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HOME / DESTINATIONS / WHERE TO EAT, STAY, AND PLAY IN NELSON, NEW ZEALAND

Where to Eat, Stay, and Play in Nelson, New Zealand

A compact city with big creative energy—and record-breaking sunshine—Nelson is a gateway to golden beaches, lush vineyards, and some of New Zealand's best outdoor adventures.

BY DAN Q. DAO | PUBLISHED: FEB 26, 2025 11:08 AM UTC | 6 MIN READ



Kaiteriteri Nelson. Credit: Miles Holden

Nestled between the Tasman Bay and the Southern Alps, Nelson is one of **New Zealand's** sunniest cities, boasting over 2,400 hours of sunshine per year—a perfect setting for its thriving indie arts community, boutique breweries and wineries, and world-class outdoor adventure tourism.

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Founded in 1841, Nelson is also the oldest city on New Zealand's South Island. The city is home to the geographical "Center of New Zealand," a scenic hilltop viewpoint that was once utilized for the country's early land surveys. Though small enough to explore on foot or by bike, the Nelson area is surrounded by dramatic natural landscapes—from the golden beaches of Kaiteriteri to the rugged, forested mountains of Abel Tasman National Park.

To get to Nelson, take any of the daily domestic flights from Auckland, Wellington, and Christchurch. If you prefer a scenic road trip, it's a five-hour drive from Christchurch, or you can take the ferry from Wellington to Picton, followed by a picturesque drive through the Marlborough Sounds.

The best time to visit is during New Zealand's summer peak season from December to February, with longer days ideal for kayaking, hiking, and beach-hopping. If you prefer fewer crowds, visit in New Zealand's spring, when the vineyards are blooming. And for beer lovers, Nelson holds another claim to fame—it's the birthplace of New Zealand's craft beer movement and the only region where hops are commercially grown.

Ready to plan your trip to Nelson? We've got you covered with recommendations for where to stay, eat, and play.

Where to Stay



Pihopa Retreat

The only five-star resort in Nelson, Pihopa Retreat offers unparalleled privacy and tranquility. In the 19th century, the estate was the residence of the Anglican Bishop of Nelson. Lovingly restored by the current owners, the hotel's six suites all feature private terraces, fireplaces, marble bathrooms with a deep soaking tub, and views of the sprawling private gardens. Upon arrival, guests are greeted with local wine and cheese, while breakfast is made-to-order each morning and served in the former chapel building on premise.

Te Koi The Lodge

Perched on a secluded peninsula along the Waimea Estuary, Te Koi Lodge is an intimate, design-forward retreat with floor-to-ceiling windows and views over the Tasman Bay. Guests can enjoy oysters and Sauvignon Blanc on the terrace, followed by a chef-prepared dinner using local seafood and organic produce. It's a short drive from Mapua, making it an ideal base for exploring the region's wineries.

Where to Eat & Drink



Kiwi Spirit Distillery

Taste Tasman Tour with Wine, Art & Wilderness

The best way to explore Nelson's food scene? Book a private tour with the aptly-named **Wine, Art & Wilderness**, which will take you to boutique wineries, artisan cheesemakers, and local craft breweries. Their standout Meet the Makers experience includes private tastings with winemakers, plus the option to pair local wines with handmade chocolates or oysters fresh from the bay. Many of the wineries in the area double as art galleries or retail shops for local artisanal goods.

Māpua Wharf

Located about 30 minutes by car from Nelson but still in the Tasman region, Māpua Wharf is a coastal district known for its boutique shops, waterfront restaurants, and relaxed seaside atmosphere. The wharf is a popular stop along the Great Taste Trail cycling route, making it a great day trip from Nelson for those looking to enjoy seafood, craft beer, and scenic views over the estuary.

The Apple Shed Kitchen & Bar

Housed in a one-time fruit storage shed on Māpua Wharf, The Apple Shed serves farm-to-table New Zealand cuisine with a focus on seasonal produce, fresh seafood, and local wine. The menu changes often, but highlights include mussels in white wine, crispy pork belly with tamarillo chutney, and grilled catch-of-the-day fish. The restaurant's outdoor deck overlooks the estuary, making it an idyllic spot for a long lunch with a bottle of local Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc.

