

VICTORIAN TIMES

Australia's High Country has long been known for winter pursuits, but a wave of food producers and winemakers are redefining the southern state's mountain region, says Michael Harden

PHOTOGRAPHY BY EWEN BELL





OPPOSITE PAGE: THE
HIGH COUNTRY'S
CLIMATE LENDS ITSELF
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THIS PAGE; LOCAL
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Travel information

Melbourne is the state capital and largest city of Victoria. Flights from the UK take 22 hours and the time is 11 hours ahead of GMT. Currency is the Australian dollar. In February and March, the average high temperature is 25C and the average low is 13C.

GETTING THERE

British Airways flies to Melbourne daily from London Heathrow via Sydney, Singapore or Hong Kong, from £1,184 return. ba.com

Qantas flies to Melbourne daily from London Heathrow with a stopover in Dubai, from £758 return. qantas.com

RESOURCES

Victoria's High Country provides all the information you need to make the most of your trip with its inspiring website. victorishighcountry.com.au

CARBON COUNTING

To offset your carbon emissions when flying to Melbourne, visit climatecare.org. Return flights from London produce 4.6 tonnes of CO₂, meaning a cost to offset of £34.87.

It used to be all about the snow. Victoria's north east, a beautiful region of historic alpine towns and fertile farmland about three hours' drive from Melbourne, is home to three of Australia's major ski resorts, Mount Hotham, Mount Buller and Falls Creek. Until recently that's what defined this corner of the southern Australian state. Sure, the High Country has been producing world-beating fortified wines since the 1860s. There's always been a handful of places offering a decent lunch and a few producers making cheese or olive oil, and the scenery is spectacular, especially in autumn when the trees burst into flaming colour under wide blue skies. But all this was mostly just a drumroll to the skiing. Not anymore.

The High Country drumbeat now is as much about food and wine as it is about ski fields. A new generation of winemakers,

producers and entrepreneurs are reinventing the region as one of the most exciting and forward-looking food and wine destinations in Australia. There are critically acclaimed restaurants occupying well-preserved, often grand 1850s gold rush-era buildings in picturesque small towns and in villages such as Bright, Beechworth, Myrtleford and Yackandandah. Microbreweries, chocolate makers, coffee roasters, gin distillers, organic vegetable growers, artisan butter makers, bakeries, trout farms and honey producers are pulling in the food-savvy crowds.

One of the most noticeable and exciting changes is that the region's winemakers are expanding their repertoires beyond the shiraz, durif and cabernet that have long been the region's calling cards. Italian varieties such as arneis, tempranillo and ————>>





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OPPOSITE PAGE,
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:





This page, clockwise from top left: cubios, from Paloquemao market; sabanera potatoes; view



pinot grigio are thriving here, well suited to a climate of frosty winters, clear, crisp autumns and long, hot summers with evenings cooled by the breezes sliding down from the Alps. The tranquil King Valley, with its mountain backdrops and winding country roads, has become a hive of prosecco-making activity as new generations of the Italian families who arrived in the area in the 1950s to farm tobacco continue to test the landscape's affinity for the vine.

