

INSIDE

OUR ULTIMATE GUIDE TO WINING, DINING, LIVING AND TRAVELLING IN STYLE.

ELLE LIVING

If you're a travelling foodie, then **AMAZING GRAZE**, ELLE's food-and-wine hit list for Sydney and Hunter Valley, will set you up for your NSW vacay. Really want to escape your over-packed schedule? **EAT, PRAY, TUNE OUT** at the most relaxing new resorts in Bali.

The road to Peppers Convent in Hunter Valley.

PHOTO: BRYAN VAN DER BEEK

AMAZING GRAZE

Dining and wining in **Sydney and Hunter Valley** should be on every foodie's list. Stacey Anne Rodrigues takes you through some of the region's highlights.



Starry, Starry Night Heading out after dark in the country isn't always a dull affair, as the sky is ablaze with the twinkle of the stars, like it does here at Peppers Convent.

Few things excite me as much as the prospect of a gourmet trail, like eating my way through Tuscany or scouring Japan for its varying cuisine across the islands. Australia's New South Wales (NSW) was never really on the must-eat list, but when I heard about Hunter Valley's annual Wine & Food Month, I thought it was definitely worth hopping over to the land down under to sniff around — literally, if you include wine tastings.

Just when you think, if you've seen one vineyard you've seen them all, a visit to Hunter Valley, New South Wales' wine country, is a reminder that there are no two wine regions alike in Australia. Each region is known for the grapes that its climate and soil allow it to grow well, and the Hunter is renowned for its Semillon. That's not to say it doesn't grow others — you can definitely find your Cabernets



and Chardonnays — but the region produces exceptional Semillon grapes and the winemakers really know how to get the best out of them.

The Hunter Valley Wine & Food Month (WFM) (www.winecountry.com.au) happens every June, when winter starts to kick in and wineries, olive oil producers, cheese makers, restaurants and more offer something a little different from the usual.

I began my journey at **Peppers Convent** (www.peppers.com.au/convent/).

Staying at this former convent, which had been transported from central NSW to the Hunter and restored, sets you up for the slow days ahead sampling the region. I say slow because as much as you'll want to make the most of your stay in the Hunter, you really want to take your time and allow yourself to digest, or risk overeating to the point of needing an intervention. Badly. I speak from

experience.

The Pepper Tree Estate, which the convent sits in, is also home to **Roberts Circa 1876**, one of the reputable dining spots around. With its organic garden full of produce, which the kitchen uses, and its commitment to showcasing the Hunter's wines, you start to get an idea of the pride that the region has for its community and their produce.

VINE PRIDE

Of course the humble grape takes centre stage here, as the region has a mix of large wine producers like **First Creek Wines** (www.firstcreekwines.com.au) that not only produces its own vintages but also provides space for other winemakers to create their blends and bottling for other equally prominent names in the Hunter. Looking at the inner workings of the factory line, there were wines being bottled for McGuigan Wines



A sampling of the Hunter Gatherer degustation wine pairing menu at Esca Bimbadgen.



— the McGuigans, I learnt, are a prominent wine family here in the Hunter and its biggest exporters. Daughter Lisa McGuigan set up Tempus Two winery which sits right in the centre of Pokolbin — arguably the Hunter’s “grand central” — and you will keep passing it every single day, observing how its contemporary architecture sticks out amid the more traditional structures here.

Another household name in the region is Tyrrell’s Wines. But the smaller wineries are what you should be looking for because the chances of you sampling their wines outside of the country are slim to none. So if you’re pressed for time, an easy thing to do would be to pop into the **Small Winemakers Centre** (www.smallwinemakers.com.au). Here celebrated winemaker Suzanne Little of The Little Wine Company conducts a blind taste test, pitting Australia’s iconic Penfolds Grange against a selection of Hunter-made Shiraz reds during WFM. The centre conducts tasting master classes to talk customers through the aromas and flavours you should expect to coax wine fanatics to hone their palates. Little is usually the only one who knows which wine belongs to which

winery, and she’s well-practised at keeping a poker face if you tried to get it out of her. While I did try the blind tasting, I only managed to get two out of the four wines correct. Damn.

So it’s back to wine school for me. And a good place to do that is **Hunter Valley Resort** (www.hunterresort.com). Any time of the year, you can book yourself into a wine theatre session, which includes a video presentation of the region’s history and winemaking, followed by a structured tasting of wines. Owner Philip Hele shares that 70 per cent of the flavour of wines can be acquired



Perfect Pairings
Pepper Tree Wines shows us how different intensities of chocolate pair well with the right wine styles.

through the nose; the only thing the tongue offers for wine tasting is the acid and sweetness of the wine. So you can smell whether you’ll like the wine or not, and if it’s corked. Hele knows the business like the back of his

hand and advises that because alcohol in Singapore is taxed based on volume and not price, we shouldn’t be trying to get the cheapest bottle possible — an even better bottle isn’t going to cost you that much more. It’ll also make the difference between a good day after and a serious hangover.

