtyard has attracted a crowd, watching curiously as fermented grape juice pours out of taps into vats below. Farther inside, lunchers natter over glasses of Grenache and plates of roasted organic Wagyu beef. "Today, we're pressing Fiano," says Kris Cush of the working inner-city micro-winery and wine-bar City Winery, which she runs with her enologist husband Dave. Fiano, a classical vine originally from southern Italy, is among the unusual grapes the couple sources from across Australia to turn into wine here in what was once the seedy underbelly of this subtropical city. "We had this idea to bring the winemaker to the people," she says, reaching for a bottle.

Clockwise from top: Zipping around the city; the skyline over the Brisbane River; Hellenika poolside yums.



In what seems like a parallel evolutionary process, over the last few years, Brisbane has been undergoing its own metamorphosis. Despite being only half the size of Sydney or Melbourne, with a population of slightly more than 2.5 million, Queensland's "big country town" capital is emerging as a cool and cultured hub with a sprinkling of new boutique urban resorts and a thriving arts, dining and rooftop-bar scene. The A\$71-million redevelopment of the heritage-listed Howard Smith Wharves, now an entertainment and lifestyle precinct, and the gentrification of Brisbane's inner-city suburbs, including Fortitude Valley AKA "the Valley," New Farm and West End, has revived the city into a rad riverside metropolis with plenty of personality.

But it wasn't always so. As is the case with many of my fellow Aussies, the term "Brisvegas" has been ingrained in my native vernacular since I was old enough to speak slang. Admittedly, I never quite understood why we considered Australia's third-largest city to be a dupe. Further research suggests that the nickname was coined in rebuttal to the city's non-existent nightlife, but it has little leg to stand on these days. Brisbane is far from bland; in fact, it's buzzing. And most refreshingly, this balmy city is not trying to be anything but itself. Central to this is its willingness to own its downfalls, one of which seems downright "un-Australian." Despite

having an annual average of "300 days of sunshine a year," as the tourism board likes to tout, Brisbane lacks the enviable beaches that many of its sister cities around the country so proudly flaunt. But after checking into one of the town's newest boutique stays, The Calile, I couldn't care less about the surf scene.

With its warm, luminous palette of sandy beige, blush, dusky rose and gold, complemented with cooler accents of jade and sage, this urban resort gets it right on just about every level. A gilded-seeming, yellow butterfly dances past my face as I float alongside the pool cabanas in the Art Deco-inspired rooftop pool later that afternoon. Even the insects are glowing at this glam oasis in The Valley, which opened the end of 2018—one in a series of new boutique hotels adding oomph to the city. In my room, curved niches, orb-like bulbs and rose-marble tabletops set a contemporary-meets-retro tone. I'm particularly impressed with the tasteful in-built gold-brushed taps dispensing complimentary water in the hall of each level.

In fact, every aspect of this urban resort is carefully considered, from the stylish linen staff uniforms designed by Aussie label Bassike to the color-coordinated, pale-pink *taramosalata* salmon-roe dip at the hotel's upmarket Greek restaurant Hellenika. My meal of Greek salad, chicken livers and French Chablis is made all the more memorable by the French head waiter who has seen that I'm dining solo and shows a genuine interest in making me feel comfortable.

The next morning I set out to explore The Valley on foot. What I begin to notice about this revamped neighborhood is a collective mood among locals to embrace and portray Australian culture in original and nuanced ways. Under a leafy canopy of fig trees, the upmarket James Street precinct has one of the best concentrations



Clockwise from top left: Pretty in pink at The Calile; wine meets charcuterie at City Winery; poolside at The Calile; day drinking at City Winery.



From left: The Fantauzzo; gluten-free goodness from Nodo Donuts; Za Za Ta at Ovolo hotel.

STAY

The Calle

Laidback luxe urban resort with a rooftop pool, cabanas and subtle interiors in the heart of The Valley. thecallehotel.com; doubles from A\$190.

The Fantauzzo

A cliffside hotel with stunning river views and artworks by Australian artist Vincent Fantauzzo. artserieshotels.com.au; doubles from A\$154

EAT + DRINK

City Winery

Inner-city micro winery with tastings, cheese boards and modern Australian cuisine. citywinery.com.au; lunch for two from A\$70.

Hellenika

Home-style Greek dishes of *taramasalata* and *saganaki* served poolside. hellenika.com.au; dinner for two from A\$70.

Honto

Sleek Japanese fine-diner and whisky bar with moody, all-black interiors. honto.com.au; dinner for two from A\$80.

Nodo Donuts

Serves gluten-free donuts and healthy breakfast eats. nododonuts.com; breakfast for two from A\$30.

Yoko Dining

Energetic Japanese *izakaya* on the Howard Smith Wharves. yokodining.com.au; dinner for two from A\$80.

Za Za Ta

Modern Tel Aviv-inspired eatery serving Yemenite bread and grilled lamb. ovolohotels.com; dinner for two from A\$90.

DO

Walk Brisbane

Get your bearings with a guided walking tour themed on arts, cafés, drinking and more. walkbrisbane.com; tours from A\$60. —J.H.



It's time for a change of scene and so the next morning I check into the new Art Series Hotel, The Fantauzzo, which opened last year at Howard Smith Wharves. It has more of a business feel, but boasts superior views of the Brisbane River and the iconic Story Bridge, plus a plethora of dining options literally on the doorstep. The cliffside hotel makes a great base for exploring Brisbane's laneways, something that I've been oblivious to until now. So the next day, I take advantage of one of Brisbane's free walking tours. As we wander up Burnett Lane, giant murals on one side, pavement artworks and small bars on the other, I begin to realize the death of "Brisvegas" as I thought I knew it. Hey, River City, you're all right. I see you. †

of high-end Australian designers I've come across, including Camilla, Zimmermann, and Scanlan & Theodore. On the culinary front, quintessentially Queensland produce such as macadamia nuts and avocado shine in inventive creations (frozen bowl with macadamia granola; crushed avo on a black sesame loaf with baby citrus and goat-milk feta) at Nodo Donuts in nearby Newstead at breakfast.

"When the sun goes down and the lights go up, The Valley has a very different feel," says Lee-Anne Harris, director of Walk Brisbane, as she guides me to her favorite secret drinking spots later that night. Craft breweries are trending worldwide, but the crew behind Soapbox Brewery is onto something clever. The brainchild of two "backyard brewers" who quit their day jobs to pursue their passion, this brewpub in the heart of The Valley is best known for its Biscuit Ale. Inspired by the Iced Vovo, a beloved Australian pink-frosted and coconut-sprinkled biscuit, the beverage has been so popular that they're struggling to keep up with demand. "We did it as an opening beer and it sold out very quickly," says co-owner Scott Robertson.

The next minute, we're off the main strip and walking down a dark and dingy cul-de-sac. Just when I begin to wonder if Lee-Anne is lost, she pushes open a nondescript door to reveal a dark, black-on-black interior with low lighting and the most enticing aromas. This is Honto, Brisbane's newest Japanese fine-dining boasting one hat. Self-confessed whisky nerd and bartender Aidan claims its adjoining XO Bar has the biggest collection of Japanese whisky in Australia. That's up for debate, but one thing is certain: order the lobster *katsu* of *panko* shellfish between slices of crust-less milk bread and you won't regret it.