



Hit the high notes

In Victoria's north-east, the hills, valleys, towns and villages are all alive with delicious produce, restaurants and wineries. Story and photos: Tricia Welsh

Olives, olive oils, honey, mustard, apples, berries, farmed trout and salmon, venison, jams, pickles, preserves, beer, specialty breads and cheese – plus of course, premium wines. The alpine valleys around Milawa, Myrtleford, Bright and Mount Beauty in Victoria's north-east are as productive as they are picturesque.

Much of the region was settled in the 1950s by Italian immigrants who filled the valleys with fields of tobacco. While some old corrugated iron tobacco kilns still dot the landscape, the fertile lands have been replanted with such a diversity of quality products that the region now delivers one of the most concentrated gourmet experiences in the country.

The region is magical in all seasons: in spring when it's peppered with blossom trees, in summer when berries and fruit are plentiful, in autumn when its vibrant foliage makes the landscape appear as if it's on fire, and in winter when shimmering snow caps the surrounding peaks.

> FOOD STORES

Whorouly is but a dot on the map about 15km west of Myrtleford, hence **The Whorouly Grocer** (577 Whorouly Rd, 5727 1220) comes as a stylish surprise. Stock up on home-made pies and goodies, gourmet and local produce and whatever farmers might have in excess from their crops. Open Mon, Thu-Fri 9am-5pm, Sat-Sun 9am-4pm.

It's not just travelling skiers who appreciate places such as Myrtleford's **The Butter Factory** (15 Myrtle St, 5752 2300). This café providore, housed in a 1906 red-brick butter factory, makes delicious snacks and baked goods, and stocks local produce as well as their own butter and cheese. Open Thu, Sat, Mon-Tue 8.30am-5pm, Fri 8.30am-late, Sunday 8.30am-7pm.

In Bright, head for **Food Wine Friends** (2/6 Ireland St, 5750 1312) for home-made soups, picnic loaves, quiches and frittatas – ideal to make a picnic. Give a little notice and a delicious hamper can be put together. Open daily 8.30am-4.30pm.



Mountains of flavour ... (clockwise from left) Milawa Mustards ... Wandiligong apples ... EV olives ... tasting platter from the Butter Factory, Myrtleford.

The kitchen at **Treats Café** (Bogong Ski Centre, Tawonga South, 5754 1515) is a hive of activity, producing a huge range of take-away food. With a little notice, they'll select items for a hamper to go. Open daily 8am-4pm, longer hours in winter.

At Mt Beauty, the smart Swedish-style deli **Å Skafferi** (84 Bogong High Plains Rd, 5754 4544) has beautiful views over the township, with Mt Bogong in the background. It offers local smallgoods, herrings, cheese, light salads, soups, home-made cakes, pastries and truffles. Open daily 7am-6pm.

> PRODUCE OUTLETS

Milawa was one of the first regional produce trails in the state and still excites with its produce. Housed in a charming colonial-style cottage, **Milawa Mustards** (at the Crossroads, 5727 3202) has been making mustards and condiments for 28 years. Taste the vast range of herb and flavoured mustards, chutneys, pickles, jams and vinegars, all made on the premises from mostly home-grown ingredients. Open daily 10am-5pm.

At the **Milawa Cheese Factory, Bakery & Restaurant** (Factory Lane 5727 3589), in the historic former Murray-Goulburn butter factory, sample award-winning cows' goats' and sheep's milk cheese such as the mild washed-rind King River Gold, mild creamy Milawa Blue and cows' milk Milawa camembert. Choose a platter with dried fruits or take some home to savour latter. The adjacent Milawa Bakery produces quality breads including French and fruit sourdoughs. Open daily 9am-5pm.

Nearby at **Walkabout Apiaries/Whiteheads Mead** (Snow Rd, 5727 3468), the Whitehead family has been harvesting blossoms for its range of honeys for more than 35 years. Try the flavour-

some Mudgegonga stringy-bark or chestnut honey – the first in Australia, harvested from groves in the Alpine region. Open daily 10am-5pm.

Olive trees dot the landscape throughout the region. There's a good selection of olives and olive-related products available at **The Olive Shop** (1605 Snow Rd, Milawa, 5727 3887). Open Thu-Sun 10am-5pm, Mon-Wed 10am-4pm. Local olives to look for include: **Alpine Olives** (Mullagong Rd, Upper Gundwring, (02) 6028 9265), open by appointment; **Mt Buffalo Olives** just out of Porepunkah (307 Mt Buffalo Rd, 5756 2143), open Sat-Sun 11am-5pm; and **EV Olive Groves** (Everton Rd, Markwood, 5727 0209), where you can be guided through an olive oil tasting, learn how extra virgin olive oil is made and taste a range of flavoured oils and plump olives. Bring your own container for bulk oil purchases. Open daily 10am-5pm.

