

COASTAL VINES

A taste of the Mediterranean with a distinctly Aussie twist awaits at McLaren Vale. **SUSAN GOUGH HENLY** discovers the best places to dine, drink and play in South Australia's greenest wine region.

Photography **DUY DASH**

The sprawling gardens and vines at Coriole Vineyard.

On the Fleurieu Peninsula, just 40 kilometres south of Adelaide, McLaren Vale is an undulating, vineyard-latticed valley meandering down through a horseshoe of hills to a pristine coastline rimmed by aquamarine waters.

Moderated by sea breezes and enlivened by immoderate winemakers and assorted other characters, it embodies a sweet spot of nurtured nature, what might even be called a Mediterranean state of mind, done in a distinctly Aussie way.

"Gulf St Vincent sure resembles the Mediterranean, only we have better sand," says Mark Lloyd of Coriole Vineyards. His son, Peter, adds, "We've certainly taken some cues from the Old World but, with our ease and openness, we've developed our own home-grown style."

A magnet for Italian immigrants after World War II, McLaren Vale became one of Australia's first areas to grow olives and almonds. Today, it's Australia's "greenest" wine region, with the country's highest number of certified biodynamic and organic vineyards. There are more than 80, mainly family-owned, cellar doors while the Saturday Willunga Farmers Market champions hyper-local gourmet goodies from the land and sea. "It's our community larder," says Salopian Inn restaurateur and chef Karena Armstrong.

"We're hugely blessed where we live," says winemaker Stephen Pannell, "I try to create wines that suit our soils, climate and way of life - wines that I want to drink with the food we grow and eat here. We live in a country we wish was cooler but is only getting hotter. I've been experimenting with Italian, Greek, Spanish and Portuguese varieties to make wines that reflect our sense of place."

"We may be a casual bunch, but we've become passionate about coming together as a community to protect this beautiful bit of land," says Armstrong. "We're surrounded by vineyards framed by olive groves and it only takes five minutes to get to the beach. People come here to relax and swim and just be. That's why we all love it so much." ▶



Clockwise from left: chef Tom Tilbury in the garden at Coriole; petit four at Gather at Coriole; Hiramasa kingfish at Salopian Inn; oyster pearl, buttermilk and sunrise lime at Maxwell Restaurant.



too. It all works perfectly with their food-friendly Italian varieties. 79 Chaffey's Rd, McLaren Vale, coriole.com

Little Wolf Osteria at Mitolo Wines

Chef Vincenzo La Montagna keeps it authentic and delicious at this airy modern Italian restaurant fashioned out of shipping containers with gorgeous views to the Willunga Range. Think the finest salumi, blue swimmer crab spaghettini, big steaks char-grilled over the hearth and an abundance of salads perfect for sharing over a long lunch. 141 McMurtrie Rd, McLaren Vale, mitolowines.com.au

Victory Hotel

This legendary gastro pub is always pumping. Head to the cellar to choose your wine from publican Doug Govan's extraordinary, well-priced global collection. Rub shoulders with the locals over a burger and a juicy grenache or some Coopers' beer-battered King George whiting with a McLaren Vale fiano. Main South Rd, Sellicks Hill, victoryhotel.com.au



Salopian Inn

Former Icebergs Dining Room and Bar and Billy Kwong chef Karena Armstrong is at the helm of the eclectic Salopian Inn, a McLaren Vale institution. Her sublime dumplings and pork buns go down a treat with a cocktail or two from the 190-strong gin list from around the world and Australia. The mains offer riffs on ethically sourced local meats with organic kitchen garden veggies along with wines from their beautifully curated list. Corner Main and McMurtrie Rds, McLaren Vale, salopian.com.au

Maxwell Restaurant

Michelin-trained Fabian Lehmann delivers delicate morsels in an inspired dégustation menu at McLaren Vale's high-end dining venue. There'll be house-baked sourdough from local stone-milled spelt flour and dishes that celebrate the estate's own limestone-cave-grown mushrooms, while the new spring menu delivers gems like trout with pickled carrot ribbons and home-grown horseradish. Olivers Rd, McLaren Vale, maxwellwines.com.au

Gather at Coriole

Sit in front of a roaring fire under the grapevine-draped pergola or in the shade of the mulberry tree with sweeping views of vineyards stretching all the way to the sea and feast on Tom Tilbury's thoughtful dishes of bright, interesting ingredients that deliver the purest of flavours. Hello kangaroo, karkalla coastal succulents, muntries and hay emulsion. There are marinated Coriole olives and Kris Lloyd Artisan cheeses,

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Below: the Cube at d'Arenberg. Right: vines in McLaren Vale.



d'Arry's Verandah at d'Arenberg

Set in the original homestead, stalwart d'Arry's Verandah showcases locally sourced products spiced with flavours from around the globe. The service is excellent and the outlook stunning. The lobster bisque is arguably more famous than The Cube. Enjoy simpler lunch fare at Eat@Polly's in the quirky building home to d'Arenberg's cellar door (after you've checked out the wine sensory room and Alternate Realities Museum). Osborn Rd, McLaren Vale, darenberg.com.au