Most importantly, Hele reminds us that you should have fun with wine. And a winemaking couple that knows precisely how to do that is Debra Moore and Ian Burgess of **Moorebank Vineyard** (moorebankvineyard.com). The Burgesses are a breath of fresh air from the larger wineries, with their playful old-married-couple teasing and how they treat their cellar door like their home — sharing a generous sampling of their vintages, as well as some of their house-made condiments, like their

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The communal-style sharing plates at Emerson’s is a highlight of the Hunter.

signature spicy grape sauce. Add naming their wines after their children and animals, and have Sheila their beloved sheep walk into the cellar door just as you're sipping on their "Sheila" Black Sheep Shiraz and boom, you have a great story to tell about your trip to the Hunter.

SOMETHING TO CHEW ON

When there's wine, there must be food — from chocolate and wine pairings at **Pepper Tree Wines**, to cheese at the **Hunter Valley Cheese Company** (www.huntervalleycheese.com.au). Forget pomp and snobbery; the Cheese Company believes that anyone can be a cheesemaker, as it conducts a short cheese-making course and even has rennet (the enzyme which sets cheese) for sale if you wish to DIY at home. These guys believe in quality handmade cheese from *fromage blanc* with oil and herbs, a Stilton-like blue cheese, and their award-winning Hunter Gold Washed rind. But one cheese that really made an impression and is a popular addition to dishes at the restaurants is **Binnorie Dairy's** Middle-Eastern-styled Labna — a cow's milk yogurt cheese with chilli, rosemary, garlic and olive oil. The only problem is unless you have serious cold storage solutions, packing



Coffee and cakes at The Grounds of Alexandria.

cheese home isn't practical — so eat what you can here.

Olive oil and vinegars are also in production in the Hunter, with an amazing array available at **Pukara Estate** (www.pukaraestate.com.au) and **Adina Vineyard & Olive Grove** (www.adinavineyard.com.au). However, I remember Adina most for the award-winning restaurant **Emerson's Café & Restaurant**, which moved here from the Pokolbin area. Chef Emerson Rodriguez plays well with seasonal flavours and local produce. His dishes are perfect for sharing on its dining porch, overlooking the vines and olive trees, while sipping on Adina's stunning Pinot Grigio 2013 that was such a hit, it was almost sold out. We were lucky to sample a bottle.



Funny Bunnies Families enjoy the light installations along the Vivid Sydney walk.

It's then you remember that good food alone doesn't make a great meal — it's that perfect combination of food, wine, ambience and company. Another name that guarantees you the first three in the great meal formula is **Esca Bimbadgen** at Bimbadgen Estate (www.bimbadgen.com.au). Esca's hilltop location makes it a great vantage point. In the summer, the grass lawn is a venue for concerts. In June, when the weather is not too chilly that you can still dine *al fresco*, there is a Hunter Gatherer menu for the month, designed to maximise a wine-food pairing experience with a degustation-style meal.

If there's one thing we

appreciate about heading out to the country, it's that you can easily find out precisely where your food came from, like the 100m meal at **Margan Restaurant & Winery** (www.margan.com.au). It's been called "acclaimed agri-dining at its best", as the kitchen acquires its vegetables and herbs from its one-acre garden; it rears its own sheep for lamb and there are enough chickens for eggs. The farm is certified organic but also adopts biodynamic principles. Nose-to-tail style dining is part of its sustainable philosophy and even rainwater is collected, then filtered and served — still or sparkling.



Book yourself into a mixology master class at The Morrison.

BACK TO THE CITY

It's all too easy to assume the food tastes better in the country, just because you're more relaxed, the wine is good and the air is fresher. But when you head back into Sydney city, it's tough to find food to match the fresh produce. Not that it's bad food, it's just not quite the same. But there are a few places that can live up to the expectations that have been set after spending some time in the country. One such place is **Nomad** (www.restaurantnomad.com.au). Located in Surry Hills, Nomad does small plates-style seasonal Mediterranean cuisine, and also has a cellar door, so if you like the wine you're having with your meal, you can order a bottle home, too. Markets like **Eveleigh Farmers Market** (www.eveleighmarket.com.au) is worth the visit for that relaxed market vibe, not to mention the chance to spot celebrity chef Kylie Kwong at the Billy Kwong stall, and pay a hefty AU\$8 (\$9.3) for what's essentially a massive *pau*, or pork bun.

One of my favourite discoveries on this trip was **The Grounds of Alexandria** (Groundsroasters.com). Not just another coffee roaster, this sprawling space is compartmentalised to include a café, street-style stalls, bakery, gardens and mini farm, with a pig called Kevin Bacon — no joke. There's a new discovery at every turn, and of course packed to the rafters with hipsters and good-looking people — hello, eye candy!

