



## ESCAPE → VICTORIA

# Cool drops excite the palate

**ANDREW McUTCHEN SAMPLES A NEW CARD THAT LEADS TO A WINE AND FOOD WONDERLAND**

GOING undercover has its advantages. It meant I could tour the best of the Mornington Peninsula's food and wine producers for the purpose of writing a story without my dictaphone and notebook in hand.

In their place was a freshly minted visitvineyards.com membership card, which accompanies visitvineyards.com, an online resource for food and wine travellers.

With the card 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 was plied with rubberwood boards of local cheeses, tapenades and fresh produce.

Visitvineyards.com, which opened in June last year, aims to showcase the best Australia has to offer to an increasingly discerning travelling public.

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 to craft an itinerary including visiting a winery for a degustation lunch, staying overnight at a secluded retreat, sampling homemade chocolates or playing golf.

On Victoria's Mornington Peninsula, 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-related offers as we could into one day. Here goes:

### RED HILL ESTATE

I booked our visitvineyards.com member experience the day before (as advised), so when we presented the card at the cellar door bar, chief

winemaker Garth Noonan took us through the entire range of wines, complete with commentary on how they were made and the differences between the vintages and the styles of wines. The Red Hill Estate Chardonnay (2006) proved every bit as good as expected.

### MONTALTO VINEYARD

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

### RED HILL COOL STORE

Complimentary tastings of olive oil and wines were on offer at this charming store, where owner and local artist Gillian Haig's passion for art and local produce was evident in every corner. Ms Haig opened our minds to the sweet sweet world of

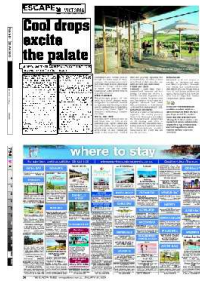
wine and chocolate matching with an unusual trio of coffee, a cinnamon blend of dark chocolate and lastly an Elgee Park chardonnay.

### PERIDOT LAKE ESTATE

Originally a dairy farm, then a vineyard with tearooms and trout fishing, the estate has resolved its identity crisis with its present incarnation as a quality European restaurant. The tastes of Greece plate with saganaki, whitebait and olives, which is exclusive to visitvineyards.com members, was a savoury treat.

### SARTAIN'S AT MORNINGTON

Nestled in a garden setting within an expansive 4ha country property, Sartain's At Mornington seemed just the respite we needed. But what was on the dressing table when we entered? A bottle of local wine and a tasting platter of local treats reserved for visitvineyards.com members! Noooooooooooo. We fought the card and the card won.



**MERRICKS STORE**

Reinvented by its new owners to resemble an old-fashioned wine store, Merricks provided a thorough wine tasting and 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.

**GO**

**MEMBERSHIP:** [Visitvineyards.com](http://www.visitvineyards.com) foundation members can join at a special introductory rate of \$49 for a year, 50 per cent off the standard annual rate. Offer is available until

February 28. Members receive a card to present at venues and a booklet of sample offers. Buy memberships at [www.visitvineyards.com](http://www.visitvineyards.com) or from preferred resellers and partner businesses