

Members' privileges

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Get a red-carpet welcome at the Mornington Peninsula's best, writes Sheriden Rhodes.

Have you ever wondered how that smug-looking couple managed to score the fireside seat on a busy Saturday at some fab foodie cafe? While you stand in line waiting to be squeezed in somewhere, they're tucking into eggs Benedict with cured ocean trout, quietly toasting their cleverness with a glass of pinot gris. Obviously, they must know someone.

Later you run into them at a bustling cellar door. While you and five other couples wait patiently for a tasting, they're whisked off on a private tour and personalised tasting with none other than the winemaker herself.

"They must be VIPs," you mutter under your breath, wishing you hadn't had the same bright idea as half of Melbourne to visit the Mornington Peninsula on the first weekend of spring - and the first day back for the Red Hill Market after its winter hiatus.

But now there's another way. visitvineyards.com.au enables food and wine buffs to get the red-carpet treatment at a range of food, wine and related experiences. It's the brainchild of Robyn Lewis, who, along with husband Charlie, runs a small boutique vineyard in Tasmania.

It was while looking at hundreds of brochures to research a trip to Margaret River that Lewis, a passionate internet user, devised the idea behind the website. "We wanted to bring our love of food and wine to epicurious travellers, and here we are 30,000 products later," she says at the launch of its membership program at Montalto in Red Hill.

"On the website we showcase what we believe are the best of Australia's food and wine experiences, while also helping people uncover the icons and hidden gems of a region." For the \$49 introductory offer, you get a range of special offers and personalised service on the Mornington Peninsula, and soon in other Australia wine regions.

With membership cards in hand, we set off to explore the peninsula.

First stop is luxury accommodation Easton Grey, 16 hectares of lush farmland run by the charming Jo Clements and her blonde, tutu-wearing daughter. This place would be a find in itself but visitvineyards.com members also get a local bottle of wine, Red Hill cheese and bread on arrival, which



Red Hill Cool Store.

Photo: *Robert Banks*

makes it just that bit more special. Clements discreetly delivers breakfast of home-laid eggs, fresh coffee and croissants with sweet jams to your door each morning.

We then head to Stonier Winery, where we're warmly welcomed by senior winemaker Geraldine McFaul.

Later, across the way at Merricks General Store, we're given the best table in the house and a glass of Baillieu Vineyard wine. New owner and winemaker Kathleen Quealy also takes us through its range during a personalised tasting. Now we're the ones feeling smug.

Three Mornington Peninsula vigneron, the families behind Baillieu Vineyard, Elgee Park and Quealy, recently took over the reins of the bistro-produce store, adding a new cellar door for their wines.

Quealy shares a laugh with us during a tasting of her favourite, the 2007 Quealy Pobblebonk - something we would never have tried unless we had met her in person. "Come back soon," Quealy yells as she sends us off to Lindenderry - one of the prettiest wineries on the peninsula.

We're shown to our table inside the formal dining room, where just one other couple is dining - celebrating a birthday. We stare out at the sunny spring day and decide to move outside to the flower-filled courtyard, where we tuck into two courses with a glass of estate-grown chardonnay, which is thrown in for visitvineyard.com members.

On the way to our next stop, I have a quick look around the busy Red Hill Market. I meet Gail Pettifer, who has enjoyed success selling her range of whimsical Bhaktiangel denim skirts, and Gabbi, from FabFrames, who makes customised frames for children's artwork and blackboards. Afterwards, at the Red Hill Cool Stores, artist Gillian Haig gives us a free local olive-oil tasting as part of the visitvineyard.com membership offer.

But possibly the best experience of the weekend comes on our last night at Vines of Red Hill. We enjoy a complimentary wine flight of four estate wines before tucking into a warm salad of early spring white asparagus with truffled free-range eggs.

There's a few things about the visitvineyard.com concept I don't quite understand. Suppliers, for instance, get a free listing, and with 30,000 products on the website I wonder how they can personally vouch for all of them. But what I do like is that membership gives you insider access to experiences you may never have tried, or known existed, and priority over other consumers, provided you've booked ahead.

Sheriden Rhodes travelled courtesy of www.visitvineyards.com.

Visitvineyards.com's membership card is available for use in the Mornington Peninsula, featuring more than 70 special wine, food and travel offers in the region. Foundation members can join for the introductory rate of \$49 for one year.