A particularly memorable meal was had at **The Bridge Room** (www.thebridgeroom.com.au), helmed by award-winning Chef Ross Lusted, who used to work at the

Grand Hyatt Singapore's Mezza9. So this guy knows his Asian food. When we spotted a Teochew-style cod on the menu, we just had to give it a try. The fish was beautifully cooked and there was a perfect balance of black vinegar and ginger for a modern take on a traditional dish. And what did we pair all this food with? Not wines, but cocktails.

You remember that good food alone doesn't make a great meal — it's that **perfect combination** of food, wine, ambience and company.

The small bar scene has only recently picked up as licencing legislation kicked in about five years ago. The guides at **Two Feet & A Heartbeat** (www.twofeet.com.au) conduct a variety of walking tours, including a small bars tour. Our guide Alison had zipped us through the city's streets and alleys, showing us the little watering holes that have become a hit with locals,

like the unpretentious corner bar, **The Fox Hole** (www.thefoxhole.com.au); **The SG**, which used to be called Spooling Goats (lovegoats.tumblr.com), a geek's playground with Star Wars figurines and pay-by-Bitcoin Wednesdays; and the alleyway bar **York Lane** (www.yorklane.com), which serves up very stiff cocktails.

Cocktail culture is hardly

the pretentious inaccessible craft it can be elsewhere. In fact, at **The Morrison** (Themorrison.com.au), mixology master classes are held, and they're said to be quite a hit with the pre-wedding hen night crowd. It helps that one of the mixologists, Euan McDonald Wood is a hottie, as many of them are.

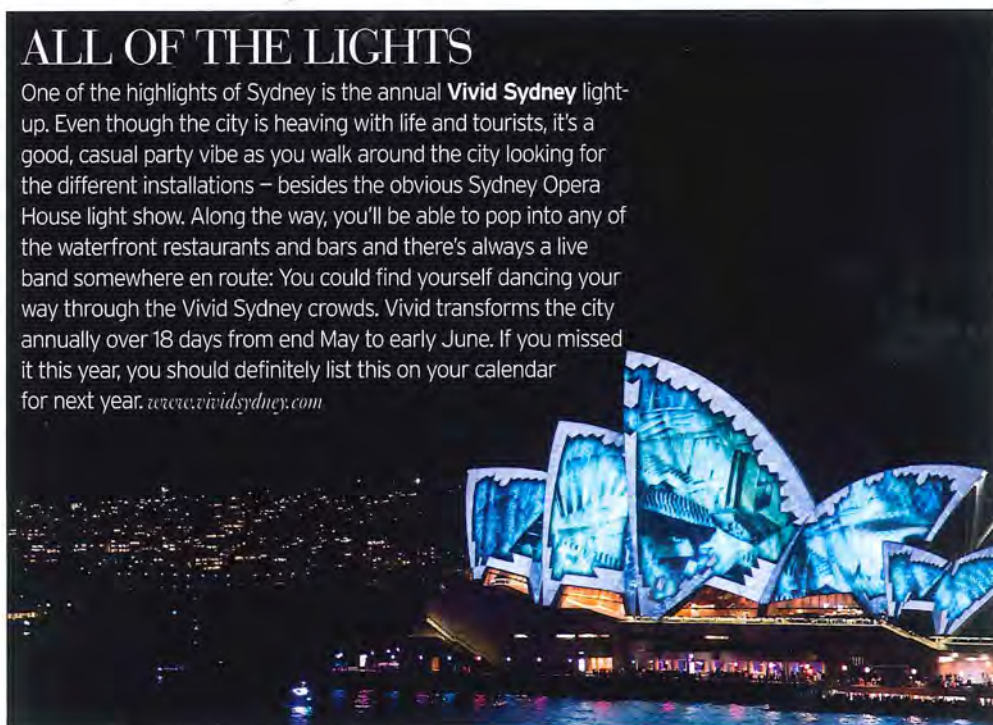
You're never going to run out of food and drinks options in this city. If you're too lazy to explore on your own, just book a food tour with **Ultimately Sydney** (www.ultimatelysydney.com.au). They've got you covered — at least for a day. **ELLE**



No matter the time of the year, a walk by the waterfront is always a romantic experience.

ALL OF THE LIGHTS

One of the highlights of Sydney is the annual **Vivid Sydney** light-up. Even though the city is heaving with life and tourists, it's a good, casual party vibe as you walk around the city looking for the different installations — besides the obvious Sydney Opera House light show. Along the way, you'll be able to pop into any of the waterfront restaurants and bars and there's always a live band somewhere en route: You could find yourself dancing your way through the Vivid Sydney crowds. Vivid transforms the city annually over 18 days from end May to early June. If you missed it this year, you should definitely list this on your calendar for next year. www.vividsydney.com





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QUEEN?
COMING CLEAN
ON FIRST-DATE SEX
HOW HE KNOWS
YOU'RE THE ONE

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