

All in good taste

For generations of immigrants, the fertile soils of the Barossa Valley provided a slice of home in the new world; today the region is busy forging its own identity and celebrating its great food and wine

It's the heady smell of fresh pastries, coffee, native flowers and hot sausage rolls that first assaults the senses. The big old winery shed is crammed with every type of gourmet delight: plump strawberries, pheasant, olive oil made from wild fruit, organic jersey milk and washed-rind goat's cheese.

Held every Saturday, the Barossa farmers' market near Angaston is the region's epicurean showpiece – and a real gathering of the clans. “The weekly market binds the community together,” says chef-cum-entrepreneur Maggie Beer, a champion of the Barossa's unique food and wine culture. “You come here to catch up on the news, grab a coffee and buy the most fabulous produce.”

And the sausage rolls? Despite the profusion of exotic fruit and vegetables, Barossans like to hang on to the old ways. The gastronomic thumbprint of the first European settlers – mostly Germans, Scots and English – who came here in the 1840s is everywhere. Cake shops still bake the traditional German bienenstich (bee's sting) sponge, while every South Australian child recalls free slices of fritz (a type of luncheon meat) at the butcher's. The Cornish brought their pasties – and slate mining know-how – to the region.

According to Beer, the Barossa's food culture is built on strong European roots and community involvement. “There's a great connection to the soil here,” she says. The legacy of the German settlers – most came from Silesia and Prussia – also lives on in the fine stone buildings, Lutheran churches and estate buildings. But, of course, the single most important gift the 19th-century pioneers transported to this harsh, beautiful and surprisingly fertile part of Australia was the grape vine. One hundred and sixty years later the Barossa is synonymous with wine, and labels such as Penfolds, Wolf Blass, Yalumba and Jacob's Creek can be found around the globe.

The Barossa – the name is a corruption of Barrosa in Spain – remains the engine room of the Australian wine industry. Its full-bodied shiraz and cabernet sauvignon and oaky chardonnay wowed a generation of British wine drinkers in the 1980s and 90s. The Barossa is also the home of Penfolds' famous Grange, Australia's most exclusive red, and about a quarter of all Australian grapes are still crushed here.

For the visitor with a nose for good wine, the Barossa offers a dizzying array of cellar doors to visit. The official tourist guide lists 56 major wineries, but there are many, smaller holdings spread around the region. Most of these are family-run concerns producing minuscule batches of wine, and tastings are by appointment only.

Armed with a decent map – and some pointers from my hosts at Peppers The Louise – I managed to visit 12 vineyards in two days, as well as sampling the wares at the farmers' markets, the Barossa Valley Cheese Company, Maggie Beer's farm shop, Blond Coffee and the Lord Lyndoch pub.

My suggestion: allow at least four days if you want to do the Barossa justice. With 16 winegrowing



'Australia is not just one big, sun-drenched country. There is incredible variety within a region like the Barossa'

The vineyards of the Barossa Valley are at the centre of a new wave of winemaking in the region Bilderberg

sub-regions – including the fast-emerging Eden Valley to the south – the Barossa is much more than the area around Tanunda. Away from the flashier cellar doors like Jacob's Creek, Saltram and Wolf Blass, you'll find plenty of family-run operations. Start with Rockford, Charles Melton and Glaetzer Wines.

For that reason it's advisable to take a back road occasionally and see where it takes you; which is usually another vineyard, a fine hilltop view or one of the smaller outposts like Bethany or Seppeltsfield. Food options are similarly eclectic. For fine dining the outstanding options are Appellation (at Pepper's The Louise) or Vintners Bar & Grill on the road to Angaston. During the day, pick up a gourmet picnic basket from Maggie Beer's farm shop – the pheasant and porcini terrine (\$15) is excellent value. Angaston is another good place to refuel. The Barossa Valley Cheese Company

produces a range of handmade cheeses, while Blond Coffee serves espresso and gourmet snacks. Both are part of the new foodie wave sweeping the Barossa. The Barossa Valley Cheese Company, for instance, was launched just four years ago and has already become a popular stop on the wine trail. “I like the idea of people buying cheese in this environment, so they can have something really special,” says owner Victoria Glaetzer. “I want people to enjoy the fruits of our region.”

The “paddock to plate” philosophy espoused by Glaetzer and Beer neatly parallels what is happening in the region's wine industry which has seen the rise of several highly idiosyncratic wine makers. Twelve of these producers – including Kalleske, Teusner, Tin Shed Wines, Spinifex and Torzi Matthews – have formed a grower's association called the Artisans of the Barossa. At Tin Shed Wines, for example, owner (and chef) Peter Clarke makes wine that perfectly complements the local produce served at his restaurant Vintner's Bar & Grill. “During the 1990s many of the Barossa wines were becoming over-wooded and heavily acidified, which overpowered food,” he explained. “We wanted to produce a wine style that was food-friendly, subtle and allowed the character of the vineyard to shine through.”

