



## INTRODUCTION

### ***He aha te mea nui o te ao***

*What is the most important thing in the world?*

### ***He tangata, he tangata, he tangata***

*It is the people, it is the people, it is the people*

MAORI PROVERB

WELLINGTON IS, without a doubt, defined by its geographical location. Physical, ancient, shaped by Maori myth and legend, moving mountains and the sea, unsteady, built on a fault-line. It is dangerous, like a sleeping Taniwha, ready to be woken. The story goes that the demi god Maui pulled up Wellington 'The head of the fish' with his mighty fish hook. As a child, I was told this, wide eyed, by books in reading time at school.

On the other hand, the internet is vast and unknowable, unable to be defined by location or space. It is endless, full of stories and secrets (and, apparently, cats on skateboards). You cannot go there, you can only be online. You can be anyone. On the internet, no one knows you're a dog. And yet everyone wants to be famous. It is addictive, revolutionising and all absorbing.

Wellington and the internet: These are the two cultural and geographical forces which have shaped my lifetime.

The Residents is a project I began five years ago to harness my love of words and my experience as a born and bred millennial Wellingtonian. I've shared 200 peoples' stories, as well as my own journey growing up in my twenties in the small city at the end of the world where I was born.

Wellington is a town that defies expectation. Yes, it's the capital of New Zealand, but so much more than just politicians and public servants; It's business owners; shoe repair shop owners; tattooists; restaurateurs; hollywood filmmakers; musicians; artists. The stories of the residents of Wellington are what make this bit of land, the fishhead of Maui, a living, breathing city.

Over the last 10 years, our newspapers and news stories online have become more nationalised. Often, the good people creating and doing good work in the community is missed because it isn't seen to be of national importance. While I know that this is because our journalists have to work harder, with less resources, when I started The Residents it seemed to me like there was a place to write about the small successes of local businesses and creatives who would provide inspiration to Wellingtonians like me.

From the beginning, my focus for *The Residents* was to interview creative, trail-blazing and entrepreneurial people on my blog to find out what made them tick, and how they lived. Many Wellingtonians have lived more than one life - even a thousand. I'd stand behind a little old lady in a pashmina with purple eyebrows and a thick grey bob and wonder who she was. An art critic? A show-girl? A diplomat? Wellington always seemed the perfect city. It has a rich, vibrant cast of characters - people with interesting lives, eclectic style, and colourful places.

Along the way, while writing my blog and this book, there have been false starts, self doubt and plenty of mistakes made. Regardless, I am proud of what this space online, and this book represents. It is about holding people up and allowing them visibility as inspiration for our community. It is about being able to know what is going on in our city and who is behind the quirky magic of the capital. While these local heroes are not representative of the entire, wider city as a whole, from every single walk of life and every ethnic group (to capture all these stories, I'd need ten thousand books) they're the people who have started something bold, created a movement, or weren't afraid to take some risks. I've also chosen people who have an enviable aesthetic, and who's house/studio/world I'd want to live in.

The result is a unique photographic collection and written record of the weird, quirky, kind and creative lives of a handful of people from Wellington that have made the city their own, and grown, either by starting something here or returning home. I wanted to give the reader a sneak peek into the behind the scenes of their lives, beyond the shop front or restaurant floor. As such, you'll find spaces in the book you've likely never seen before, including our residents of Wellingtons' living rooms, studios, bedrooms, kitchens and gardens.

It is divided into five chapters: Foodies, Arts, Public Service, Small Business and Fashion. While there are so many other sides to the city, this is the version of Wellington through my eyes. These five parts have all been inspiring for me as a local, and are what I think makes Wellington different and unique from other cities in New Zealand, and the world.

I believe that anyone has the right in this day and age to tell their story, and *The Residents* not only gave me the confidence to share the stories of others but also to share mine. Creation and publication is possible in a way never previously available in human history; most of us have the tools at our disposal - a laptop and a cell phone. Imagine what Katherine Mansfield, Robin Hyde or CK Stead would have done if only they'd been able to blog? As such, I've discovered that the only thing that stands in my way of starting something. It is usually me.