Eddyline Brewery & Pizzeria

Founded by a pair of Colorado expats, the sustainability-centric Eddyline Brewery specializes in West Coast-style IPAs, lagers, and stouts. The brewery originally started in New Mexico, but moved to Nelson when its owners, Mic and Molley Heynekamp, relocated their family to New Zealand. An ode to their home, the food menu leans Mexican, with taco salads, birria tacos, and nachos loaded with local cheese—perfect for pairing with a cold pint of their signature Colorado State of Mind IPA.

Kiwi Spirit Distillery

A two-hour drive from Nelson proper in Golden Bay, Kiwi Spirit Distillery specializes in small-batch New Zealand craft spirits made with pure local ingredients and no artificial additives. The distillery is known for producing organic gin, rum, vodka, and the uniquely New Zealand-made TeKiwi—a tequila-inspired creation made from 100% Blue Agave spirit.

Where to Play



Helicopters Nelson

Explore Tasman's Great Taste Trail with The Gentle Cycling Company

Skip the car and easily explore Nelson's vineyards and countryside by e-bike. **The Gentle Cycling Company** offers a self-guided route along the Great Taste Trail—where you'll pass wineries, hop gardens, and seaside villages. Stop for wine tastings, a farm-to-table lunch, and a quick dip in the bay. Tours range from one-day trips to three-day adventures.

Take a helicopter tour with Helicopters Nelson

See Nelson and the surrounding region from the sky with one of the private helicopter tours from the acclaimed **Helicopters Nelson**. The Abel Tasman Explorer takes you on a 30-minute journey over turquoise waters, golden beaches, and hidden coves, showcasing one of New Zealand's most stunning coastal landscapes. Meanwhile, if fine dining is more your style, the Wine & Dine Experience lands you at exclusive vineyards for a private tasting and lunch.

Catch some sun and surf on Nelson's beaches

For a beach day, Nelson offers a few options—best enjoyed during the summer months from December to February—though some remain swimmable year-round. **Tahunanui Beach**, located close to the city, is a popular choice with calm waters and a family-friendly vibe. A short drive away, **Rabbit Island** boasts long stretches of golden sand, shaded picnic areas, and cycling trails.

Explore the Abel Tasman National Park

Though it's New Zealand's smallest national park, Abel Tasman offers plenty of adventure. One of the best ways to discover it is a kayak or boat tour that will take you past secluded coves, dramatic granite cliffs, and the occasional sunbathing seal. For those who prefer to explore on foot, the park includes a trail—one of New Zealand's Great Walks—that winds through dense forests, golden-sand beaches, and panoramic coastal viewpoints. Finally, if you feel like taking a swim, opt for the clear waters at Anchorage Bay with potential dolphin-spotting near Tonga Island Marine Reserve.

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How New Zealand Chefs are Charting a Course for the World's Most Dynamic Fusion Cuisine

What exactly is New Zealand cuisine? From fire-cooked feasts to foraged delicacies, the country's best chefs are shaping a bold, evolving food culture that resists definition.

BY DAN Q DAO | PUBLISHED: MAR 19, 2025 10:41 AM UTC | 9 MIN READ



Under the stars and snow-capped peaks of Castle Hill village near Christchurch, we gathered for a feast prepared by acclaimed New Zealand chef **Ben Bayly** of Auckland's **Ahi**. At this "star-grazing" event, hosted by Tourism **New Zealand** with the local iwi, or tribe, Bayly showcased local bounties—pāua abalone, muttonbird, kawakawa herb—cooking some over an open flame, and others underground in a hāngī, the traditional Māori earth oven that infuses food with the smoky essence of the land itself.

It was an experience that told the story of Aotearoa through aroma and taste. Still, one question kept surfacing throughout the night: *What exactly is **New Zealand food**?* Indeed, unlike other more tightly defined heritages bound by centuries-old rules, New Zealand's cuisine resists classification. Rather, it's a mix of the indigenous Māori foodways layered with a myriad of outside influences—all evolving within the constraints and opportunities of the island's remote geography.