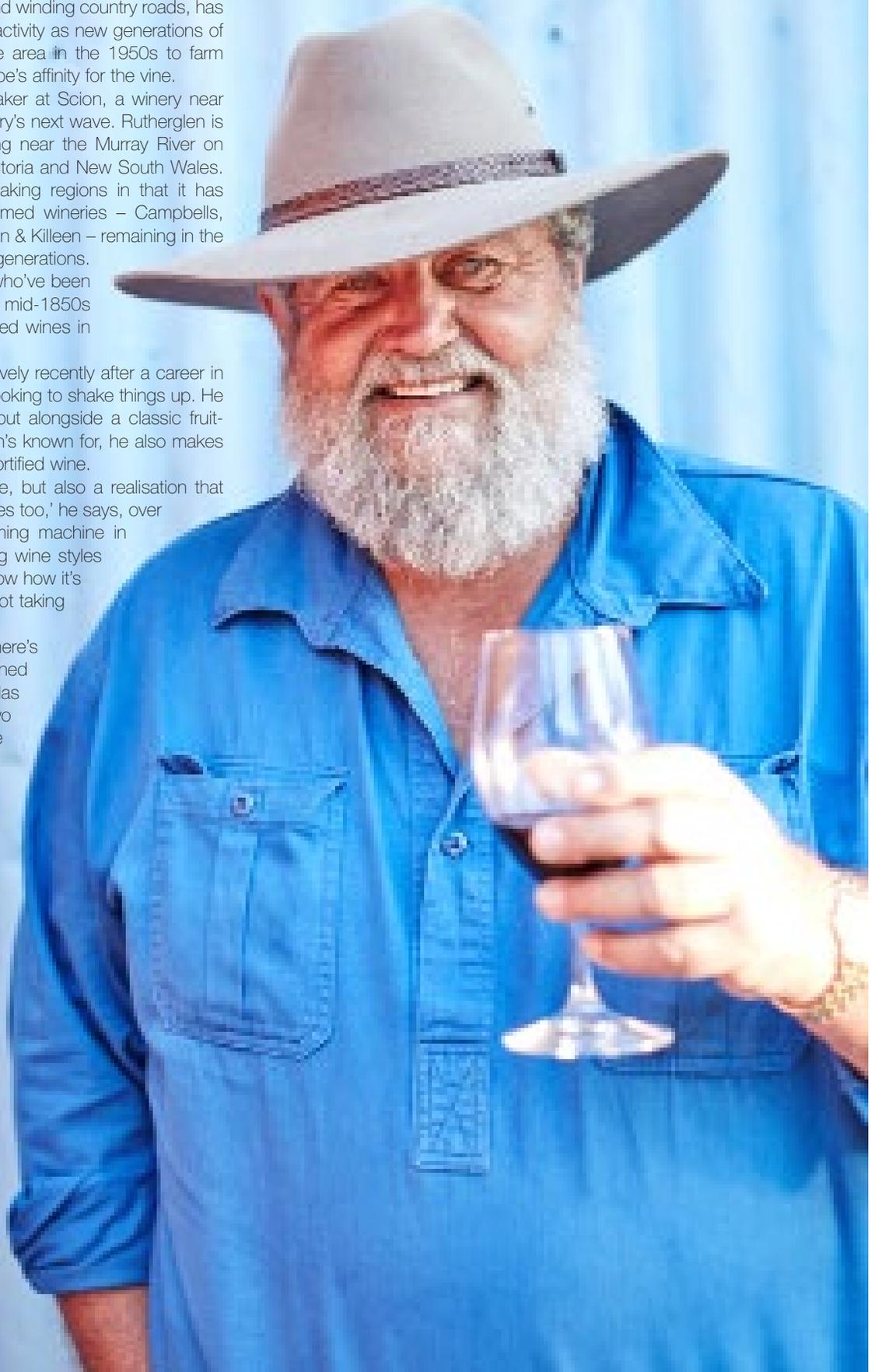
Rowly Milhinch, the owner-winemaker at Scion, a winery near Rutherglen, is part of the High Country's next wave. Rutherglen is a sleepy, town of wide streets sitting near the Murray River on the border between the states of Victoria and New South Wales. It's unique among Australian winemaking regions in that it has a dynastic vibe with many of its famed wineries – Campbells, Chambers Rosewood, Jones, Stanton & Killeen – remaining in the hands of the same families for generations. Milhinch is part of the Morris family, who've been making wine in the region since the mid-1850s and produce some of the best fortified wines in the world less than 20km away.

Milhinch came to winemaking relatively recently after a career in graphic design in Melbourne and is looking to shake things up. He might still make durif, for example, but alongside a classic fruit-driven style that the Rutherglen region's known for, he also makes a rosé and a restrained, less-sweet fortified wine.

'There's a respect for tradition here, but also a realisation that we're capable of producing other wines too,' he says, over very good espresso from the gleaming machine in Scion's cellar door. 'We're developing wine styles and going with it, even if we don't know how it's going to work out. I figure that if I'm not taking risks then I'm risking the business.'

In the main street of Rutherglen there's a bar called Thousand Pound. It's owned and run by Eliza, Angela and Nicholas Brown, siblings who also own two wineries in the region, All Saints Estate and St Leonards Vineyard. At All Saints, with its castle-like winery and cellar door built in 1864, the Browns have their critically acclaimed Terrace Restaurant, where head chef Simon Arkless plates pretty, beautifully constructed dishes focused on local ingredients. He also runs the kitchen at Thousand Pound, where the food taps into the looser, more bar-like atmosphere.

It's the kind of smart, well-cooked menu you'd find in a bar in Melbourne, but here in Rutherglen the meat – lamb made into croquettes, for example – is grown on the Browns' property. The vegetables – pickled heirloom carrots or the artichokes and asparagus flavouring a risotto – are from the gardens at All Saints and St Leonards. Add a soundtrack via an exemplary collection of vintage vinyl and you get an ————>





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Where to eat

Prices are per person for two courses and a glass of wine or beer, unless otherwise stated

Chrismont On a sunny day the awning-shaded terrazzo veranda on this modern angular restaurant and cellar door captures the bucolic, peaceful setting and is the ideal perch on which to appreciate simply cooked, rustic Italian dishes. From £25. 251 Upper King River Road, Cheshunt, 00 61 3 5729 8220, chrismont.com.au