Wellington's talent per capita rivals that of London, New York or Paris. No one tells us what to do, or how high we should set our sights, or what to value.

In Wellington, I've learned, almost anything is possible.

One positive thing it has brought back to front of mind for me is how lucky I am to be a resident of Wellington and to know the residents of my home town as I do. As we see our local businesses struggle to put themselves back together the best that they can

as COVID 19 continues to shake the world-order, I continue to look to them as role models of resilience, strength and humility. This book is about the residents of Wellington. But it is also about finding a place in life where you can be happy where you are and trust that the world has put you exactly where you can best serve.

*The Residents: Starting, and ending with me and you.*



## GEORGE FOWLER

*Hugo Grrrl*

GEORGE FOWLER, BETTER KNOWN by the stage name Hugo Grrrl, is a New Zealand drag king, comedian and cabaret producer. He was the first drag king and first trans man to compete on a drag reality show, winning the inaugural season of House of Drag. We met at George's flat in Aro Valley.

*"He just fell out of me one day. I started fooling around in front of my mirror and out popped this strange clown figure. He came to life."*

On a Saturday night in the Te Aro precinct, you'll find a flamboyant cabaret staging something extraordinary. With a smear of glue stick, some glitter, tit tape and a seriously strong wig, larger-than-life queens and kings entertain. They effortlessly work the crowd to the beats of Britney, Christina and Cher. Bars regularly transform into drag races. Coloured feathers dance on the pavement. Glitter twinkles. Welcome to the Wellington drag scene.

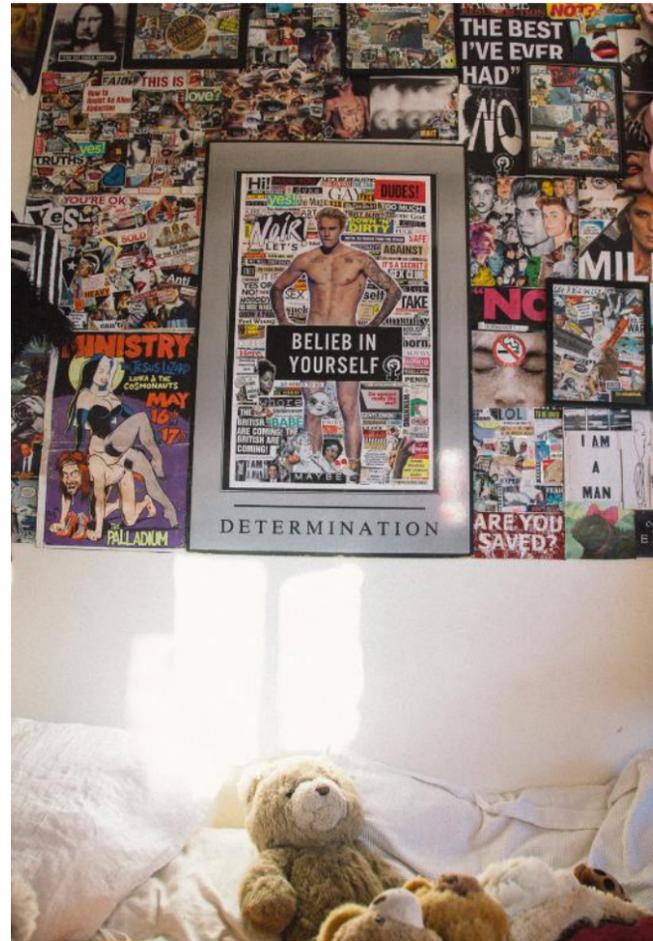
No one embodies the spirit of the scene better than George Fowler, 29, also known as Hugo Grrrl. George and his peers stand on the shoulders of giants who came before: Carmen and the Topp Twins, and institutions such as Scotty & Mal's. "I love this city and have thrived here because of the way art works in Wellington," George says. He's sitting on a computer chair in his sunny flat on quirky Aro Street. The walls of his bedroom are covered floor to ceiling with smutty art and show costumes. Over the window hangs a coat made entirely of teddy bears. "We have two drag venues – Fringe Bar and Ivy Bar – which have very few barriers to entry; anyone can run the shows, and anyone can be on stage. Getting stage time as a niche performer is possible. In Wellington, a dozen things are happening every night. The hustle is real here to be the biggest and most sparkly show."