"Our location has become our greatest asset," explains Bayly, an eighth-generation New Zealander of Pākehā, or European, heritage. "Nestled in the middle of nowhere, we are surrounded by a stunningly beautiful country where our cuisine is being born right before our eyes, which is liberating as we're not hemmed in by rules of tradition."



Courtesy of Ben Bayly

That's not to say history hasn't played a crucial role. New Zealand's legacy as a British colony from 1841 to 1907 has undoubtedly shaped its food culture. It was during this time that agricultural practices such as dairy and sheep farming were introduced, shifting traditional Māori food systems. Later waves of immigration brought Chinese, Indian, and Pasifika communities, whose culinary traditions have likewise become woven into the rich fabric of local ingredients.

"New Zealand cuisine embodies the essence of its land and sea, showcasing a vibrant array of fresh, locally sourced ingredients," says **Haylee-Chanel Simeon**, the Māori chef-owner of **Hayz @ The Anchorage** in Bluff. "This culinary tapestry is enriched by a unique fusion of Māori, Pacific, and European influences, resulting in dishes that are both authentic and innovative."

Today, New Zealand cuisine is still coming into its own—led by a new vanguard of chefs notably of all different backgrounds and practices. For these culinary innovators, the task is not just to cook but to define, articulate, and push forward what New Zealand food can be.

Of Craft and Terroir

In the food world, conversations surrounding New Zealand cuisine centre on the wealth of its *terroir*. Indeed, New Zealand's diverse geography, from lush forests to rugged coastlines, provides an ideal environment for farming and foraging, shaping the country's rich *terroir*. With abundant sunshine, volcanic soil, and coastal influence, its fertile lands have given rise to a new generation of craft suppliers, fueling the evolution of modern New Zealand cuisine.

"We grow the best lamb and have the finest seafood, and our cuisine is all about letting these ingredients shine," Bayly says. "The greatest heroes in my restaurant are the suppliers who provide us with these exceptional ingredients, allowing us to highlight what makes our country so special."

For some, the connection to the land goes beyond sourcing—it becomes the foundation of their restaurant's philosophy. Giulio Sturla, originally from Chile, arrived in New Zealand over a decade ago and quickly became one of its most passionate advocates. Today, he's the visionary behind **Mapu**, an experimental kitchen in Lyttelton near Christchurch, where he crafts intimate tasting menus using produce grown on-site, alongside foraged and locally sourced ingredients. Through his initiative **Eat New Zealand**, he has also helped elevate New Zealand cuisine on the global stage.

"I have been growing food since I arrived in Ōtautahi, Christchurch and that's how our menu is created," Sturla reveals. "Eighty-five percent of our own garden is served in our menu at any given time. I understand that my work as a chef is more towards preserving the seasons at its best of flavours and ripeness for the future rather than using it right away."

This *terroir* is far from singular and homogenous. All across New Zealand, each region offers distinct flavours shaped by its climate, geography, and Indigenous food traditions. For example, the South Island's alpine regions produce some of the country's finest wild game, mushrooms, and cool-climate fruits, while the surrounding coastal waters are rich with Bluff oysters and *pāua*.

"New Zealand's small size belies its vast biodiversity, which is reflected in our flora, fauna, and varied microclimates across different regions," says **Sam Low**, the Auckland-based Chinese-Fijian chef and winner of *MasterChef New Zealand*. "This diversity results in a wide range of flavours, meaning the food you cook can taste entirely different depending on where you are and the local ingredients available."

And that's not to mention the vast and diverse world of New Zealand wine, which represents the unique *terroir* of regions like Marlborough, Central Otago, and Hawke's Bay—each with distinct soil compositions, climates, and varietals that shape the final product.

"If you look at our New Zealand wine story, it has been told so well that people overseas recognise New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc as fantastic," Bayly notes.

The Role of Cultural Storytelling



Courtesy of Tourism New Zealand

As New Zealand cuisine has evolved, storytelling has become central to how chefs connect their food to culture, history, and identity. According to **Monique Fiso**, the Wellington-based Māori-Samoan chef and author, it was her own personal story that influenced her decision to become a chef.

"From a young age I've been drawn to kitchens," she says. "I understood early on that *kai* (food) can tell you a lot about a person or a place. The *kai* I make is directly influenced by my identity and *whakapapa* (genealogy). I love to be able to express myself this way."

