

John Cassegrain - Cassegrain Wines

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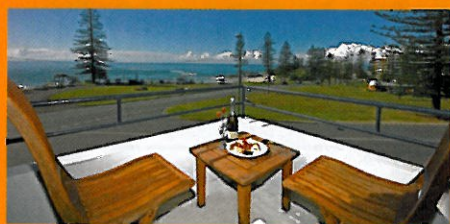
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port macquarie COME OUT OF YOUR SHELL

Bimbadgen Estate Winery



Hunter Valley

STANDING on the wide wraparound timber verandah at the cellar door of Audrey Wilkinson in the Hunter Valley and gazing at the vineyards rolling down to a dam in front would have to be one of the most beautiful sights in the nation.

Behind you can be heard the sounds of people tasting and talking, ever more passionately about wine but in front, row upon row of vines descending down to a lake and a big corrugated iron Aussie shed (the winery itself). It's late afternoon when I arrive and a mob of grey kangaroos are grazing at the bottom of the rise. The day's final burst of sun draws out the golden greens of late autumn, its rays absorbed by the soil, bare vines and surrounding gums. Every angle resonates with rugged, natural Australian beauty.

As winemaker at one of the oldest wineries in Australia, Audrey Wilkinson's Jeff Byrne is passionate about the region's history and legacy - and the part he and his fellow winemakers are playing in it.

He talks just as excitedly about Mike De Iuliis or Andrew Thomas as he does of his own wines, which are again on the rise - the 2009 The Ridge Reserve Semillon and the 2007 The Lake Reserve Shiraz are

both cracking wines sure to develop further in coming years.

Byrne's promotion of his Hunter colleagues is a common trait, which seems to afflict everyone I meet over the weekend. It's a tight-knit community; they share winemaking tips, they eat at each other's houses and some of the blokes even play together in a local rugby team. The night before I'd sat with winemaker Samantha Connew from Tower Estate, Sarah Crowe from Swish Wine and vigneron Scott Harrington from De Bortoli. All spoke animatedly about the region and its characters.

And while they gently argued over a number of winemaking issues, the one thing they all agreed upon was the Hunter's again on the rise. A new generation of younger winemakers, together with a few of the older heads in the region, is ensuring some of the nation's best wine is again coming out of this famous stretch of land. Yet while the Hunter remains synonymous with wine, it's also now one of Australia's leading tourism destinations. It's one of the few wine regions anywhere in the world with so much extra to offer with highlights including everything from great restaurants to destination spas, golf courses, wonderful gardens, and luxe resort accommodation.

Interestingly, just as the first vines in the region were planted by expats such as James Kelman and James Busby, the rise of the Hunter as a tourism destination can be attributed to the efforts of another expat.

Much credit must go to the late Len Evans who was not only a champion of Australian wine but was passionate about the Hunter and its tourism potential.

On the culinary front, my first night with the winemakers was at Bistro Molines where another Hunter pioneer, chef Robert Molines delivers fantastic French provincial cuisine.

A standout was duck breast with duck neck sausage and an orange sauce matched with an excellent Brokenwood Hunter Valley shiraz.

Other sure-fire winners include Rock Restaurant, Esca Bimbadgen at Bimbadgen Estate and Botanica Restaurant. And while I only had two days in the Hunter, I intended to give a few of them a solid workout.

The following day just as the early morning mist, which hung low around the vines in front of my room at the Hermitage Lodge, seemed to sink further into the ground, I headed to Scarborough Winery.

It didn't seem too early for a tasting and Scarborough offers one of the best experiences around.

PHOTOGRAPHY: LIAM DRIVER, MIKE NEWLING/TOURISM NSW



LEFT: McWilliams Estate Vineyard  
BELOW: Ian and Sally Scarborough inspect their vineyards

Rather than standing check by jowl at a bar with a bunch of others, jostling to get a sip of something, Scarborough sits you down. You're seated with a few cheeses and crackers and someone comes to talk you through the wines. It's much more civilised and a good start to the day.

Scarborough, is a family affair with founder Ian Scarborough joined by wife Merralea, winemaker son Jerome and daughter Sally who oversees sales and marketing. At De Iuliis Wines, winemaker Mike

De Iuliis is endeavouring to make modern Hunter Valley wines which he says, "still hark back to the older wines such as the great Hunter Valley burgundy styles".

In particular, he's currently leasing the old Lindeman's Steven vineyard and will release a Steven shiraz later this year. I was lucky enough to taste the new-age Steven and it's shaping into a rich Hunter shiraz that's full of fruit, chocolate and importantly, not too much oak.

As much as the screwcap has marked the start of a golden age for the region's other great variety, semillon, it appears to be having a similar impact on Hunter shiraz. The famously leathery

and earthy medium bodied wine is, quite rightfully, roaring back into popularity as the average wine drinker's palate sidesteps overwrought, over-oaked reds.

"Good Hunter shiraz has complexity, layers and exceptional softness," says Audrey Wilkinson's James Agnew.

And often from the first sip, you know immediately that it's a Hunter red – pinot noir makers yearn for that immediate sense of place.

Three of Australia's First Families of Wine have roots in the Hunter, Tyrrell's, De Bortoli and McWilliam's.

Sixth generation winemaker Scott McWilliam works the company's Hunter operations with long-time winemaker Phillip Ryan. The family's Hunter operations kicked-off in 1932 when they partnered with legendary winemaker Maurice O'Shea and created some of the greatest wines ever produced in Australia.

Nowadays, McWilliam's is still crafting great Hunter wines and the cellar door is one of the region's most visited with around 140,000 people sidling up to the bar a year.

Unfortunately, I arrived at around closing time meaning if I wanted to taste more wine, I had to match it with food. I won't pretend it was tough. Within an hour, and sitting by the open fire at Restaurant Botanica, all was good in the world.

## Where to eat

- **Bistro Molines Tallavera Vineyard**  
Mount View, (02) 4990 9553,  
[www.bistromolines.com.au](http://www.bistromolines.com.au)
- **Rock Restaurant**  
Pokolbin, (02) 4998 6968,  
[www.rockrestaurant.com.au](http://www.rockrestaurant.com.au)
- **Esca Bimbadgen**  
Pokolbin, (02) 4998 4666
- **The Verandah Restaurant**  
Pokolbin, (02) 4998 7231
- **Restaurant Botanica**  
Pokolbin, (02) 6574 7229

## Where to sleep

- **Crowne Plaza**  
430 Wine Country Drive,  
Lovedale, (02) 4991 0900
- **Pokolbin Village Resort**  
188 Broke Rd, Pokolbin,  
(02) 4998 7670
- **Vintage Residences**  
Vintage Drive, Rothbury,  
1800 889 889
- **Mercure Resort**  
Hunter Valley Gardens, Broke  
Rd, Pokolbin, (02) 4998 2000
- **Hermitage Lodge**  
McDonalds Rd, Pokolbin,  
(02) 4998 7639