George was born in Christchurch. Despite coming out as gay when he was 19, and moving to Wellington "for the gay bars" and to study theatre, he found things did not come easily. After graduating, he started drinking heavily and became more and more unhappy with himself. "I wanted to be creating art, and I wasn't."

Then Hugo came along.

Hugo Grrrl is a male drag creation who performs in a cabaret line-up. He's often a ringmaster or a Boy Scout, twirling his most distinguishing feature – an impeccably groomed moustache. "It's a genuine alter ego," George explains. "He just fell out of me one day. I started fooling around in front of my mirror and out popped this strange clown figure. He came to life."

In spite of initial suspicion from the existing drag scene, George began to perform. He made people laugh, and soon word spread. People came from all over to see his twisted, cartoonish shows. Soon he started producing. He created everything



from traditional drag shows to feminist poetry nights. Eventually, he decided to quit his bar job and focus solely on building a career in event management and drag. Following George's path, other drag kings started to perform. Now there is a small yet solid scene of Wellington drag kings – thanks to George and Hugo.

George thinks Wellington is a smart, liberal city, and that's why it's such a great place to perform. "We have tough conversations about diversity and the arts. There are spaces to do what I do. So many people from here are making their jobs, paths and making their art – being a self-starter and true to yourself are things I associate heavily with being from Wellington. My family centres around the people I work with, perform with and craft with; to know me is to work with me. I'm always working. When people tell me after gigs, 'You're so Wellington,' or, 'This is the shit that makes Wellington great,' it makes me emotional."

It wasn't until 2018 that George discovered the missing pieces of the puzzle and came out as a trans man shortly before giving up alcohol. The result was transformative. "Life is so much brighter now. When I came out, I also went sober. Those processes were very interconnected. I needed to be honest about who I am. So hello, I'm a man, and I'm an alcoholic."

A year sober and going strong, George was approached on Instagram by the producers of TVNZ's House of Drag. He was initially reluctant to join the cast. "I thought it could go wrong in so many ways. But being a drag king is my job. I would never turn down the opportunity to perform on a huge stage." Ten days after George's casting was confirmed, filming began. It was a gruelling process. "It's full-on psychological warfare. You don't get meaningful rest. I lost about five kilograms in a week."

George brought every costume he'd ever made to the show. They're laid out in his room now: some twinkly, some slutty and each with a story to tell. "Each challenge I thought I was going home, so I wore my best clothes first. By the end, sequins were popping off."

Against all odds, as the only king in the house, George won. Was he on top of the world? Not quite. "I felt terrible. But it wasn't surprising. I often feel bad when my shows end. I feel like I've been indulgent and enjoyed myself, and it gives me terrible guilt." He had to remind himself how hard he'd worked to get to where he was. "As cripplingly insecure as I am, I felt in many ways I deserved to win."

George used the ten thousand dollar prize money to fund his production company, Hugo Grrrl's Gigs. Since then, he's created new work opportunities like going to the United States to perform. Yet he is most grateful for his experience of coming out as trans in Wellington. "It could have turned out differently in a different place. Wellington as a city, on the whole, is liberal and accepting. There is the culture here that you can be who you are. That phrase isn't as trivial as it sounds: being who you are is difficult for some people. For some, letting your freak flag fly is complicated. I'm one of them. But it can be life-saving. Being in an accepting city is crucial for me being able to sort my shit out. I might not ever have come out if I lived somewhere else."





