

Feel good McLaren Vale

For Western Australians, stunning coastal wine regions don't get much better than Margaret River, but just over the border, producers in South Australia's McLaren Vale are doing some interesting new things in one of the country's oldest wine regions.

By Susan Gough Henly

McLaren Vale delivers a stunning gourmet seaside experience, with vibrant local markets, undulating sustainably run vineyards, oodles of biking and walking trails, and miles of white sand beaches fringing the aquamarine waters of Gulf St. Vincent. It is also Australia's 'greenest' wine region with the largest number of certified organic and biodynamic wineries in the country. And it's all just 40 kilometres south of Adelaide.

McLaren Vale's mellow Mediterranean climate is not only great for vineyards but also for winemakers, who have taken a vibrant new approach to tradition. And while vineyards define the region, there are also olive and almond groves, orchards and dairy farms, plus abundant marine life on the coast. ▶

IMAGE: Coriole Vineyards



Zak Karmasek

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Star of Greece; d'Arenberg Cube; Port Willunga Beach; Maxwell Wines; Hither & Yon



Marc Mandica

Visiting the cellar doors

Insiders say that McLaren Vale's Grenache ranks among the best in the world, but it's also known for its Shiraz and an increasing array of other Mediterranean varieties such as Sangiovese, Fiano, Tempranillo, Nero d'Avola, Vermentino, Nebbiolo, and Barbera. There are more than 80, mainly family-owned, cellar doors to visit, many of which offer exceptional restaurants. Here are some highlights.

A McLaren Vale icon surrounded by exquisite cottage gardens and a trailblazer for Italian varietals, Coriole Vineyards offers panoramic views from its 1860 ironstone farmhouse cellar door where you can taste Shiraz, Sangiovese and Fiano as well as local cheeses and olives. Enjoy seasonal delicacies at their restaurant with produce drawn from their kitchen garden and farm.

Gemtree Wines is a family-owned biodynamic vineyard and winery which offers a fascinating Being Biodynamic workshop. You'll explore their herb garden and learn about biodynamic preparations. Take the Gemtree Eco Trail on a Wine and Wander Tour and enjoy a gourmet picnic under the river red gums. There are four eco-retreat off-grid cabins where you can stay on the property.

Hither & Yon is South Australia's first carbon neutral winery. Its next-generation-style cellar door is in the former Willunga butcher shop where you can enjoy wine and cheese platters. Their Coach House at Hillenvale is a beautifully restored 1850s stone cottage where McLaren Vale and the Adelaide Hills meet.

Taking tasting to the next level, the Chalk Hill Collective delivers a relaxed hilltop cellar door experience to keep everyone happy. Taste wines at Chalk Hill, gins at Never

Never Distilling and indulge in Northern Italian pizzas and other street food at Cucina di Strada.

For a wine region, McLaren Vale also has an extraordinary number of laidback craft breweries such as Swell, South Coast, Kick Back, Vale Brewing and Goodieson Brewery not to mention McCarthy's Orchard Cellar Door for apple and pear cider, heirloom fruit and produce, and cheese.

If you're a cheese connoisseur, book in for a cheese making class at the SloWhey School of Cheese and learn to make mozzarella, burrata, ricotta, camembert and more.

Willunga Farmers Market

The oldest farmers market in South Australia, the Saturday morning Willunga Farmers Market at the Willunga High School is a thriving community hub that offers a cornucopia of goodies from more than 60 local farms and producers. Think apples and berries, olives and olive oils, honeys and jams, cheeses and baked goods, freshly roasted coffee, as well as herbs, seafood, meat and poultry.

Restaurant highlights

The Star of Greece has to be one of Australia's most charming and chilled restaurants with a view. Enjoy a plate of tangy salt and pepper squid, a chilled glass of McLaren Vale rose and the 180-degree view of Port Willunga's aquamarine waters stretched out before you.

A McLaren Vale institution, The Salopian Inn offers a Pan Asian-inflected menu with organic kitchen garden vegetables and ethically sourced local meats.

Michelin-trained Fabien Lehmann offers an inventive degustation menu of delicate dishes at the Restaurant at Maxwell Wines, McLaren Vale's most elegant dining venue.

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Little Wolf Osteria at Mitolo Wines is a modern Italian restaurant cleverly created from shipping containers nestled in the vineyards. Enjoy a long lunch of the finest salumi, fresh pasta, zucchini flowers and steaks chargrilled over the hearth.

Just behind Sellicks Beach, The Victory Hotel is a mighty fine gastro pub where you can choose your wine from publican Doug Govan's extraordinary cellar and hang out with the locals over burgers and Grenache.

