

FIT FOR A

King



Photography: Ewel Bell



Sue Wallace eats and drinks her way around Victoria's King Valley, where the produce is as rich in history as it is in abundance.

There's a toe-tapping Italian tune playing as we sip prosecco and dine on homemade gnocchi, gazing out over the scenery of the King Valley, which is tucked away in north-eastern Victoria. It's no surprise that Italian migrants made this area their home in the 1940s and '50s, declaring this little patch of paradise reminded them of their beloved homeland.

The King Valley stretches 75 kilometres south from Wangaratta into the Alpine National Park and includes the towns of Oxley, Milawa, Moyhu, Whitfield, Cheshunt and Myrree. It has a rich history, having been home to bushranger Harry Power, lots of hardworking Chinese, who established market gardens during the gold rush days, and Italians, who planted tobacco. These days, however, the tobacco fields have been replaced by rows of manicured vineyards and award-winning wineries. ➔



After the decline of tobacco farming, many Italian families called on their winemaking heritage to create European-style wines and varietal blends. Today, the King Valley is perfect for winery hopping, boasting some of the highest altitude vineyards in the country producing prosecco, riesling, shiraz, nebbiolo, sangiovese, barbera, verduzzo, brachetto and arneis, as well as rarer Italian varietals.

CESHUNT AND WHITFIELD

Award-winning King Valley winemaker Arnie Pizzini, of Chrismont at Cheshunt, is among those who sing the area's praises.

"The King Valley is a very special place. It has so much going for it with its wonderful scenery and excellent vineyards where you can meet the winemakers and their families," Arnie says. "It has a similar climate and landscape to Piemonte and Tuscany in Italy, and Alsace in France, so it enables us to produce rich cool-climate wines."

Arnie's father, Arnold, arrived in the area from Italy's Trentino region in 1952 and made the transition from tobacco in the 1980s. The family has been making top wines since 1996. Drop into the cellar door or stay a night or two in the elegant guesthouse, which has dramatic views across the vineyards and hills.

Arnie says his wines are made with passion and pride. New drops include Chrismont La Zona Pinot Grigio 2012, which has aromas of melon and ripe pear and subtle notes of quince and cooked apple.

Closer to the town of Whitfield is the Pizzini winery, where Fred Pizzini, Arnie's cousin, planted his first riesling vines in 1978 after growing up on a tobacco farm with his parents, who also left the Italian Alps for a new life in Australia.

It's a family affair, with son Joel making wines that include award-winning pinot grigio, riesling, arneis, shiraz, sangiovese, nebbiolo and vin santo, a rare Italian dessert wine. Try a tasting at the cellar door or take an inspiring cooking lesson with Fred's wife, Katrina, who learned to cook when she lived with her Italian mother-in-law for the first 12 months of her married life. She now shares her treasured



FAST FACT

Chinese settler Bill Chong and his wife, Bessie, ran the Whitfield cafe in the 1940s and '50s and often sold 40 dozen homemade pies on a Saturday afternoon when the footy was on.



Clockwise from top: The bar at the Mountain View Hotel; Dal Zotto wines made the first prosecco in Australia; Otto Dal Zotto, winemaker at Dal Zotto Wines; a juicy Mountain View Hotel rib eye.

Photography: Ewen Ball, Tourism Victoria

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recipes at her A Tavola! Cooking School, where you can learn how to make pasta, ravioli and gnocchi the true Italian way.

For a taste of the valley's best produce, dine at Whitfield's Mountain View Hotel, which is now a boutique gastronomic pub where chef Bryan Alley has breathed new life into the kitchen.

“There's so much great fresh produce in the King Valley, it's a real adventure to create dishes around the produce,” he says. “We are all about big flavours and making everything in-house by hand. You will see French, Spanish and South American influences on our menu.”

The classic-style hotel, which overlooks Jessie's Creek and has a licence that dates back to the 1890s, was revamped by Fred and Katrina's son, Carlo, and his wife, Sally.

Be tempted by deboned baby chicken and prosciutto with chestnuts, celeriac fondant, pumpkin puree and sprouts, and a finale

of orange trifle with burnt orange crème, prosecco jelly and orange cake.