## MARC WEIR

### *Loretta*

MARC WEIR IS THE OWNER OF LORETTA. He has run multiple restaurants and cafes, including Floriditas, also on Cuba Street. He lives with his husband in Brooklyn.

*“I pinch myself every day that I own something like this. It’s my dream restaurant. I come in here when it’s closed, and I look around, and I think, ‘God, how did I get here?’”*

We’re in Marc Weir’s Brooklyn garden. It sits behind the narrow two-storey villa that the restaurateur owns, set high in the hills overlooking Wellington harbour. The owner of Loretta is taking me on a tour of his charmingly overgrown herb planters. “I don’t do weeding,” he admits.

Herbs are Marc’s thing, particularly with liberal pasta and olive oil. He has put plants at the centre of his plate for a long time. “My business card says ‘closet vegetarian’. When most people cook for others, they start with the protein and then add the vegetables. I start with the plants and then go from there.” As we walk through the vegetable patch, two cats slink provocatively through clusters of parsley and dill. Marc gestures to the neighbouring property, which he and his husband also own and let out. “One day, we’ll bring the two properties together,” he muses, looking into the distance. “Just not yet. When I have more time.”

Time is a luxury for Marc. One of Wellington’s most popular restaurants, Loretta (like Marc’s weekly schedule) is consistently full. Marc is on the floor five days a week, his stoic face usually underlined by a gondolier-style tee, asking, “How many?” before whisking you through the restaurant to your table.

He attributes his success with Loretta to hard work. By consistently delivering excellent service and quality fresh ingredients, Marc has introduced Wellingtonians to a new way of eating based on putting vegetables at the heart of the dish. Loretta is one of the best restaurants not just in the capital but in New Zealand, awarded a coveted hat award by Cuisine magazine in 2018, and listed as one of their best restaurants in 2019.

Marc’s 30-year career has been defined by his ability to foster long-term loyalty, from both himself and his employees, in a famously transient industry. “Before we opened Floriditas, I really only had two major jobs in my life, each for eight years. Today’s management team – Tanase, Erin and Milan – have worked at Loretta for eight years, which is unheard of in hospitality in New Zealand. Working in the business every day means I get the respect of my staff. I’ve got a powerful team. Not putting myself on a pedestal, but the fact they’ve worked for me for so long says something.”

Marc’s desire for consistency and quality, in his home, food and business, could be attributed to the challenges he faced growing up. Born in Auckland, he was cooking

from an early age. His first food memory involves cooking French toast for his parents. “It was on electric hobs in the 1970s. I had burn marks on my wrists because I couldn’t quite reach the stovetop.” Marc and his mother, an accountant, moved to Wellington when he was 12 because his parents split (his brother decided to stay in Auckland with his father, a mechanic). Marc struggled with coming out at school in the macho environment of ’80s New Zealand. “Growing up gay in 1980 was pretty tough. It wasn’t unusual, but just different.” He was close to his mother, and together the pair would hang out on Cuba Street to pass time. “When I was 15, I was a bit of a Johnny-no-friends. I remember that Mum and I used to sit on a Friday night on Cuba Mall and people-watch in the car. Then we’d go to the Farmers café because their food was half price on Friday nights and Mum was a solo parent. Way back then, 30 years ago, I would never have imagined that I would own a restaurant on Cuba Street.”

After graduating from Newlands College, Marc immediately began teacher training, receiving his first placement at Newlands Intermediate. “The worst two weeks of my life.” He dropped out and decided to go back to hospitality, an industry he’d worked in during college, even though teaching might have seemed like the more sensible path. “I think coming out was more important to me in those years than a career.”