Simeon agrees, adding that her Māori heritage plays a significant role in shaping her approach to cooking, particularly through the emphasis on fresh, locally sourced ingredients. She cites the Māori concept of *manaakitanga*, or hospitality, as well as the broader responsibility of *Kaitiaki*, the guardianship of the land and sea.

"We celebrate the land and sea by embracing locally sourced ingredients and minimising waste," she explains. "Our commitment to sustainability is evident in how we create a rich stock base for our seafood chowder, utilising fish frames and vegetable trimmings—traditional practices passed down from my mother, grandparents, and generations before them."

According to Simeon, storytelling also enriches her customer's dining experiences. She cites the history behind *karengo*, a Māori delicacy of red seaweed known for its exceptionally high mineral content—up to twenty times that of land-grown plants. Once harvested and cleaned, *karengo* undergoes a careful pickling process using sugar, spices, and vinegar before being left to mature, allowing its distinct flavours to fully develop.



Courtesy of Monique Fiso

"When we serve *karengo*, we take the opportunity to share its origins, the significance of each ingredient, and the ways it has evolved through time," she says. "This narrative invites diners to appreciate not just the flavours before them, but also the culture interwoven within the dish."

This ethos extends to other cherished ingredients like muttonbird, or *fīfī*, as well as traditional cooking methods, namely the *hāngī* earth oven. Considered one of the most iconic forms of Māori cooking, *hāngī* imparts a distinct smoky, earthy, and umami-forward flavour as the food—often meats, seafood, and root vegetables—is wrapped and placed over heated stones before being buried underground to patiently steam for several hours.

"At Ahi, we have Rewi Spraggon, our *hāngī* master, who speaks of his ancestors from hundreds of years ago, and Ron Bull, who shares stories about muttonbird and his family's lineage," Bayly says. "Their deep connections to their heritage are inspiring. The same burrows used for muttonbird have been used by his ancestors for generations."

A Dynamic Future

While deeply rooted in tradition, New Zealand's culinary landscape continues to evolve, shaped by both heritage and modern influences. Fiso describes the country's cuisine as "on a journey of exploration," driven by a renewed appreciation for traditional ingredients and techniques, paired with an increasingly diverse population and a contemporary perspective.

"There are pockets of people across the *motu* (country) doing incredible things in the culinary space," she says. "We have a renewed appreciation for traditional ingredients and techniques coupled with a diverse population and a modern lens. It's an exciting time."

For Low, New Zealand's multicultural fabric plays a crucial role in shaping its modern food scene, particularly in cities like Auckland, where a large Chinese community has influenced the availability of key ingredients.



Courtesy of Tourism New Zealand

"Community also plays a significant role in shaping our cuisine," he explains. "For example, I predominantly cook modern Chinese food, and the larger Chinese population in the North Island, particularly Auckland, influences the availability of specific ingredients. Asian grocers and market growers cater to these communities, making certain produce more accessible."

Low showcased his cultural heritage on *MasterChef* with a dish that fused his Chinese upbringing with New Zealand ingredients. For his first course, he prepared a Cantonese congee elevated with a locally inspired *pāua* XO sauce that involved mincing *pāua* and combining it with dried sausage, ginger, onion, and garlic to create a topping. Served alongside soft *pau* and a century egg, the dish was a reflection of both his roots and the culinary influences that shaped him.

"The *pāua*, a key ingredient in New Zealand, pays homage to my roots, while the congee, a comfort food from my childhood, represents my parents' lineage—it's like home in a bowl," he explains. "This dish is a perfect blend of tradition and innovation, reflecting my journey and the ingredients available to me."

Back at Castle Hill, as the fire crackled and the last plates were cleared, the night's conversation hadn't necessarily answered the question of what New Zealand cuisine is. But maybe that was never the point. New Zealand cuisine is not something to be "defined" but rather experienced in layers. The chefs here are not just cooking—they're writing its future through their own experiences.

"Everyone's individual stories create pockets of absolute magic," says Bayly. "It's not just one person creating our cuisine; everyone is contributing, and it's incredible to see the innovative ideas people come up with."