Lovers of fair-dinkum pubs would be hard pressed to locate such an animal in Melbourne at the moment. The rapid onslaught of inner-city gentrification has hit hotels hardest, turning formerly warm and friendly hosteries into sterile and pastelled retreats for the monied. Thankfully, there are some pubs scattered across the city and suburbs that still put character and integrity above awful decor, patronising service and prices high enough to drive you to drink.

Starting in the shellshocked Central Activities District, it would be hard to walk past the landmark Young and Jacksons, opposite Flinders Street station. There's the famous Chloe, a glass-bottom view of city bustle and plenty of old diggers propping up the bar with tales of an earlier Melbourne.

Walk down Flinders Street to the Duke of Wellington, tops for frosty pots but occasionally haunted by mildly psychotic country and western fans. Another block down, the Phoenix Tavern is useful for observing the slavering jackals of the press falling down steps and serenading pot plants and fire extinguishers.

Up on Spring Street, the Imperial (opposite Parliament House) has an excellent array of caricatures decorating the walls and a cozy pubic bar. Opportunities for poking fun at the plethora of MPs skulking and scurrying nearby are endless.

Elsewhere in town, there's the early-opening Waterside on King Street, replete with colourful dockside identities and young bucks having a technicolour yawn on the freshly-scrubbed footpath; the filthy-but-fun Sherlock Holmes in Collins Street; and the Canada, high up Swanston St and popular with battle-hardened union officials.

Carlton, once a bohemian mecca, has been overrun by cocktail-consuming airheads. But liquid salvation is at hand in the laid-back, erratic Lemon Tree in Grattan Street; the genuine and homely Clare Castle up Rathdowne Street (brilliant food); the inimitably Irish Dan O'Connell (beware of Guinness-soaked pseudo-literate reprobates); and the friendly Fenwick.

Music with your liver damage is Fitzroy's specialty - top jazz at the Tank (Tankerville Arms, Nicholson Street), young and slightly disturbed rock with a corresponding clientele at the Punters' Club in Brunswick Street and boppy R'n'B at the Royal Derby. The charming Marquis of Lorne (George Street) and the Lord Newry are also worth a visit.

Richmond and Collingwood are overflowing with top pubs, mostly tucked away in sidestreets but worth the extra shoe leather. Among the gems are the Retreat in Abbotsford, Swan Street's Richmond Club and Swan hotels and the Royal in Burnley Street (good, cheap counter meals).

Down south, grunge awaits at the Prince of Wales in Fitzroy Street. Avoid the human detritus on Friday and Saturday nights; instead, pop around to the Esplanade for stunning bay views and enthusiastic security staff. The St Kilda Inn at the end of Grey St is a rough diamond - but don't bad-mouth NZ.

South Melbourne has the jazzy Limerick Arms in Clarendon Street and breathtaking bay views from the window of the Victoria in Beaconsfield Parade. Pop around to Port Melbourne's Prince Alfred for a proletarian pot or two, too.

Naturally, this is but a sketchy outline of Melbourne's impressive resume of fine drinking holes. Careful crawling may give you Russ Hinze's spare tyre and Don Lane's nose, but you'll have damn good fun at the same time.

Happy elbow bending!

Simon Troeth