At Oxley, buy fresh raspberries, boysenberries and blackberries in season (Dec-Mar) from **Blue Ox Berries** (77 Smith St, 5727 3397). They have frozen berries year round and make berry jams, chutneys and sauces. Open daily 10pm-6pm.

At the **Valley Nut Groves** (235 Schlapps Rd, Gapsted, 5752 1251), let Gillian Gasser take you on a taste discovery tour of the walnut varieties her family has been growing since 1923. Open daily 10am-5pm April-June.

Near Eurobin, you can buy venison steaks and sausages, and take-home packs of ostrich and goat meat, from **Red Stag Tourist Complex** (324 Hughes Lane, 5756 2365) – all grown on the farm. Open daily 10am-4pm.

Buy all sorts of fresh berries in season, plus blackcurrants and cherries just before Christmas, at the **Bright Berry Farm** >



Valley variety ... (clockwise from above) Kancoona's cellar door ... gourmet chestnuts ... A Skafferi's treats ... organic produce at the Whorouly Grocer.

< (6300 Great Alpine Rd, Eurobin, 5756 2523), plus frozen berries and ice cream year-round. Open daily 9am-5pm. Seasonal and frozen berries are also available from **Gunnadoo Berries** (1380 Great Alpine Rd, Smoko, 5759 2507). Open 8.30am-5pm.

Nearby is **Australian Gourmet Chestnuts** (5962 Great Alpine Rd, Eurobin, 5756 2788), where Brian and Jane Casey harvest chestnuts from 2000 trees. Their crop is used locally as well as exported to Japan and France. Open April 10am-5pm or by appointment.

Refresh your palate with one of the seven brews on tap at **Bright Brewery** (121 Great Alpine Rd, Bright, 5755 1301), made using fresh mountain water, home-grown grain and hops from the alpine valleys. Try the light, natural Bright Lager, the aromatic Hellfire Amber Ale or the American-style Blowhard Pale Ale. Many are available in five-litre mini-kegs. Open daily noon-evening.

It's a pretty drive to Wandiligong to buy fresh apples by the kilogram or box from **Nightingale Bros Alpine Apples** (Morses Creek Trk, 5755 1318). Open daily 8am-5pm.

At Harrierville, you can catch your own rainbow, brown or brook trout and perhaps Atlantic salmon at the **Mountain Fresh Trout and Salmon Farm** (Stoney Creek Trk, off Great Alpine Rd, 5759 2558). Fish can be cooked and barbecued on the spot. Open Thu-Mon 10am-4pm, public holidays and daily during school holidays.

It's worth any detour to taste the award-winning **Gundowring Ice Cream**. Perhaps sample toasted honey and walnut, ginger, licorice, rhubarb or fig at **A Skafferi** (see page 33) and **Waddington's** (2688 Kiewa Valley Hwy, Kergunyah, (02) 6027 5393). Open Thu-Sun noon-3pm.

> INTERESTING WINERIES

The family-owned **Ciavarella Oxley Estate** (17 Evans Lane, Oxley, 5727 3384) specialises in small-parcel wines, and although they planted their first grapes in 1978, they didn't produce their own wine until 1992. Let Tony Ciavarella talk you through the excellent durif, the gold medal-winning chardonnay or the zinfandel – one of the few made in the area. Open Mon-Sat 9am-6pm, Sun 10am-6pm.

Meet fifth-generation winemaker Ross Gehrig at **John Gehrig Wines** (80 Gehrigs Lane, Oxley, 5727 3395) and try the rare varietal chenin blanc, plus cabernet merlot and RG riesling. Open daily 9am-5pm.

With 150 years' family winemaking tradition, the Michelini family at **Michelini Wines** (213 Great Alpine Rd, Myrtleford, 5751 1990) produce a great range of Italian-style wines, available at their villa-style cellar door. Try their classic Italian reds such as sangiovese, marzemino and teroldego – the only commercial teroldego produced in Australia. Open daily 10am-5pm.

Ringer Reef Winery (6835 Great Alpine Rd, Porepunkah, 5756 2805) is on the site of an old gold mine. Bruce and Annie Holm are justly proud of their sparkling merlot and elegant rosé. Open Fri-Mon noon-5pm.

Bogong Estate (cnr Mountain Creek and Damms Rds, Tawonga, 5754 4347) serves Burgundian-style platters during school holidays to complement its pinot noir – two from 2005 and two from 2008. Open daily 11am-5pm.

In a beautiful bushland setting, **Kancoona Valley Wines & Café** (123 Morgans Creek Rd, Kancoona, (02) 6028 9419) make top preservative-free wines and have a small rustic cafe menu at weekends. Try the pinot noir, merlot, chardonnay or refreshingly sweet dolce vino rosso. Open daily 10am-5pm.

