

Under the radar

VICTORIA IS PACKED WITH SO MANY GREAT WINE AND FOOD REGIONS, BUT **DAYLESFORD** AND THE **MACEDON RANGES** MIGHT JUST BE THE MOST UNDERRATED OF THE LOT.

WORDS **WINSOR DOBBIN**

Curly Flat, Passing Clouds, Bindi, Hanging Rock, and Granite Hills. The greater Daylesford-Macedon Ranges region is home to some of Australia's finest boutique wine producers. Some of Australia's fastest-rising young winemakers can be found here, too. Think trendshapers such as Joshua Cooper of Cobaw Ridge, Owen Latta of Eastern Peake and Latta Vino, and Etienne Mangier at North, plus emerging producers like Lyons Will, Wilimee, Athletes of Wine, and Dilworth and Allain. Nearly all of the region's producers are boutique and family owned, with its modern wine industry emerging in the late 1960s and early 1970s through the likes of Virgin Hills and Granite Hills. But despite being a short drive from Melbourne Airport – and home to some of Australia's best regional restaurants – the area still tends to fly under the radar compared to other Victorian wine regions, such as the Yarra Valley and Mornington Peninsula. It's a diverse region that's cold in winter, with a booming tourism industry in and around the spa towns of Daylesford and Hepburn Springs. Perhaps the biggest obstacle for winemakers is that there's no one particular wine style that shines through, with elevations ranging from 300 to 800 metres above sea level. Grapes are grown here across a large expanse, from Lancefield

to Clunes. Passing Clouds even moved lock, stock and barrel from Bendigo to Musk, outside Daylesford, in search of more rainfall and fewer spikes in temperature. Snow can fall here as early as June, making the region great for producing pinot noir and chardonnay, while Granite Hills, highly regarded for its rieslings, is now experimenting with other whites such as gruner veltliner and pinot blanc. Matt Harrop, former chief winemaker of Shadowfax outside Werribee, has long admired Macedon fruit. He makes his own wines in the region, as well as the collection at Curly Flat, which he joined about 18 months ago. "Macedon is actually a massive geographical area, but the plantings are small," he says. "There's no broad-acre viticulture up here – Curly Flat is the biggest by a long shot. There are lots of small holdings. You can't just go out and buy a few tonnes of fruit here and a few tonnes there like you can in the Yarra Valley." Chris Dilworth, assistant winemaker of Eastern Peake and Latta Vino, which sources fruit from the region, says there is a real sense of community because the area is still growing in terms of winemaking. Chris also produces his own small range under the Dilworth and Allain label with partner Loique Allain, who worked with Paul Pillot in Burgundy. "Young people can come here and get an opportunity to experiment," Chris says. "The area under vine is still relatively small, but most are planted in good places." 🍷

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Frost fan at Curly Flat.



Blue Bean Love.



Cliff-top at Hepburn and (below) views over Breakneck Gorge.



The Lakehouse on Lake Daylesford and (below) its dining room.



Owen Latta.



Wine and the Country (above) and neighbour Dos Delicatessen. Previous page: the vines at Cobaw Ridge.

Josh Cooper, son of Alan and Nelly Cooper who own outstanding organic and biodynamic winery Cobaw Ridge, says producers here are assessing what is possible because there are so many different soil types across the region. The good news is that the 2019 vintage was particularly exciting, according to Josh, despite bringing with it some stressful periods of heat. "Fruit will be concentrated with higher acidity and not too high alcohol," he says. Having seen minimal rain from last December through the harvest season, Chris of Dilworth and Allain predicts wines "of great intensity, brightness and freshness". Visitors keen to sample the regional wines, as well as those from Sunbury, the Pyrenees and other nearby areas, should head to Wine and the Country in Daylesford, run by winemaker Owen Latta's wife Jenny. It operates as a wine bar and retail store, and Jenny is also behind the lo-fi tasting event, Everything In Its Right Place, which is set to hit Daylesford on October 13. While visiting this wine bar or the coming festival, be sure to try wines from Etienne Mangier, who is originally from the Jura in France. He created the North wine label in 2013 after finding a hidden gem of a vineyard near Mount Macedon.