Ginger Baker Sitting on the edge of a park overlooking the Ovens River this ridiculously cute café has open fireplaces, a good wine list and well-cooked food for breakfast, lunch and dinner. From £22. 127 Gavan Street, Bright, 00 61 3 5755 2300 gingerbaker.com.au

Jones A low-key, relaxing French bistro that serves signature dishes such as confit duck and crème brûlée alongside estate wines that can be purchased at the cellar door. From £33. 61 Jones Road, Rutherglen, +612 6032 8496, joneswinery.com.au

Project 49 A snapshot of what's new and excellent in the region wine-wise alongside top-quality coffee and a short, sharp menu heavy on salami and antipasti. From £22. 46-48 Ford Street, Beechworth, 00 61 3 5728 1599, projectfortynine.com.au

Provenance One of Australia's best regional restaurants, Provenance combines sharp Japanese-influenced cooking with a superb wine list benchmarking the best local stuff against the Old World. From £45. 86 Ford Street, Beechworth, 00 61 3 5728 1786, theprovenance.com.au

Terrace Restaurant A lovely rustic dining room offering views over manicured gardens is the backdrop for superbly cooked modern Australian food that takes advantage of estate-grown meat and vegetables. From £39. All Saints Estate, 315 All Saints Road, Wahgunyah, 00 61 2 6035 2228, allsaintswine.com.au

Thousand Pound This rustic-chic wine bar on Rutherglen's main street delivers fantastic drinks and a solid menu that includes three different cuts of steak and excellent cheese. From £30. 82 Main Street, Rutherglen, 00 61 2 6032 8179, thousandpound.com.au

Tomahawks Come here for great cocktails and an on-trend menu that includes a brilliant cheeseburger made with Sevens Creek Wagyu and top-notch Korean fried chicken. From £22. 15 Camp Street, Bright, 00 61 3 5750 1113, tomahawksbright.com.au



experience that captures a real sense of what's happening in the region right now, a respectful reworking of tradition.

There's a similar feeling over at Jones Winery. Winemaker Mandy Jones runs a French-style bistro where people tuck into chicken and pork terrine or confit duck in a relaxed room that's all polished concrete floors and mismatched antique furniture. Jones worked as a winemaker in Bordeaux for more than a decade and many of her wines are classically made using Rutherglen varieties such as durif. She's also experimenting with white varieties such as fiano and has recently released Correll, a French-style aperitif wine with notes of juniper, orange and anise.

'I was a big fan of Lillet when I lived in France and always wanted to try something like that when I came back here,' she says. 'There was a feeling that it couldn't be done, that the region wasn't suited to making wines in that style or that people wouldn't buy them. It turns out Rutherglen is more diverse than people thought.'

Over at the vast Brown Brothers in Milawa, Katherine Brown is also experimenting with different varieties and styles. The first female Brown family winemaker in a company that's been making wine in the region for 125 years, Brown is pushing boundaries too with different ferments and yeasts, techniques such as hand-plunging and making rosé from varieties such as tarrango or experimenting with an entirely new grape variety called mystique, specifically designed for Australian conditions.

'Our climate in the King Valley is a huge strength,' says Brown. 'We can grow anything we want because of all the separate micro-climates and, because the area still feels a bit like a hidden secret, we're not stuck in a mould. People come here to try something new. We can make and grow what we like and so the reputation we're getting as a region is as a place where we do things differently.'

Michael Ryan is doing things differently in Beechworth. The chef's restaurant Provenance, housed in a gold rush-era bank building on the town's Ford Street, is one of the most acclaimed in Australia. Ryan's deep love for Japan is present in the technique and flavours of his dishes but there's a similar fascination with local produce. There might be delicate house-made silken tofu flavoured with ginger and dashi, a wallaby tartare flavoured with umeboshi and topped with cured egg yolk or steamed snapper with a rice cake and kimchi hot pot and fresh shiso leaves. It's intricate, experimental food but, given that most ingredients are sourced close to Beechworth, it also captures a sense of place.

The wine list at Provenance is weighted towards those being made in the High Country and it also includes beer from Bridge Road Brewers, one of the original craft breweries in the region, located just a few doors down, on the same street. —————>>



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King Valley Dairy is doing the flavour-profile thing with butter, pumping out an amazing range of varieties flavoured with truffle, confit garlic, bush tomato and wild thyme

Bridge Road Brewers produces more than a million litres a year now and has 50 varieties available at any one time. There's plenty for the serious craft brew fan to mull over – wet hop beers, Belgian brown ale, porters, pilsners and IPAs – but also more off-the-wall stuff using ingredients such as chestnuts, chocolate and ice cream (there's a seasonal vanilla ice cream ale called Magical Christmas Unicorn).