The Currant Shed

Anything by chef Wayne Leeson and the team at this top-notch lunch spot is memorable. Dishes are driven by what is in season (and what they can harvest from their kitchen garden) but an all-year round highlight is the entrée of pork, peanut, chilli and bean sprouts. The six-course chef's selection (with paired wine) is the way to go. 104 Ingoldby Rd, McLaren Flat, currantshed.com.au

Pizzateca

Classic Napoli-style thin-crust, wood-fired pizza, antipasti, and char-grilled lamb are made with love by the Mitolo family for Aussie families to devour at tables on the grass under the gum trees. 319 Chalk Hill Rd, McLaren Vale, pizzateca.com

The Little Rickshaw & Pearl

In nearby Aldinga, two newcomers are drawing rave reviews from the locals. In a pint-sized rustic tin shed, The Little Rickshaw charms with sparkling fresh Southeast Asian delicacies, while beachside Pearl channels a Greek Island taverna vibe with its sustainable offerings of calamari, whiting, school prawns and mussels. thelittlerickshaw.com.au, pearlaldingabeach.com.au

Star of Greece

There are few better places to be in the world than on the deck of the Star of Greece feasting on a plate of local squid, a glass of McLaren Vale rosé in hand, looking at the translucent waters lapping the sandy shore. It's the next best thing to having open borders and a boat in the Aegean. 1 Esplanade, Port Willunga, starofgreece.com.au >





Chalk Hill Collective does an enterprising job of blending wine, spirits and food in one stylish, relaxed locale complete with views.



PHOTOGRAPHY MEAGHAN COLES (CHALK HILL COLLECTIVE).



Clockwise from left: the main bar at Swell Brewing Co; the dining room at Maxwell Restaurant; the tasting room at d'Arenberg. Opposite: a distiller at Settlers Spirits; Chalk Hill Collective.

DRINK

Renowned for grenache, shiraz, and cabernet sauvignon, McLaren Vale is increasingly winning accolades for its Mediterranean varieties such as sangiovese, fiano, tempranillo, nero d'avola, montepulciano, vermentino, piquepoul, nebbiolo, and barbera.

With an irreverent bunch of winemakers at the helm, it also wins the award for some of the quirkiest wine names in the business: April's Dance Sparkling, Little Demon Fiano, Derelict Vineyard Grenache, Monkey Bum Shiraz, and The Mongrel Sangiovese set the tone.

Check out iconic wineries such as Wirra Wirra whose late founder Greg Trott was McLaren Vale's mischievous vinous Pied Piper; d'Arenberg whose quirky art-filled Cube embodies its moniker of "the art of being different"; and classy Coriole,



Australia's Italian varieties' trailblazer. Other must-visits include **Gemtree** to get the lowdown on biodynamic winemaking and explore its eco trail; **Primo Estate**, which offers olive oil, Grana Padano, and wine tastings; **SC Pannell** to sample an appealing array of Mediterranean varietals; **Maxwell Wines** with its passion for mead and mazes; Italian champions **Serafino**, **Mitolo**, and **Vigna Bottin**; **Hither & Yon**, South Australia's first certified carbon neutral winery; and other gems such as **Shingleback**, **Samuel's Gorge**, **Yangarra Estate**, **Samson Tall**, and **Bec Hardy Wines**.

The rising popularity of alternative varieties and the wine community's welcoming nature attracts adventurous new blood to the region. Among them, emerging brands such as **Silent Noise**, **Sherrah Wines**, **Lino Ramble**, **Varney Wines**, **Brash Higgins** and **Aphelion Wine**.

And in a trifecta, the **Chalk Hill Collective** does an enterprising job of blending wine, spirits and food in one stylish, relaxed locale complete with breathtaking vistas. Taste Chalk Hill and Alpha Crucis wines, sample a range of award-winning gins at **Never Never Distilling Co** and feast on northern Italian-style pizzas and other street food at **Cucina di Strada**.

Don't stop there. Craft breweries such as **Swell Brewing Co**, **South Coast**, **Kick Back Brewing**, **Shifty Lizard**, **Vale Brewing** and **Goodieson Brewery** are must-visits as are **Settlers Spirits** and **McCarthy's Orchard Cellar Door** for apple and pear cider, heirloom fruit and produce, and old-vine wine, too. ►



STAY

Old Chaff Mill

The artfully restored stone and glass Old Chaff Mill offers two double-storey suites each with spacious bathrooms, contemporary kitchens, and living areas enriched with historic artefacts. The Millery sports a combustion heater and secluded outdoor clawfoot bath while The Granary features a Juliette balcony with views over the vineyard. Fresh local goodies for breakfast and welcome nibbles include the estate's own shiraz and olive oil. Enjoy treatments and massages at the spa tucked into the atmospheric pond-side former dairy. It's minutes to Silver Sands beach and a short drive to the heart of the vineyards.

371 Plains Rd, Sellicks Hill, oldchaffmill.com.au

The Jetty

For beach views, The Jetty looks out over Port Willunga's stunning coast and is a stone's throw from The Star of Greece restaurant. There are four modern apartments to choose from. Views (and sundowner locations) don't get much better.

