



a harvest for hedonists

Beechworth in Victoria's high country is the ideal short break for epicureans who love nothing better than to follow a food and wine trail.

Simon Thomsen samples some of the goods as the region readies for its High Country Harvest festival this month.

Boynton's Feathertop
Winery; Porepunkah

FORAGING BEECHWORTH



ICTORIA'S NORTH-EASTERN HIGH COUNTRY is a culinary golden triangle, where the drugs are legal, but nonetheless highly addictive. Up until a decade ago, tobacco was a primary crop – the old corrugated-tin drying kilns are still key landmarks – but today the region boasts some of Australia's most sought-after boutique wines, such as Giaconda, Savaterre and Sorrenberg. Nearby Stanley's orchards produce stone fruit, berries and apples, including a unique local variety, honey crisp, much in demand at the farm gate in season.

Hops have replaced tobacco in the fields around Myrtleford, so it's no surprise that micro-brewers are the new stars. And in Bright, a little Italy has developed where Umbrian-born Patrizia Simone helped pioneer the region's emphasis on seasonal local produce, sparking a new wave of culinary migration.

Framing the region are the Alpine and Mount Buffalo National Parks, which in winter transform into snow-covered playgrounds. Amid weekend farmers' markets (nefm.com.au) the region's love of a good time comes to an annual climax with the 10-day High Country Harvest festival (highcountryharvest.com.au), May 17-26.

EAT

PROVENANCE

86 Ford Street, Beechworth.
(03) 5728 1786.
theprovenance.com.au

Chef Michael Ryan's elegant fare is heavily influenced by regular trips to Japan, which also explains why there is sake alongside great local wines. Declared Victorian chef of the year, and Provenance best regional restaurant in 2012, this grand two-storey guesthouse (a former bank) is the pinnacle of local dining. Dishes such as house-made silken tofu with marinated seafood, soy, pickled ginger and salmon roe show why.

TANI EAT & DRINK

100 Gavan Street, Bright.
(03) 5750 1304.
tanieatdrink.com.au

During winter, chefs Rachel Reed and Hamish Nugent are closer to the ski fields at their Dinner Plain restaurant, Tsubo (tsuborestaurant.com). Their new venture, Tani, is a casual, sprawling old shopfront that belies a sophisticated menu, seemingly inspired by Nobu, which adds a slight Japanese accent to bar snacks such as beef rib with pickled wasabi. More elaborate creations include spanner crab with egg custard, native salt bush and puffed rice; and also berries with sake, lime sponge and cucumber ice. Pick and choose, or trust the chef with keenly priced, remarkable four (\$50), six (\$70) and eight-course (\$85) set menus. Tani is closed in July and August (ski season).

GINGER BAKER WINE BAR & CAFE

127 Great Alpine Road, Bright.
(03) 5755 2300.

Tim Walton is a bush-change chef (from Melbourne's Mr Percival) who moved to Bright for the lifestyle and now runs this rustic cafe, which opens up into a

sprawling backyard – bar strewn with old mining buckets and shaded by large oaks – stretching down to the Ovens River. Start the day with a thick slab of bacon topped with sauerkraut. Later, try whisky mussels, braised farro with chimichurri and beef short ribs with hot sauce.

THE STANLEY

6-12 Myrtleford-Stanley Road, Stanley.
(03) 5728 6502.
thestanley.com.au

It's a pleasant surprise to recognise Shane and Annemarie Harris, hosts of this sunshine-coloured village pub, as refugees from some of Sydney's finest restaurants. A European-style menu focuses on the local bounty, from borscht with heirloom baby beetroot, Milawa chèvre and Stanley walnuts, to Stanley apple tarte tatin and scoops of Gundowring ice-cream. If the nifty local and French wine list is too tempting, there are two guestrooms.

DAL ZOTTO WINES

4861 Wangaratta-Whitfield Road, Whitfield.
(03) 5729 8321.
dalzotto.com.au

Friday is pizza night, washed down in true Italian style with \$18, 500ml carafes of this Italian family's wines, as the locals gather in large groups. Pizza and pasta – house-made fettuccine with a ragu made from Dal Zotto dorper lamb – is served on Thursday, and for Friday lunch, too, but come the weekend, nonna Elena's garden is raided for a soul-restoring daily trattoria menu featuring antipasti and slow-cooked pork belly with fennel.

PATRICIA'S TABLE

Brown Brothers Milawa Vineyard, Bobinawarrah Road, Milawa.
(03) 5720 5500.
brownbrothers.com.au

The remarkable, 124-year history of four generations of this family-run >



Brown Brothers, Milawa; The Sorting Shed, Porepunkah (right)



Provenance, Beechworth; Dal Zotto Wines, Whitfield (left)



BOYNTON'S PHOTOGRAPHY: DAVID HANNAH; BROWN BROTHERS & DAL ZOTTO: KATE MORRIS/BAUERSYNDCATION.COM.AU; PROVENANCE/JOHN LAURIE/BAUERSYNDCATION.COM.AU; MAP: STEPHANIE PEMBROKE

FORAGING BEECHWORTH



A Tavola! Cooking School, Whitfield; Myrtleford Butter Factory (left)

winery makes it a must for exploring their experimental styles, such as Zibbibo and Tarrango, Spanish and Italian varietals and cellar door-only wines from among a 50-bin range. Daily tours take you through the original winery and cellar, and to meet the winemaker. The impressive adjacent restaurant, Patricia's Table, focuses on seasonal local produce in dishes such as poached chicken with rabbit croquette, white gazpacho and pickled cucumber, which comes with a complimentary tasting glass of matching wine.

