

WINE-COUNTRY WONDERS

Is there life beyond the cellar door in the Yarra Valley? Try art, chocolatiers, cideries and farmers' markets, says Alice Wasley

Driving through the outer suburbs of Melbourne to get to the Yarra Valley, it's hard to believe that you're on the cusp of a rural idyll. Then suddenly, after only a 45-minute journey, fast-food joints make way for rolling pastures and vineyards and – bam! – you're in wine country. Before making our way to our accommodation at the historic, slightly eccentric Chateau Yering, we drop in for lunch at the recently renovated Oakridge Wines restaurant (highlight: braised globe artichokes and a glass of 2009 Oakridge Sparkling Chardonnay Pinot Noir) near Seville in the southern part of the Yarra Valley. The expanse of glass lining one side of the room overlooks its sweeping vineyards and little else is needed in the way of eye candy.

After lunch we hit the TarraWarra Museum of Art, where the topnotch collection of mid-century modern Australian art (names such as Olsen, Nolan, Drysdale and Whiteley) sits beautifully within architect Allan Powell's clay, steel and glass structure, which is surrounded by... yep, you guessed it – picture-perfect vineyards.

There are more than 40 cellar doors to visit in the area. Its cool climate means the pinot noir grape varietal thrives and the region is becoming renowned for its rosé. If vino isn't your thing – well, what the hell are you doing in a wine region? Kidding. There's the Yarra Valley Chocolaterie & Ice Creamery and Yarra Valley Dairy, or you can follow the Yarra Valley Cider & Ale Trail and check out

microbreweries and cideries. Also look out for orange and blue signs flagging the Yarra Valley Regional Food Trail, which includes more than 100 cafes, restaurants, providores and farmers' markets.

That night we dine in the plush Eleonore's Restaurant, part of which is situated in Chateau Yering's original 1854 dining room (highlight: the sommelier describing the pinot noir as he's decanting it as a 'magic-carpet ride' for our palates). The colonial atmosphere conjures up visions of landed gentry discussing upcoming hunts and the finer points of gold speculation.

On the way home the next day, we stop off at a few more cellar doors, including the very impressive Innocent Bystander in Healesville. The bustling industrial space has a big glass wall separating the winery from the cellar door, so you can see the inner workings of the winemaking process as you taste. It also houses an artisan bakery, coffee roaster, restaurant and wine bar. Visually sated, we visit Hargreaves Hill brewery in Yarra Glen to cleanse our wine palates with a beer tasting and some fish and chips. We feel smug, fat and happy on the drive back to Melbourne – until someone starts furiously waving at us from a nearby car. This lunatic is quickly unveiled as a concerned onlooker and we spend the rest of the afternoon YouTubing how to change a flat tyre. 🚗

Alice Wasley travelled as a guest of Tourism Victoria.

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EDITED BY MEL EVANS. PHOTOGRAPHY MANDALA WINES/VISIONS OF VICTORIA, GRAHAM CROUCH, PIAF SALON

RAISE A GLASS... to the other Yarra Valley activities BY MEL EVANS

CYCLE TOURS



Grab a bike and roll along the Warburton Rail Trail, which meanders along the Yarra Valley. Take your time to enjoy all the sights, with plenty of opportunities to sample the delights of the region along the way. Visit railtrails.org.au.

RELAXATION



If indulging in a vino or three just isn't enough, take the relaxation up a notch at one of the many day spas in the Yarra region. Piaf Day Spa will have you stretched out and zen before you can say "pass the pinot". Visit piafsalon.com.au.

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