BEYOND THE WINE

There are also excellent artisan distillers, cider makers and brewers based in Daylesford, and the lively nearby country towns of Kyneton, Woodend and Trentham are also well worth putting on the itinerary. It was mineral spas that first put Daylesford and Hepburn Springs

on the tourism map. Hepburn Bathhouse & Spa, the Mineral Spa at Peppers Springs Retreat, and Salus Spa at The Lake House are still major drawcards. The latter is the luxury country retreat on the edge of town that first drew gourmets to the region, and sits imperiously overlooking Lake Daylesford. It remains an iconic food and wine destination, complete luxury accommodation that is one of the best in the country. A wide range of accommodation options are on offer throughout the region, from the luxe to more basic, such as the comfortable rooms at the Daylesford Hotel, a classic Australian country pub with a twist. The Daylesford offers a huge menu of pub grub and an excellent selection of local beverages, with warming wood fires in winter. For those seeking self-catering options, consider Wentworth House, a local cottage beautifully restored by local designer Jessica Holmes, who, along with her husband, is working to create Daylesford Brewing in town. Cliff-top at Hepburn is a personal favourite, with a selection of well-appointed villas that feature quirky additions, such as high-end massage chairs, pinball machines, Bose sound systems, plus Netflix and Spotify. Four new villas here known as Solitude were made from shipping containers, and they comprise Paris, Vienna, Venice and Rome – all dramatic but stylistically different. Expect spectacular views over Breakneck Gorge, sheer glass floors, infinity daybeds and a range of other beautiful inclusions, including a sauna within a wine barrel. Mini-bar snacks and beverages are complimentary, too. More traditional hotel accommodation can be found at Peppers at Hepburn Springs, which has an elegant vibe, while Hotel Frangos

in Daylesford has rooms with a definite European bordello-inspired atmosphere, as well as a chic new bar. In addition to The Lake House, Daylesford-Hepburn has a vast selection of places to eat and drink. They range from outstanding cafes – put Café Kouklas at Hotel Frangos, Pancho, the Boathouse and Blue Bean Love on your list – to the swish, newly refurbished bar at the Art Deco Hepburn Palais Theatre. Lovers of French food will want to sample the fare at Bistro Terroir, where patron-chef Matt Carnell has returned from a stint in Europe full of great ideas. Here you will find dishes like melt-in-your-mouth cheese gougeres, deep-fried quail legs with sweet potato puree, truffle jus, chives and currants, and simple but delicious steak frites. This is seriously good food cooked with love. There is also modern Australian cuisine with a twist at Argus Dining Room at the Peppers Mineral Springs Hotel, while Sakana is the love-child of former local favourite Kazuki's, which has relocated to Melbourne. Here you'll find modern and innovative Japanese dishes, along with sakes and a serious wine list left from its previous incarnation. Chef Caliopi Buck serves up some delicious small plates and share dishes from a rotating blackboard menu at Frank and Connie's Kitchen, while the Surly Goat, the Farmer's Arms, Mercato and Sault are all long-time favourites for good reason. And for a short trip into the country here, stop in at Daylesford Cider at Musk for hearty dishes and live music, and the old-school Radio Springs Hotel. ●

SIX EXPERIENCES TO TRY

SUPER LEKKER

The small town of Woodend is home to one of the best burger joints in the country, using meat from free-range cows and chickens, and local ingredients, with the exception of pickles and a special cheese imported from the US. Other Woodend attractions include the Kuzu Izakaya Japanese eatery and Holgate Brewhouse.



BIG TREE DISTILLERY

Tucked away off the beaten track at Newham, Big Tree Distillery is from husband-and-wife team Gary Jago and Catherine Crothers, who loved good gin so much they decided to make their own. Five gins make up their range, and tastings are available by appointment, while all-day gin-distilling classes for up to 10 people are also offered, with a farm-cooked lunch included.



PASSING CLOUDS

On market Sundays, you can take the train from downtown Daylesford to Passing Clouds winery at Musk – the only wine producer in Australia to have its own railway station. Here, you'll find a new tasting room and funky eatery overlooking the winery and barrel hall. Dine on local charcuterie, and roasted meats cooked over charcoal, and pair them with the estate's wines.

KYNETON HOTSPOTS

Lovers of American cuisine – think southern fried chicken and Reuben sandwiches – will be happy at recent Kyneton arrival Donkey. It makes for a great stop between Melbourne Airport and Daylesford, and also stocks boutique beers and local wines. Across the road, step into Dr Abalone for a fun vibe, and enjoy tapas and a good selection of drinks, with the team specialising in artisan gins and cocktails. Tansy's, from chef Tansy Good, and Spaghetti Bar are other recent arrivals to put on your list.



Dr Abalone.

BLACKWOOD RIDGE NURSERY

Completely off the grid, up a gravel road outside Blackwood, is this beautiful nursery and restaurant. All meals are based on sharing, and most are decorated with edible flowers straight from the kitchen garden that surrounds the restaurant. It's particularly popular with locals.

DAYLESFORD APOTHECARY

This new shop in Daylesford specialises in herbal potions made by a naturopath. It is also worth strolling around Daylesford, which has many boutiques, galleries, second-hand stores, spas and coffee shops. Just try to resist the Max and Delilah patés and rillettes at Dos Delicatessen, which is also known for its charcuterie and cheeses.