PROVISIONS

CELLAR DOOR WINE STORE

62 Ford Street, Beechworth.
(03) 5728 2882.

cellardoorwinestore.com.au

This cosy main-street nook, which serves the town's best morning coffee, has a wall lined with the best of the region's small wineries,

plus a great international selection beside it, beer and cider in the back fridge and fine spirits should you need a bracing nip. It's also an intimate wine bar, with a fine by-the-glass range, charcuterie and cheese plates and salumi sliced to order by an antique Berkel slicer. A great way to explore the region without getting up.

MYRTLEFORD BUTTER FACTORY

15 Great Alpine Road, Myrtleford. (03) 5752 2300.
thebutterfactory.com.au

It's a joy to see this century-old red-brick factory again being used for its original purpose, thanks to Bronwyn Ingleton, whose hand-churned, cultured butter is found in some of Melbourne's best restaurants. Watch butter being made, or take a weekly factory tour or monthly butter-making classes. Ingleton's chef mother, Naomi, runs the cafe, serving house-made sausage rolls

and crumpets, buttermilk pancakes and other butter-inspired dishes, including irresistible scones. She also makes the jams, relishes and pickles sold in the shop alongside buttermilk bath salts and soaps.

MILAWA CHEESE COMPANY

17 Milawa-Bobinawarra Road, Milawa. (03) 5727 3589.
www.milawacheese.com.au

This local institution helped to show Australians there's more to life than cheddar. The old butter factory is now a cheesery, bakery and restaurant, so have a cheese platter and then fill the esky with cheese to take home.

DRINK

RINGER REEF WINERY

6835 Great Alpine Road, Porepunkah. (03) 5756 2805.
www.ringerreef.com.au

Named after a 19th-century goldmine on this hillside property,

this is a petite labour of love for Bruce and Annie Holm. They make fewer than 1000 cases of wine: sauvignon blanc, chardonnay, rosé, sangiovese and merlot (including a delicious sparkling one) and botrytis semillon.

BRIGHT BREWERY

121 Great Alpine Road, Bright.
(03) 5755 1301.
brightbrewery.com.au

A smart expansion to this small brewery beside the Ovens River offers plenty of space to try the six-beer range, which includes an extra strong dubbel. An Italian-tinged snack menu and pizzas help soak up the brew. Join the Friday tour and guided tasting, or the monthly brewer-for-a-day option.

BRIDGE ROAD BREWERS

Old Coach House, Ford Street, Beechworth. (03) 5728 2703.
bridgeroadbrewers.com.au

The setting, inside a 150-year-old Cobb & Co coach house and



The Sorting Shed

THE SORTING SHED

Cavedons Lane, Porepunkah.
0400 733 170. kilnhouse.com.au
Melbourne architect Sally Draper's inspiration for this two-floor, three-bedroom concrete and recycled materials house was a crumbling tobacco sorting shed on this cattle farm. With sauna, gourmet kitchen, spa, private den and floor-to-ceiling window views of Mount Buffalo, it's a luxe retreat where Patrizia Simone offers private cooking classes. The farm's two-bedroom corrugated-tin guesthouses, incorporating the old tobacco kilns in the design, are also available. From \$375 (minimum two nights).

stables, has its charm, yet there's also something very alluring about settling in with a tasting paddle of Ben Kraus' finest brews, a warm giant pretzel, beer-braised pork ribs, lamb and chestnut pie, or perhaps a pizza topped with prosciutto and local figs.

BOYNTON'S FEATHERTOP WINERY

6619 Great Alpine Road, Porepunkah. (03) 5756 2356. boynton.com.au

The Alpine Valley's wineries are often overlooked, but shouldn't be underestimated, just like merlot, one of the 19 varietal stars of this small winery, under winemaker Jo Marsh. Kel Boynton began this impressive setup in 1989 and James Halliday often scores the wines 90-plus. It's open daily, with a deli of local produce to put together your own picnic pack – although resident chef Ikuei “Kin San” Arakane may end up tempting you across to the outdoors lunch restaurant on the weekends with beef tataki and garden vegetable pancakes.

PENNYWEIGHT WINERY & CELLAR DOOR

Pennyweight Lane, Beechworth. (03) 5728 1747. pennyweight.com.au

Love sherry or port? Stephen Morris (of the Morris of Rutherglen clan) is the man. Ahead of his time, he began making organic (now biodynamic) wine here among the tall eucalypts in the early 1980s. His excellent apera (Australian sherry) is found in high-end restaurants such as Tetsuya's.

