



# Roads Less Travelled

## The Hunter Valley

**T**HEY'VE been tending vines and making wine in the Hunter Valley—a two-hour drive north of Sydney—since 1828. They've been playing golf for considerably less time, but Hunter is a most agreeable

place in which to combine a round or two with a glass or two.

The Hunter is home to some of the biggest and best cellar door operations in the country with Tyrrell's, McWilliam's and Brokenwood at the top of the list

for most visitors to the region. Tulloch, McGuigan and Drayton's is also under consideration and a visit to Rock restaurant at Poole's Rock is de rigueur, too.

But the Hunter has a lot more to offer than just the big names and the



Pokolbin strip, which has been dubbed "Disneyland for adults" thanks to its huge range of wineries, eateries and gourmet food outlets.

There are several dozen artisan wine (and food) producers tucked away along country lanes and it is well worth checking some of them out for a more personal experience once you've visited the big names.

Small wineries like Allandale, Briar Ridge, Wandin Valley, Mistletoe, Thomas Wines, Meerea Park, Glandore Estate and De Iuliis all produce excellent wines that exemplify the boutique ethos of the region's family-owned operations.

Allandale and Wandin Valley are among the stars of the sleepy Lovedale sub-region, which hosts the annual Lovedale Long Lunch (a two-day food and wine fair to be held on May 15-16) and is also home to small, welcoming wineries including Swish, Tatler, Sandalyn Estate and Gartelmann.

Allandale winemaker Bill Sneddon, a local boy made good, has been producing reliably good semillons and chardonnays at reasonable prices for more than two decades—and he's also a dab hand with shiraz. He's only the second winemaker in Allandale's 33-year history. The Allandale cellar door overlooks the lower Hunter and has great views of the Brokenback ranges, and is just a 15-minute walk from the Crowne Plaza Hotel. Make sure to try the 2008 Allandale Chardonnay—a great buy for less than \$20.

Just down the road is Wandin Valley Estate, where Matt Burton, who looks like a schoolboy but is creating some very mature wines, is producing an excellent range (including stunning 2009 semillon, rosé and verdelho).

There are several good restaurants nearby including Loaves and Fishes, Major's Lane and Mojo's—all part of the Tour de Lovedale food and wine trail.

Also off the beaten track is Briar Ridge at Mount View, a long-time favourite that has emerged resurgent under the joint stewardship of winemaker Mark Woods and consultant Karl Stockhausen, still going strong at 80 years old.

The semillons and shirazes here are reliably good—and the winemaking team also does well with chardonnays, sometimes a hit-and-miss proposition in the region.

Briar Ridge recently opened an excellent new restaurant, Briar Grillade, serving a range of tasting plates that change seasonally and are listed on a large blackboard.

The other stars in the Mount View region include Audrey Wilkinson and Tallavera Grove, where veteran Hunter Valley chef Robert Molines is serving up some of the best winery food in the country at Bistro Molines.

There may be spectacular vineyard views but the real stars are the seasonal dishes, prepared with Molines' traditional French flair. It's hard to think of a better spot at which to enjoy a long lunch. The menu changes every day and there are daily blackboard specials: dishes like rillettes with spicy chutney, cornichons and Melba toast and sautéed lamb kidneys with Puy lentils and rosti potatoes.

Just down the road from Tyrrell's, you'll find the De Iuliis complex, which comprises a winery, cellar door, the relaxed Cracked Pepper restaurant and the Butterflies Gallery.

Mike de Iuliis is regarded as one of the rising stars of the Hunter Valley and his family's winery is fast becoming a "must visit" on any trip to the Hunter.

De Iuliis makes a range of excellent shirazes, semillons, chardonnays and verdelhos that are available for tasting in an airy cellar door, featuring the work of local artists on the walls and looking out over gum trees and landscaped gardens.



At Cracked Pepper, expect dishes like blue swimmer crab, chilli and fresh sage with house-made gnocchi and Parmesan cheese, or maybe char-grilled Hunter beef fillet on a caramelised eschalot tart.

Diagonally across the road is Glandore Estate, where Duane Roy crafts all the Hunter staples as well as varieties like the Spanish grape tempranillo, with which he has enjoyed great success.

The Eather brothers produce a superb range of wines under the Meerea Park label—making their cellar door a “must”—particularly for the mature 2004 Alexander Munro Semillon and 2006 Alexander Munro Shiraz. Also tucked away down a quiet lane adjacent to Peppers Convent (one of the region’s best places to stay) is Pepper Tree cellar door, a relaxed haven where you can taste the wines made by Jim Chatto.

There is much local debate as to whether Chatto, or Andrew Thomas—formerly of Tyrrell’s but now crafting some extraordinary semillons under his own label—is the best young winemaker in the region.

Chatto makes a superb range for Pepper Tree, many from regions outside the Hunter, but all available at the leafy cellar door.

Another small operation that should be on any wine aficionados’ itinerary is Piggs Peake, where Steve Langham creates an idiosyncratic range of wines—many of which are snapped up by mailing list customers. Check out the zinfandels, which have attained cult status.



Other boutique stars include family-owned and operated Mistletoe—one of the quiet achievers of the Hunter Valley—where winemaker Nick Paterson has been in fine form over recent vintages; and Margan Tasting Room and Restaurant outside Broke, a popular weekend hangout, and Ballabourneen, where the former Evans Family cellar door is now the domain of ex Capercaillie winemaker Daniel Binet.

Krinklewood, way off the main strip outside Broke, is also a “must” because it is producing a range of excellent biodynamic wines and has a lovely rural cellar door.

At most cellar doors, it will pay to sample two of Australia’s iconic wine

styles: Hunter shiraz and Hunter semillon, as well as the many new varieties, although the Scarborough family makes some excellent chardonnays that are well worth seeking out.

If time is of the essence, visitors have the chance to sample the region’s iconic wines, including Brokenwood Graveyard, Thomas Kiss Shiraz and McWilliam’s Mount Pleasant Maurice O’Shea in a funky lounge atmosphere. The Icon Lounge on the mezzanine level of the Small Winemakers Centre in Pokolbin offers the chance to taste the finest wines from the region’s best winemakers in a range of glass sizes, using the Enomatic dispensing system. The Icon Lounge is the initiative of Ian and Suzanne Little, who run the Little Wine Company, which focuses on “alternative” grape varieties, and the Small Winemakers Centre, a facility that is shared with Margan, Andrew Thomas, David Hook and Keith Tulloch—all reliably good labels.

**WHERE TO STAY**

The gracious Peppers Convent, Tower Estate and Sebel Kirkton Park offer classy boutique accommodation, while the Crowne Plaza Hunter Valley and The Vintage by Grand Mercure cater for groups and conventions. Tonic Hotel and Peppers Guest House are reliably good, while there are dozens of self-catering cottages and bed and breakfasts to choose from.