Nearby is Dal Zotto Wines, which is known for its many award-winning drops, including its acclaimed prosecco, which was the first of its type made in Australia. Winemaker Michael Dal Zotto couldn't wait to join his father, Otto, who started making wines in 1987 after emigrating from Italy in 1967 and growing tobacco.

Michael, who gave up his accounting job in the city, describes the King Valley as one of the most beautiful places he has ever seen. “There aren't too many places like the King Valley and I love seeing people's reactions when they arrive and take their first look at the hills and countryside,” he says. “They reckon I have a pretty good office.”

The winery's popular Trattoria, open weekends only, features an Italian-inspired menu with antipasto, gnocchi and handmade pasta. There's a bocce court where you can

work off your lunch, and you may even catch a glimpse of family matriarch Nonna Elena in the veggie garden, tending the precious produce that ends up on the table.

ON THE TRAIL

For those who love Italian bubbly, Dal Zotto is among the movers and shakers behind the Prosecco Road tasting route that also includes the Chrismont, Pizzini, Ciccone Estate, Brown Brothers and Sam Miranda wineries. The route stretches 50 kilometres from the Milawa Gourmet Region to Cheshunt and offers a variety of intimate prosecco tastings and culinary experiences at the six wineries, showcasing the simple pleasures of prosecco.

Another King Valley character is Salvatore Politini, 77, who arrived from Sicily in 1956 and established Politini Wines with his wife, Josie, in 1989. “There are many other valleys in north-eastern Victoria and I have seen ☺



them all after living around here for 50 years, but the King Valley is special,” he says. “We have the King River, beautiful scenery, such wonderful wines and great people, and we love seeing visitors discover our secret.”

The two loves in his life are his piano accordion and Josie’s Italian cooking. “She makes the best salsicce (sausage), sweet cannoli, crostoli and almond torrone. Her sausage-making classes always sell out,” he says.

Closer to Milawa, you can’t miss the lofty tower of third-generation winemaker Sam Miranda’s cellar door. Sam makes crisp whites and earthy, cool-climate reds, while chef Hugh Lambert offers a menu of regional produce.

New drops are also available at Milawa’s Brown Brothers, which is considered the pioneer of food and wine pairing. Chef Doug Elder is wowing diners at the winery’s Epicurean Centre, which opened in 1994. Diners can now choose from Patricia’s Table for an à la carte occasion or the more casual Epi.Curious for relaxed wine and food.

“Patricia’s Table is a tribute to family matriarch Patricia Brown, who loved her kitchen. Her cooking was enjoyed by visitors to Brown Brothers for more than five decades,” explains Brown Brothers public relations manager and fourth-generation family member Katherine Brown.

Visitors can borrow a free bike and enjoy a ‘pedal to produce’ experience, visiting Milawa Mustards, The Olive Shop, Milawa Cheese Factory – known for its award-winning cheeses and breads – and other producers.

New to the town is Snow Road Produce, a provadore and wine store focusing on regional wine, seasonal produce, coffee and tasty meals. All-day breakfasts are served here on weekends.

The King Valley offers the perfect pairing of food and wine options. It’s no wonder the region’s annual food and wine festival is called La Dolce Vita – life here is definitely sweet. [O]

Round-up

GET THERE

The King Valley is two and a half hours’ drive from Melbourne on the Hume Highway, 80km from Albury and 15km from Wangaratta. Take the Milawa Gourmet Region exit.

STAY

Casa Luna Gourmet Accommodation

1569 Boggy Creek Road, Myrree
03 5729 7650, www.casaluna.com.au

Mountain View Hotel

4 King Valley Road, Whitfield
03 5729 8270, www.mvhotel.com.au

EAT & DRINK

Dal Zotto Trattoria

4861 Wangaratta-Whitfield Road, Whitfield
03 5729 8321, www.dalzotto.com.au

King River Cafe

1143 Glenrowan-Myrtleford Road, Oxley
03 5727 3461, www.kingrivercafe.com.au

EXPLORE

To follow the **Prosecco Road**, suggested itineraries are available at www.kingvalleyproseccoroad.com.au. Try **whitewater rafting** on the King River or **fishing** and **canoeing** on Lake William Hovell.

MORE INFO

www.kingvalleytourism.org.au
www.visitwangeratta.vic.gov.au