COOK

PATRIZIA SIMONE COUNTRY COOKING SCHOOL

18 Riverside Avenue, Bright. (03) 5755 2266. simonesbright.com.au

Acclaimed chef Patrizia Simone and her son Anthony, of Simone's of Bright, have branched out with a purpose-built cooking school – more large family kitchen than classroom. From picking mushrooms in local forests, pickling, making pasta and salumi and cooking dishes from her book, *My Umbrian Kitchen*, before

eating together, it's a typically joyous Italian experience as wine and gossip flows.

A TAVOLA! COOKING SCHOOL

Pizzini Wines, 175 King Valley Road, Whitfield. (03) 5729 8278. pizzini.com.au

While her husband and children tend the vines and wines, the warm, easygoing Katrina Pizzini is showing people how to make gnocchi, pasta, ravioli, antipasti and other delectable treats (don't leave without her rocky road) in fun, encouraging classes that include wine-tasting before feasting on the food you've made. The Pizzini passion for food is also clear in the nearby Mountain View Hotel, which they reopened in 2010, serving confit duck terrine with fig chutney and brioche.

STAY

VILLA GUSTO
630 Buckland Valley Road, Buckland. (03) 5756 2000. villagusto.com.au

This serene guesthouse and

restaurant seems far removed from Italophile, novelist and raconteur Colin McLaren's former life as an undercover cop. The petite, colour-themed rooms channel southern Italy, as does chef Emma Stanley's daily multi-course spuntino menu: antipasti drawn from the garden, house-made gnocchi and pannacotta. A great value Italian wine list adds to *la dolce vita*. From \$285 a night (minimum two nights).

1860 LUXURY ACCOMMODATION

4 Surrey Lane, Beechworth. 0408 273 783. 1860luxuryaccommodation.com

There's an evocative, smoky smell from the fireplace of this restored timber-slab hut that makes it easy to picture life 150 years ago when it was built, especially when the coffee table is a giant former blacksmith's bellows and there's a deep, freestanding two-people bath. Thankfully, it's also packed with luxurious mod cons, including an espresso machine; freshly baked bread lands on the



doorstep with the paper after a plush night's sleep. From \$295.

CASA LUNA GOURMET ACCOMMODATION
 1569 Boggy Creek Road, Myrrihee.
 (03) 5729 7650. casaluna.com.au
 This two-suite guesthouse is nestled above a pretty valley across from the King Valley (the wineries are a picturesque, winding dirt road drive away) and Gwenda Canty's Italian cooking encourages simply staying put and admiring the views, especially when her partner, David, lights the outdoor wood-fired oven and cracks open the prosecco. From \$215 per night.

ON YOUR BIKE
 The flat, sealed 20km ride from Bright along the old rail line – with a stop at the Rail Trail Cafe (railtrailcafe.com.au) for a breakfast burrito or quesadilla and coffee – is a pleasant way to reach the Alpine Valley wineries. The trail stretches to Wangaratta and fans out across the region, from Beechworth to Milawa. The pine forest-covered mountains behind Bright provide more strenuous cycling. Hire bikes from Cyclepath (74 Gavan Street, Bright; 03 5750



1442, cyclepath.com.au). Child trailers and tandems also available.

SEE & DO
BEECHWORTH GAOL & HISTORIC PRECINCT
beechworthgaol.com.au
 Behind these heavy granite walls is a heavy history, including eight trips to the gallows. Melbourne gangland killer Carl Williams was among the alumni, along with the notorious Kelly gang, before it closed in 2004 after 160 years of incarcerating unlucky ne'er-do-wells. A guided tour provides a realistic taste of life behind bars, including Ned Kelly's cell. Daily tours around Beechworth's historical precinct take in the Burke Museum (burkemuseum.com.au), which pays tribute to the ill-fated explorer and former local police inspector.



The Sorting Shed
 (all images)

WOOLSHED FALLS
 A cascading waterfall, just 10 minutes from Beechworth in Chiltern-Mount Pilot National Park, has wow factor after heavy rain, but it's just as fascinating for the lessons it yields on the times when miners tried their luck on the riverbanks of this rich goldfield. Bring a picnic and swimmers, and explore the remnants and relics of the area's goldrush heyday.

DAYTRIPS
ALPINE NATIONAL PARK
 The hike to Victoria's highest peak, Mount Bogong (1986m), is a strenuous 16km all-day walk that rises above the tree line. However, the Bogong High Plains can be explored via short, signposted walks past historic huts (recent bushfires have scarred the

landscape). Bogong village has relaxed lake and waterfall walks. Popular winter ski fields are Mount Hotham (mthotham.com.au) and Falls Creek (falls creek.com.au), where the chefs from Sydney's Three Blue Ducks run a cafe/restaurant during the ski season.

MOUNT BUFFALO NATIONAL PARK
parkweb.vic.gov.au/explore/parks/mount-buffalo-national-park
 This dramatic mountain plateau, with its picnic areas and camping, rewards a summer visit with beautiful wildflowers, spectacular granite tors, waterfalls and steep gorges that are loved by hang gliders and rock climbers. The walks are easy, the views magnificent. In winter, the national park is a modest, family-friendly ski field with good marked trails for cross-country skiers. 🌐

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