In Aldinga, the Little Rickshaw specialises in vibrant Southeast Asian delicacies, while beachside Pearl offers the freshest sustainable calamari, school prawns and mussels.

McLaren Vale beaches

McLaren Vale has almost 30 kilometres of sandy coastline, with six distinctive beaches stretching from Port Noarlunga in the north to Sellicks Beach in the south. Overlooked by cliffs where fishermen once carved out caves to store their boats, Port Willunga is famous for its Star of Greece 1888 shipwreck, popular with snorkellers, and its seafood restaurant of the same name.

Port Noarlunga is a popular fishing spot where the Onkaparinga River enters the sea while its jetty juts out to a 400-metre reef that's home to 200 marine plant species and 50 fish species.

Walking trails

The 38-kilometre Shiraz Trail (also called the Coast to Vines Trail) starts in coastal Marino, just south of Adelaide, and weaves through the heart of the McLaren Vale vineyards to Willunga. It intersects with the Field River Trail, Christies Creek Trail, Pedlar Creek and the Flat to Vale Trail to create interesting loop trips.

The Onkaparinga River area has a diverse array of wildlife. There's an easy and accessible wetlands loop circuit in the Onkaparinga River Recreation Park while in the Onkaparinga River National Park you can enjoy magnificent views from clifftop trails or tackle the steep hike into the Onkaparinga Gorge which is home to koalas, kangaroos and possums. There's also mountain biking, kayaking, rock climbing, abseiling, and horse riding.

Art in the vines

The d'Arenberg Cube is a wonderful Willy Wonka-esque adventure into the wacky world of art and winemaking conceived by chief winemaker Chester Osborn. Designed like a Rubik's cube, the off-kilter five-story building rises out of the vineyards with interactive exhibits. There's a wine sensory room, a virtual fermenter, a 360-degree video, and an Alternate Realities Museum. Sample d'Arenberg's ►

80-plus wines on the top-floor tasting room. In the nearby original farmhouse, d'Arry's Verandah transforms locally sourced products with international flare.

At the historic Hardys Tintara Winery, the Fleurieu Arthouse is an artisan hub with artists' studios, an exhibition gallery and retail store selling local paintings, ceramics, jewellery, sculpture, prints and glass.

Where to stay

Whether you choose to stay amongst the vineyards or by the beach, the McLaren Vale region has an abundance of accommodation options, from luxury villas to rustic cabins and even a micro-hotel made of shipping containers.

Near Silver Sands Beach, the creatively restored stone and glass Old Chaff Mill offers two inspired double-storey suites each with spacious bathrooms, contemporary kitchens, and living areas enriched with historic artefacts.

In Blewitt Springs, the Vineyard Retreat has six self-contained guest houses stocked with local provisions. Soak in the communal hot tub with panoramic views before returning to your private deck.

Inkwell Wine's Hotel California Road has large, luxurious king suites each with a private deck. This artful and interestingly designed micro-hotel is constructed from converted shipping containers.

With four apartments overlooking Port Willunga beach, The Jetty offers the perfect family seaside getaway within easy reach of The Star of Greece restaurant.

Getting around

The easiest way to get around is by car. If you're planning on hiring a car while you're there, leave it behind if you're going wine tasting and have a designated driver for the day. Better still, for wine tasting outings, Chooks Little Winery Tours offers custom tours and cellar door transfers. For a more active adventure, you can rent bicycles at the Visitor Centre, Coast & Co, McLaren Vale Vintage Bikes, and SA eBikes.



For more information about visiting and touring McLaren Vale, visit mclarenvale.info

For flight, car hire and accommodation deals, visit your local RAC Travel Centre or call 1300 655 179.

Adelaide highlights

On your way to or from McLaren Vale, spend some time exploring Adelaide.

This pretty city of historic sandstone buildings is also Australia's festival capital with the Adelaide Fringe and the Adelaide Cabaret Festival two of many held throughout the year, in addition to events such as Illuminate Adelaide.

Make sure you pay a visit to Adelaide's Central Market, the largest covered market in the Southern Hemisphere. It's brimming with fresh produce, gourmet goodies and food outlets. Just next door is the JamFactory with four studios where you can watch artists creating ceramics, furniture and jewellery.

At the South Australian Museum, you can see the world's largest collection of Australian Aboriginal artefacts, then wander through Adelaide's Botanic Garden.

For sports fans, take a tour of the beautiful Adelaide Oval, which includes the Sir Donald Bradman Museum and get a behind-the-scenes look at this iconic site.

One of Adelaide's hottest restaurants right now is Africola where you can experience the flavours of Africa, then do a laneway crawl to discover the city's quirky speakeasy-style bars like Pink Moon Saloon, Maybe Mae, Udaberri and BRKLYN. ■



LEFT: Adelaide Central Market