

ONLINE GRAPEVINE

Sunday Herald Sun, September 21, 2008 **escape**

Andrew McUtchen samples a new card that leads you into a wine and food wonderland

GOING undercover has its advantages. In this case it meant that I could tour the best of the Mornington Peninsula's food and wine producers for the purpose of writing a story without my customary dictaphone and reporter's notebook in hand. In their place, a freshly minted VisitVineyards.com membership card.

The new membership program accompanies VisitVineyards.com, an online resource for food and wine travellers. I could leave the interviews, the elaborate tasting notes and the waffle to the wine and food critics, and see how the other half live. Just drink wine, eat cheese and cruise around flashing my card.

With it I was connected with chief winemakers upon arrival, given access to the top drops — not just the \$20 price points — at cellar doors and more than once I was pried with rubberwood boards of local cheeses, tapenades and fresh produce.

But this was too good not to write down, so wearily, with all this great new information in mind and exciting tastes still lingering on my palate, I trudged back to the car to

boarding pass

getting there:

VisitVineyards.com's membership card is currently available for use in the Mornington Peninsula, an hour's drive from Melbourne. The membership program aims to expand to include other significant Victorian and Australian wine and food regions.

deal: Foundation members can join the VisitVineyards.com community at a special introductory rate of \$49 for one year of benefits, 50 per cent of the standard annual rate. This offer is available until March, 2009. Members will receive a membership card to present on arrival at the venue, and a booklet of sample offers.



more: Memberships can be purchased via the website www.visitvineyards.com or from preferred resellers and partner businesses in the region.

retrieve my notebook. Combining food, wine and experiential travel is all part of the Visit Vineyards plan, according to founder and CEO Robyn Lewis: "The membership program is about offering people exclusive, memorable experiences they can't access during a standard regional visit."

"We connect them directly with producers — some well known and others 'hidden gems' — so they can uncover the colour, flavour and secrets of each place they're visiting."

Having opened in June this year, VisitVineyards.com aims to show-

case the best that Australia has to offer to an increasingly discerning travelling public, who have more choices — and less time to make them — than ever before.

The membership program, launched this month, aims to go one step further by connecting wine and food travellers with regional producers in a way that's never been done before.

The website has already pooled more than 30,000 wine, food and travel experiences across key Australian wine and food regions. Search the site free of charge and soon you will be crafting an itinerary to suit a specific interest — whether it is visiting a winery for a degustation lunch; staying overnight at a secluded retreat; sampling homemade chocolates from a local chocolatier; playing golf at a local club; or a combination of them all.

VisitVineyards.com focused on Victoria's iconic Mornington Peninsula for the first phase of its membership program. More than 70 businesses are already involved — from wineries, breweries, restaurants and food producers, to art galleries, spas and accommodation providers. My partner and I set out with elastic-waisted pants to fit as many member offers as we could into one day. Here goes.

bracing sea views all the way across Western Port Bay to Phillip Island.

2: MONTALTO VINEYARD

This picturesque property of vineyards, olive groves, streams, sculpture gardens and wetlands provided the quintessential Mornington backdrop for a winery lunch, which included a complimentary "wine flight" of Montalto's sophisticated chardonnay range.

3: RED HILL COOL STORE

Complimentary tastings of olive oil and wines were on offer at the charming Red Hill Cool Store, where owner and local artist Gillian Haig's passion for art, as well as local produce, was evident in every corner. Gillian opened our minds to the sweet sweet world of wine and chocolate matching with an unusual trio of coffee, a cinnamon blend of dark chocolate and lastly an Elgee Park Chardonnay. I reached to loosen my belt and realised I wasn't wearing one. Uh oh.

4: PERIDOT LAKE ESTATE

Originally a dairy farm, then a vineyard with tea-rooms and trout fishing, Peridot Lake Estate has resolved its identity crisis with its current incarnation as a quality European Restaurant. The Tastes of Greece plate with saganaki, white-bait and olives, which is exclusive to VisitVineyards.com members, was a savoury treat, but it pushed the two of us firmly into elegant sufficiency. What a way to go.

5: SARTAIN'S AT MORNINGTON

Nestled in a garden setting within an expansive 4ha country property (suitable grounds for walking off the many thousands of calories acquired during the day) Sartain's At Mornington was just the respite we needed. But oh no, what was waiting on the dressing table when we entered? A bottle of local wine and a tasting platter of local treats reserved for VisitVineyards.com members! Nooooooo. We fought the card and the card won.

6: MERRICKS STORE (top left)

Reinvented by its new owners to resemble an old-fashioned wine store, Merricks General Store provided a thorough wine tasting and a complimentary glass of wine with our chosen meal, a board of local cheeses and fresh-cut apples. The General Store is now the cellar door for Elgee Park, Baillieu Vineyard and Quealy Wines. Kathleen Quealy of Quealy Wines poked her head in at one point to explain her quirky self-made varietals including the spritzzy "Pobblebonk" (an Italian style "Super-White") from a range of grapes in a single region.

Stop 1: RED HILL ESTATE (left)

I pre-booked our VisitVineyards.com member experience the day before (as advised) and sure enough when we arrived and presented the card at the cellar door bar, chief winemaker Garth Noonan appeared to take us through the entire range of wines, complete with commentary on how the wines were made and the differences between the vintages and the styles of wines. The Red Hill Estate Chardonnay (2006) proved to be every bit as good as it is supposed to be. Our session was completed with a tour of the vineyard, which boasts