> WINERY RESTAURANTS

The region is supported by more than a dozen wineries, several with good restaurants that complement their wines. At Oxley, third-generation winemaker Sam continues his family's traditions at **Sam Miranda** (Snow Rd, 5727 3888). Start with a selection of antipasti or charcuterie before moving on to perhaps a slow-braised lamb forequarter, crisp pork belly or marinated baked ricotta. Do try the Italian-style sparkling prosecco and the flagship Girls Block cabernet sauvignon blended with petit verdot. Open daily 12noon-3pm, cellar door 10am-5pm.

Iconic family-run **Brown Brothers** (Milawa-Bobinawarrah Rd, Milawa, 5720 5500) is arguably Australia's leading varietal winemakers and holds a special place in the local community. You can sample special release wines at cellar door or enjoy them at The Epicurean Centre, where Danny Neate produces dishes designed to complement the estate wines – perhaps home-cured duck prosciutto with 2009 crouchen riesling rosé, a terrific pithivier of potato with green capsicum and wash-rind cheese with 2008 cellar door release viognier, or Berkshire pork belly, braised fennel and orange marmalade with the 2007 limited release sparkling shiraz. Pairings are suggested for the ultimate wine and food experience, and great use is made of local produce. Open daily noon-3pm, cellar door 9am-5pm.

Near Porepunkah, **Boynton's Feathertop Wines** (6619 Great Alpine Rd, 5756 2356) is identifiable in autumn by its magnificent avenue of trees. From Cup Day until Mother's Day, they lure Dinner Plain chef Hamish Nugent from Tsubo to cook Japanese-inspired dishes of two courses with matching wines (\$45). You can also choose local deli produce to enjoy with a glass of wine on the terrace. Try their pinot gris, shiraz or prosecco brut, only available at cellar door. Open Thu-Mon noon-3pm, daily in January, cellar door daily 10am-5pm.

At Gapsted, sit on the terrace of **Gapsted Wines** (3897 Great Alpine Rd, 5751 1383) and enjoy a tasting plate or a la carte lunch. Share a platter of local produce to start and then choose from perhaps seared duck breast with blueberry and durif jus – matched with 2006 Ballerina Canopy durif, or soya-glazed Atlantic salmon steak with mango salsa matched with a Valley Selection sauvignon blanc semillon. You can enjoy breakfast at weekends with terrific eggs Benedict, but do sample the innovative European-style wine varieties – the Russian-style red saperavi and the French-style riesling petit mansang, and both available only at cellar door. Open weekdays 11am-3pm, Sat-Sun 9am-3pm, cellar door 10am-5pm.

Near Mt Beauty township, **Annapurna Estate Vineyard & Café** (Simmonds Creek Rd, Tawonga South, 5754 4517) enjoys beautiful views to Mt Bogong and uses much regional produce in its vineyard café to match its wines. Try the pinot gris and flagship sparkling pinot noir and methode classique. There's also a tapas menu to complement the six brews from in-house Sweetwater Brewery. Open Wed-Sun 10am-5pm.

Although in a bushland setting, **Ceccanti Kiewa Valley Wines** (285 Bay Creek Lane, Coral Bank, 5754 5236) enjoys similar soil types and climate to Italy's famed Chianti region, hence the winery café's Tuscan-inspired antipasti, soup, pasta, sweets or a five-course banquet to complement the estate riesling, cabernet sauvignon, merlot and shiraz. Open Thu-Mon 11am-5pm.

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Venison and more is available from Red Stag, near Eurobin.

> MARKETS

Every Saturday from Christmas to Easter: Myrtleford Community Produce Market.

First Saturday of the month: Mt Beauty.

Third Saturday of the month: Bright.

> FESTIVALS/EVENTS

22 October-2 November: Bright Spring Festival, www.greatalpinevalleys.com.au.

20-21 November: Brown Brothers Wine and Food Festival, Easter weekend 2011: Brown Brothers Easter Festival, www.brownbrothers.com.au.

29 April-1 May 2011: Mt Beauty Music Festival, www.musicmuster.org.au.

30 April-11 May 2011: Bright Autumn Festival, www.brightautumnfestival.org.au.

> RACV REGIONAL WINE & FOOD PROGRAM

Through the RACV Regional Wine & Food program, you can enjoy special discounts as RACV members at a selection of businesses throughout the north-east valleys, including:

Beechworth: Beechworth Honey & Indigo Vineyards;

Bright: Boyntons Feathertop Winery; Bright Brewery;

Glenrowan: Granite Range Estate;

King Valley: Casa Luna Gourmet; Gracebrook Vineyards; Politini Wines.

Rutherglen: Pfeiffer Wines, Rutherglen Estates; Rutherglen Lamb.

For the full list of discount offers from participating businesses, go to racv.visitvineyards.com.