Although some of the young turks talk about “a wine revolution”, their efforts are part of a long tradition of artisan wine making in the Barossa. Despite the growing dominance of large corporations, the actual production of grapes is still in the hands of small producers dotted around the valley. The arrival of aggressively independent wine makers and the introduction of new varieties (mataro, sangiovese, mourvedre, pinot gris etc) has added an extra frisson.

“There's a definite buzz around the Barossa. It's a very exciting place to make wine,” says Matt Gant of St Hallett Wines. “The thing about the Barossa is the sense of passion people bring to everything they do, not just making wine.”

The British-born wine maker, who hails from Chelmsford in Essex, took over the reins at St Hallett in 2001 and clearly relishes being part of the new wave of wine makers in the Barossa. “Australia is not just one big, sun-drenched country,” he says. “There is incredible variety within a region like the Barossa. For instance, we source wine from 30 different suppliers: that gives you a very wide palate of textures and flavours to work with.”

For Gant, the main challenge for the Barossa lies in better marketing the sub-regions such as Ebenezer, Moppa, Bethany, Eden Valley and the Barossa Ranges so that consumers better understand the region's depth and variety.

At the same time, he applauds the ability of the Australian wine makers to constantly push the boundaries and concoct entirely new styles of wine. “One of the reasons Australia has been so successful over the last 20 years has been that sense of innovation. Reinvention has been one of Australia's key strengths as a wine-making nation,” he says. “The frontier mentality is still part of the Australian psyche.”

Mark Chipperfield

Readers' tips: Food & wine

Who needs labels?

Buy “cleanskin” wines for real bargains. These are named brands bottled with an anonymous label as a way to offload prestigious named wines. Why? Overproduction, mainly, and the need to protect their name. Of course, you take pot luck, so buy one bottle to taste and then stock up if you like it. You can buy great wines from \$5 upwards.

Tony Powell

Top-notch peninsula

The Mornington Peninsula, an hour south of Melbourne, has great small vineyards dotted throughout green countryside. (Stoniers has great wine – which you can also buy in Sainsbury's). Stop at a vineyard for a delicious lunch, and then head to the beach. There are miles of unspoilt coastline to enjoy. You could easily do this as a day trip from Melbourne, or on your way to the Great Ocean Road.

Lucy Collins

A roadtrip through vineyards and wineries



When planning a visit to the Hunter Wine Valley outside Sydney, hire a car and enjoy the drive up to the area. Also, make sure you book for wine tastings as not all vineyards are “open all hours” – don't be disappointed! It's great fun!

Maria Kenny

Boutique brewery and cool climate wines

Woodend, Victoria, is home to many mouth-watering cool-climate wines; the pinor noir and the chardonnay are the most famous. Woodend is nestled in among the Macedon Ranges and is a great place for a day trip from Melbourne (located about 60km north off the Calder Highway, watch out for the roos) or an overnight/weekend stay. Microbrewery, Holgates, would be sure to please the palate of any ale lovers. Shatzki's is an award-winning Austrian restaurant, my favorite in the town. Meals are oh-so-fresh, plentiful and well priced at about £7. Better yet, it offers a BYO service so you can bring the day's cellar-door purchase along for a trial.

Genevieve Touzel

The real surf and turf



We liked Rib and Rump, overlooking Manly Beach just outside of Sydney. Fantastic steaks, good atmosphere and a great place to sit and watch the locals on the beach. Astonishingly cheap compared to our prices, three-course meal plus drinks for just over £30!

Nick Brett

Watch out for 'garage' vintners

Visit the Warramate Vineyard in the Yarra Valley – a fantastic little place run by lovely people. Also visit the tiny wineries of Gippsland, Victoria – places like Lyre Bird Hill and Wild Dog – real “garage” style places that are so different from what you might expect in Australia. Fantastic white pepper-tinged shiraz and seductive stickies!

Steve Capes

It's no joke when kangaroo is on the menu

Brought up watching Skippy the Bush Kangaroo, eating the same in a restaurant for the first time was a surprising treat. Tip: never joke about whether koala is also on the menu. It's not funny down under.

Chris Clough

Heaven in the Adelaide Hills

Get yourself to Adelaide and head to the hills – the Adelaide Hills that is. An exciting, experimental, new wine-growing region with boutique wineries aplenty. Further afield, it's worth checking out McClaren Vale – wine, wine and more wine, and a growing olive industry too. All can be done in a day trip or longer.

Susannah Wilson

Fish and chips fit for a king



For the best fish and chips in Sydney, head down to Balmoral Beach and eat them right out of the paper wrapper on the beach. The locals use this spot to unwind on the weekend with friends and family. The views over middle harbour are great.

Tina Suvajak

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