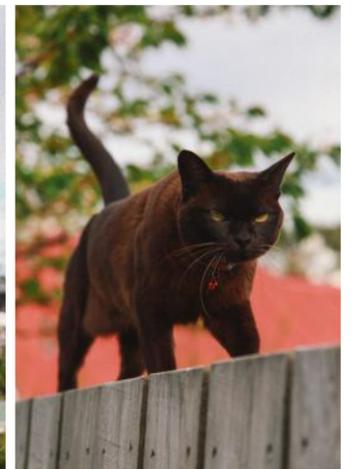
To make ends meet, Marc got a job at a hotel atop Ngauranga Gorge. “I put on my prom jacket and a tie, and off I went to the interview. The manager hired me based on my presentation: she said I was her biggest success.”

Marc began learning the ropes. As a 20-year-old, he was quite fussy and had a few early fails. “The first few places I didn’t love, and I hated that. But I was lucky because then I found Brooklyn Café & Grill. That’s where my career really started.” That establishment was then co-owned by cookbook author, food writer and restaurateur Lois Daish. “I used to go in for dinner all the time. I finally got a foot in the door and told the owners, ‘I want a job as a waiter.’” Here, under Lois’s wing, Marc found his passion for seasonal, fresh food. He ended up working there for eight years.

When the business was sold, Marc looked for other opportunities. He’d heard from a friend that Julie Clark and her husband James were opening a new cafe in Palmerston North. Despite his misgivings about the location, Marc agreed to work there for a year. He stayed for eight. “It was like running my own business without any financial commitment – learning more skills, and just growing a business. Into year four, the three of us talked about opening up a business together, and four years later, we did. I sold my house, took the gamble, and we opened up Floriditas.”

It’s hard to remember a time when Wellington’s cafes were anything but first-class. When Floriditas opened in 2003, however, it turned heads. “It was one of the first on Cuba Street to offer table service and even serve a glass of water on seating customers. Nowadays, that’s totally normal,” says Marc. “Back then, it seemed ever so posh.”

During the Floriditas years, Marc and his now-husband bought a house in Brooklyn dating from the early twentieth century which had been redone on the cheap.





“The house had three bedrooms and two bathrooms, but it was too small. We lived like that for three years, and then we gutted it.” The pair made the house their own, renovating the kitchen, knocking out one of the bedrooms and filling it with taxidermy and art.

For some time, life continued uninterrupted for Marc. Then, after another four years, the owners of Floriditas were presented with the opportunity to open a second restaurant. Initially, people had thought they were “fools” for opening the 75-seater Floriditas, but they had learnt the market was there, regularly seating 480 people a day during the brunch rush. And opening a second space would protect them if Floriditas ever had to close for earthquake strengthening. So Loretta was born, and Marc became engrossed in it. “Eventually, we decided to just take one restaurant each, so Loretta became mine, and Floriditas became Julie and James’s.”

Today, the past is never far away from the present for Marc. “From my living room window, I can see the three flats I rented in my twenties, and where Brooklyn Café & Grill was. Some customers I served there are customers at Loretta, almost 30 years later. One of the beautiful things I appreciate is that we do have an incredible customer base. That’s something I really smile about when I look around.” He also likes the diversity of his customers. “When Loretta first opened, it was ‘too green’ and ‘rabbit food’. Now people just get it, and we seat 80-year-olds with 17-year-olds. I pinch myself every day that I own something like this. It’s my dream restaurant. I come in here when it’s closed, and I look around, and I think, ‘God, how did I get here?’”

A self-confessed homebody, Marc retreats to the kitchen when not at work, most often cooking pasta and herbs with olive oil and lemon. “You can do so much with that combination and whatever is in season. I also love French tarragon, zucchini and linguine, and aubergine.” High-quality equipment is a priority, especially his Lorimer knives, handmade in New Zealand. He is also the proud owner of three KitchenAids (one limited-edition matte black, one copper and a classic white). “I do, however, always have one cheap pan, which I can thrash.”

Wellington is truly home for Marc, with a lifetime of hospitality memories and the ever-demanding Loretta to care for. “Loretta is not a small business – it’s a big business. There’s always something to think about. One of my staff recently said, ‘You’ve hit the jackpot,’ and it’s like: well, no, I haven’t, really, I’ve worked for everything I own, and I still work.”