16 Esplanade, Port Willunga, thejettyportwillunga.com.au

Hotel California Road

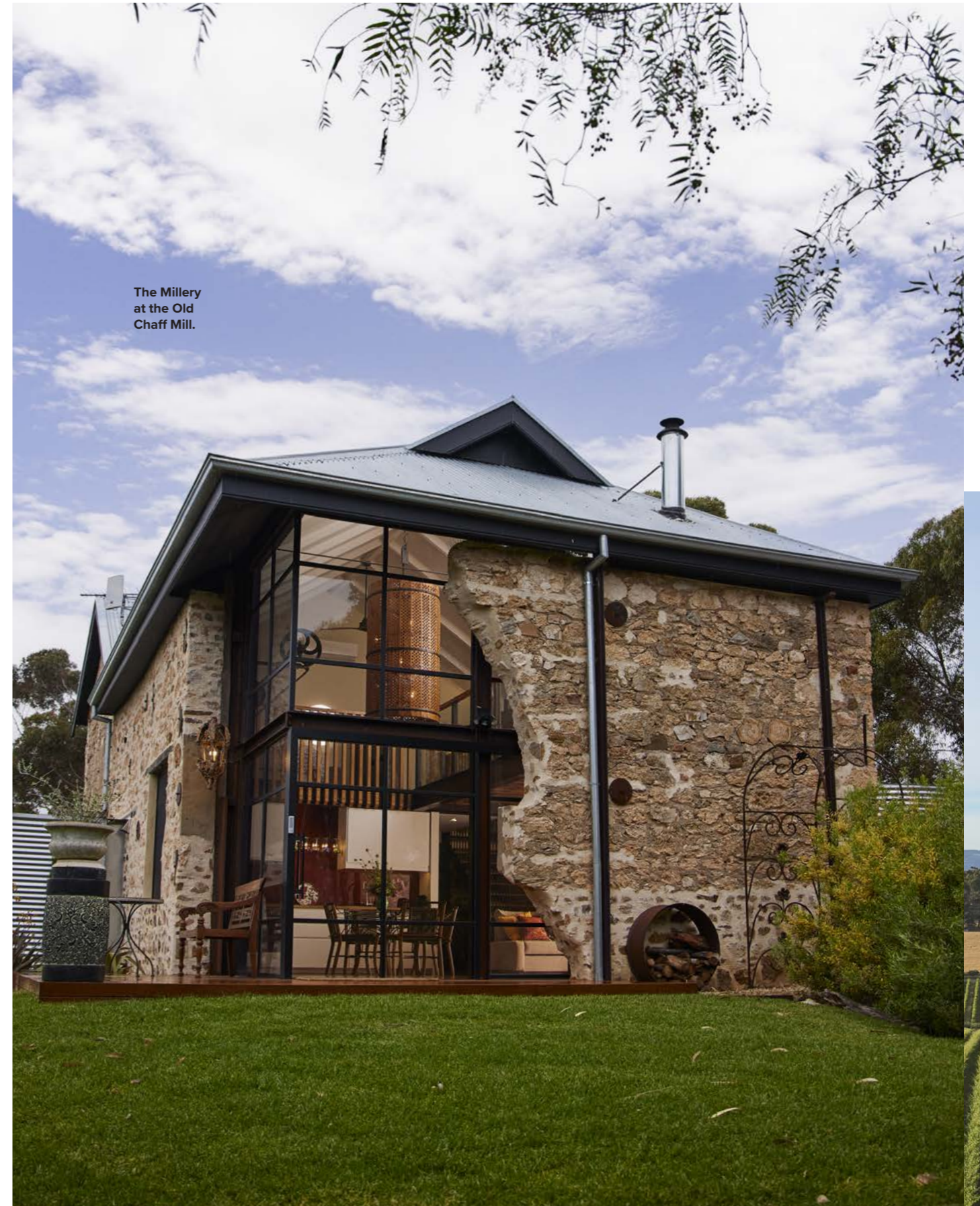
Hotel California Road at Inkwell Wines is a luxury micro-hotel for adults only. Set in the vineyards on a private floor, each king suite features an expansive deck, soaking tub with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the vines, a floating king bed and all the mod cons. 377 California Rd, Tatachilla, inkwellwines.com

The Vineyard Retreat

With six distinctive (including one fully accessible) self-contained guest houses, generously stocked with local provisions and complimentary minibars, and each with private decks, The Vineyard Retreat offers an excellent base for gourmet touring and its concierge services are perfect for those seeking insider's guidance. Enjoy a soak in the retreat's hot tub with panoramic views to the water. 165 Whittings Rd, Blewitt Springs, thevineyardmu.com.au ●



The artfully restored stone and glass Old Chaff Mill offers two double-storey suites enriched with historic artefacts.



The Millery at the Old Chaff Mill.

Clockwise from top left: inside The Granary's bathroom and bedroom at the Old Chaff Mill; The Vineyard Retreat.