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SOUTH AUSTRALIA

VITI CULTURE

Mona-style museums and cuisine are the latest to invade SA's wine region, writes *Louise Goldsbury*.

Everybody keeps apologising for their purple-stained hands. It's 'vintage' in McLaren Vale – the annual time when grapes are picked and pressed – and winemakers are excited about this year's quality. The region has experienced its best growing conditions in recent memory due to a wet winter followed by a mild and dry summer, allowing slow ripening and intense flavours to develop evenly.

The cuisine scene is also developing beautifully, with a variety of dining options sprouting up at cellar doors, and art and culture are also on the rise.

"Ten years ago you'd be hard pressed to find a place for lunch, but since then the region has completely changed and there's plenty of choice," says Mark Lloyd, director at Coriole, which has a delightful courtyard restaurant overlooking the estate gardens.

Five minutes down the street, Maxwell Wines delivers a superb degustation at its high-end Ellen Street Restaurant. At Chalk Hill, Italian snacks can be nibbled while tasting wine or gin at outdoor tables. Mitolo's lively Little Wolf Osteria feels more like feasting with friends and family; Wirra Wirra has a casual café; and Beresford sells platters to eat by the fireplace.

Private dining is also offered by sixth-generation vigneron Bec Hardy, which she hosts in her Topsy Hill residence. And then there's the standalone venues, such as the waterfront Star of Greece — a reminder that this is one of very few wine destinations surrounded by beaches.

On Saturday mornings, Willunga Farmers Market showcases the best fresh food and drinks made in the Fleurieu Peninsula, sprawling from the cobblestone town square to a park across the street. This friendly gathering place demonstrates the community spirit of McLaren Vale, where small producers have a genuine passion



for their creations and generously support others in their hometown.

"We're all competitors but not in a true sense," says Tom Harvey, director of Chalk Hill Wines. "We grew up here, we went to school together, we're still friends, and you help each other out."

/ CHALK HILL

One of the best examples of collaboration is the one-stop hilltop shared by Chalk Hill Wines, Never Never Distilling Company and Cucina di Strada. The distillery recently sold out of Ginache (grenache grapes steeped in gin) and its award-winning

Juniper Freak. Seated tastings of small-batch nebbiolo and nero d'Avola are exclusively available at the cellar door.

Wine or gin flights can be served in the shared space with a magnificent vineyard vista, but the indoor areas are equally impressive.

/ D'ARENBERG

The fine dining venue at the distinctive d'Arenberg Cube has closed but d'Arry's Verandah and Polly's Wine Lounge remain open. The real attraction, however, is the off-kilter building and the Alternate Realities Museum, both created by artist, collector and fourth-generation winemaker Chester Osborn. Many of the artworks are inspired by d'Arenberg's practices, such as a cow hugging a lie detector machine, suggesting



Clockwise from top: the famous d'Arenberg Cube; Primo Estate; Wirra Wirra.

that the hyped benefits of biodynamic wine "could all be a pack of lies", explains Osborn. A self-guided tour app is available for iPhones. Entry (\$15) includes wine-tasting on the top floor, with views across the Willunga Hills and Gulf St Vincent. A Salvador Dali surrealist exhibition featuring 25 bronze sculptures and graphic artworks is an extra \$25.

/ MAXWELL WINES

Beekeeping, mushroom-picking, a picnic with lawn games and getting lost in a maze are some of the experiences available at this family-run winery, carved into a limestone hill. Book a tour and pour a glass of red straight from the barrel. Indulge in head chef Fabian Lehmann's multi-course

masterpiece of crab, trout, beef and a bite-size lamb-fat donut, ending with pastry chef Connor Bishop's whipped parsnip cheesecake, apples poached in spiced mead syrup and buckwheat ice cream. Mead (honey wine) can also be sampled at the cellar door.

/ WIRRA WIRRA

Lots of changes are coming for this renowned 125-year-old brand, one of Australia's most sustainable vineyards. Loved for its pies and panini, Harry's Deli will be expanded, while the new Wirra Wirra Wellness Resort is due for completion next year. The cellar door has been renovated to enable tastings while seated at comfortable lounges, "like a mini-masterclass", says

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managing director Andrew Kay. Other activities include behind-the-scenes tours around the original ironstone cellars to taste the best shiraz, followed by lunch. Lucky guests get to catapult a watermelon across the grounds, in tribute to late proprietor Greg Trott whose unusual dream was to build a medieval siege machine and hold competitions with other wineries.

/ CORIOLE

Gather at Coriole does a brilliant five- or seven-course menu of local sustainable produce with optional wine pairing. Try the fiano and sangiovese, both pioneered in Australia by Coriole, and chef Tom Tilbury's kangaroo tail with fried saltbush and macadamia. The cellar door can host 10 people at a time but the gorgeous grounds are large enough for arts events like Opera in the Vines. Coriole Music Festival will be held in the barrel hall from May 21 to 24.

/ MITOLO

The family's Italian heritage shines through Mitolo's range of wine varieties, traditional food and welcoming atmosphere. Deliberately less luxe than it used to be, Little Wolf Osteria's signature dish is lamb tomahawk, but the menu changes to offer other delights such as bone marrow risotto or homemade burrata. Another casual venue with music is on the horizon for summer. Wine tasting is Friday to Sunday.

/ OLIVER'S TARANGA

Director and winemaker Corrina Wright and her cousin Brioni Oliver run this

180-year dynasty, contributing blocks of shiraz to Penfolds Grange, while also working with emerging grapes such as mencia, touriga and sagrantino. They're also known for hosting the occasional Porchetta or Paella Party, a four-course banquet matched with Oliver's Taranga wines.



/ BERESFORD WINES

A lovely, spacious estate to relax by the fireplace with a pizza or cheese plate, and do a tasting flight of Beresford's wines or offerings from its sister brewery and distillery venues. The Palate Liberator, for example, covers Riverland rose vodka, gin, brandy and whiskey. A decadent offering of four types of shiraz matched with chocolates is available until June.

/ PRIMO ESTATE

There are no distractions at this modern piazzetta-style venue, except for the rows of cabernet grapes. A sit-down tasting features four premium wines, served with Joseph olive oil, Grana Padano cheese and crusty bread. Most known for the Joseph Moda, Primo Estate's other standout is the Angel Gully Clarendon Shiraz 2019 containing a mix of 30 vintages dating back to the 1980s.

/ BEC HARDY WINES

Dine with Bec and her husband Richard, who love to cook and entertain in their Topsy Hill residence. For \$295 per person

(\$395 with a professional chef) including unlimited wine from the 1990s to current vintage, the tailored dinner for your private group begins with drinks in the property's spectacular two-acre gardens.

/ SALOPIAN INN

Affectionately known as Slops, this popular restaurant is lucky to have Karena Armstrong, who formerly worked at Icebergs and Billy Kwong in Sydney. Settle into the old 1850s homestead and trust the 'Feed Me' menu for the chef's selections of Asian, Middle

Eastern and South Australian flavours. Check out the historic basement cellar to choose a regional red with dinner.

/ STAR OF GREECE

Turn up in time to watch the sun set over the ocean at Port Willunga beach. The food is not Greek (it's named after a nearby shipwreck) but every dish is fresh and delicious. King George whiting and squid are specialities. Wine is also reasonably priced, despite the jaw-dropping clifftop location.

If you need a designated driver, contact Chook's Little Winery Tours. (Hen's and buck's parties are banned, but that's a whole other story.)



From top: a tasting inside the d'Arenberg Cube; treats at the Willunga Farmers' Market; Star of Greece.