Where to stay

Circa 1936 Three-suite luxury accommodation in a former art deco bank building. Price per night includes access to the day spa plus drinks, dinner, breakfast and morning and afternoon tea. Suites from £336. 145 Sanger Street, Corowa, 00 61 2 6033 5371, bycirca.com

Feathertop Winery Stylish apartment-style accommodation with views to Mount Buffalo and one with an outdoor bath on the veranda. Apartment/suite from £170. 6619 Great Alpine Road, Porepunkah, 00 61 3 5756 2356, feathertopwinery.com.au

Provenance Japanese-themed accommodation in the old stable building behind Provenance restaurant. Access to a leafy garden and to breakfast cooked by chef Michael Ryan. Doubles from £100. 86 Ford Street, Beechworth, 00 61 3 5728 1786, theprovenance.com.au

The Punka Pub Their recently refurbished hotel rooms are basic but cute, quirky and represent great value. The Punka Pub does excellent food, too. Doubles from £78. 13 Nicholson Street, Porepunkah, 00 61 3 5756 2111, porepunkahpub.com.au

Tuileries Large themed rooms with big verandas overlook views of grapevines, with breakfast served in the welcoming Tuileries café included. Doubles from £110. 13 Drummond Street, Rutherglen, 00 61 2 6032 9033, tuileriesrutherglen.com.au

There are so many craft breweries operating in this region that it seems more of a surprise when a town doesn't have one. Fresh mountain water is one of the advantages for brewers here, as is an abundant supply of locally grown hops that are large-scale farmed for both local and international markets.

It's not surprising then to see the Bright Brewery, a sizeable brewery and beerhall, in the centre of Bright. An extremely pretty town that attracts sightseers in autumn when the town's trees break out a borderline-gaudy display of colour, Bright has also become one of the region's most interesting food destinations.

Hamish Nugent is a chef who recently closed his restaurant in Bright so that he could concentrate on making gin. He's fascinated with the gin-making process and how gin can 'reflect the landscape'.

'I wanted Remedy Gin to really reflect what's local so I've been experimenting with a lot of different flavours,' he says. 'I've looked at pine needles, finger lime, lemon-scented gum, lemon verbena, lemon myrtle, nuts from Wandoo, honey from Milawa and sencha tea from a local tea producer. I want the gin to taste like a walk through the Australian bush on a hot day.'

Nugent is in the midst of teaming up with local coffee roaster Luke Dudley, whose business Sixpence Coffee has outgrown the small coffee 'shed' where he started roasting beans and running a café on the outskirts of Bright a couple of years ago. The café with its rustic character, grassy, outdoor area and spectacular mountain backdrop will remain, but the roasting will move into a new complex in the centre of town that will also include the gin distillery and a bakery specialising in bulk-fermented sourdough bread.

Bright also has a chocolate maker – Bright Chocolate – located in an 1870s brick stable building. Owner and head chocolate maker Simeon Crawley handcrafts chocolate from beans that he roasts on site in the same space as the retail shop and so the smell, sounds and vicinity of chocolate making add layers to the experience. Particularly good is a range of beautifully packaged single-origin chocolate bars that are made with beans from Madagascar, Ecuador, Trinidad, Tanzania and the Dominican Republic, each with a distinct flavour profile.

About an hour's drive away in Moyhu, chef Naomi Ingleton is doing the flavour-profile thing with butter. She operates King Valley Dairy out of an old dairy factory that closed in the 1950s and is now back to life, pumping out an amazing variety of cultured butter, buttermilk, crème fraîche, ghee, buttermilk ricotta and butters beautifully flavoured with truffle, confit garlic, —————>>







The High Country retains the peace and the pace of an undiscovered gem. The narrow, winding roads are mostly empty and there's a shoulder-relaxing tranquility to the place



smoked salt, bush tomato and wild thyme. The business has taken off faster than even she expected.

'I take all the cream I can get my hands on from 21 local dairy farms,' she says. 'But we're always on the lookout for more because of demand – we've doubled production this year and will do it again by the middle of next year.'

It might seem that with all this production activity, the High Country might be getting a little hectic. But somehow it still retains the peace and the pace of an undiscovered gem. Aside from the few times of year when there's a festival taking place or snow traffic, the narrow, winding roads are mostly empty and there's a shoulder-relaxing tranquility to the place.

One of the best places to experience this is on the King Valley Prosecco Road. Wineries such as Dal Zotto, Pizzini and Chrismont are found along a quiet stretch of road that ends in a dead end at the end of the valley. There's no through traffic and, at the wineries, plenty of excellent vantage points where visitors can sit back with a glass of prosecco – or fiano, sangiovese, nebbiolo, arneis, verduzzo or pinot grigio. It's the perfect way to contemplate the beauty of the High Country, snow or no snow. □

