

(hunter valley)

Lauren Quaintance takes the long way around to find a valley of civilised pleasures.

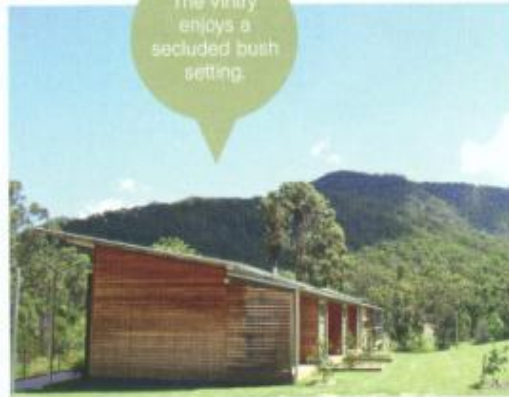
Truth be told, the appeal of the Hunter Valley has been lost on me in the past. Two previous trips to Pokolbin were neither bucolic nor restful. Blame the erroneously named Wine Country Drive that delivers people from Cessnock to the central Hunter – an unlovely motorway-like stretch choked with tour buses and dotted with advertising hoardings promoting new “resort-style” developments.

This time, when we accidentally take the slow road to the Hunter – turning off the F3 at Peats Ridge onto Tourist Route 33 – there is no traffic and the countryside is immediately soothing. When signs tell us that we are approaching Wollombi, we notice a scarecrow on the side of the road that seems to be dressed as the Grim Reaper and then, a short distance later, a scarecrow in a prison uniform. We later learn that more than 100 scarecrows line Wollombi Road from Bucketty to Millfield in March and April as part of an annual scarecrow festival. We stop at Wollombi for lunch and I immediately wish we were staying longer. The historic buildings are quaint and we’d be keen to linger at the Wollombi Tavern which is said to serve a famous fortified wine called Dr Jurd’s Jungle Juice.

Our accommodation for the weekend is, technically, in Pokolbin, but thankfully The Vintry is a discreet distance from the knot of wineries at the busy intersection of Broke and McDonalds roads. In fact, the self-contained house is on a private vineyard covering nearly one hectare, located down a dirt road at the foothills of the Brokenback Ranges.

With an expansive lawn, bush views and bi-fold doors that run the length of the house, The Vintry underscores the fact that you’re no longer in the city. A 10-seat dining room table and a well-equipped kitchen mean you’d be happy enough spending the weekend here, but Rock – the Hunter’s top fine dining restaurant – is conveniently located at the end of the road.

During our stay I walk further along the increasingly rutted dirt road past an abandoned vineyard with overgrown vines and a dilapidated house. Someone’s dream gone awry. The only noise is the sound of rustling grass as startled cows flee and a kangaroo hops onto the road. It reminds me that the real pleasure of the Hunter is to be found off the main roads and in outlying districts such as Wollombi and Lovedale. If you get beyond the centre, you’ll find the Hunter as it should be.
Lauren Quintance



The Vintry enjoys a secluded bush setting.

Stay

The Vintry

With four ensuite rooms, a well-equipped kitchen and a 10-seat dining room table, the secluded Vintry is perfect for a weekend escape with a group of wine- and food-loving friends. In winter, gather in front of the fireplace and in summer, open up the bi-fold doors and enjoy the view. The decor is contemporary – charcoal walls, beige leather couches – and the kitchen features a Gaggia coffee maker and a Zanussi dishwasher,

as well as a range of cookbooks by Australian chefs. The rooms are well-appointed and even feature a “pillow menu” with a choice of four different types of pillows. The master bedroom has a spa bath and its own private deck that overlooks a pond. Cost: \$1100 a night (\$275 a room, per night)

Wine tasting is an essential part of a visit.



Valleyfield Escape is awash with good views.

and \$900 a night for more than five nights. 780 De Beyers Road, Pokolbin.

Phone: 4998 6825; www.thevintry.com.au.

Tonic
Built from corrugated iron, glass and steel in the style of an outback shed, this boutique hotel in Lovedale is a strictly chintz-free zone. In each of the eight rooms designer furniture has been matched with finds from antique stores, and there are large, modern bathrooms with walk-in showers and deep, indulgent baths. The fridge is stocked with complimentary juices

and ingredients such as salmon and scrambled eggs for a do-it-yourself breakfast. There’s also a fine selection of beer, champagne and local wine for sale – including the best chardonnay we tasted in the Hunter. It’s possible to access your room with a pin code, so there’s no need to see anyone else all weekend. Cost: \$395 a night (two-night minimum on weekends), and \$850 a night for a two-bedroom apartment. No children.

251 Taiga Road, Lovedale.

Phone: 4930 9999;

www.tonicotel.com.au.

Valleyfield Escape

A stylish one-bedroom cottage set on an olive farm near Wollombi, this has all the modern conveniences (galley

kitchen, spoon-shaped Agape bath, mood lighting, Hitachi TV and LG DVD), as well as uninterrupted views across the valley towards Yengo National Park. Belonging to Armando Percuoco, owner and chef of celebrated Paddington restaurant Buon Ricordo, the cottage has been designed for a couple and, naturally, features excellent cookware, chef’s knives, ground coffee and condiments. Guests can order a pre-prepared meal (\$45 a head) from Buon Ricordo to collect before they leave Sydney.



Olives thrive as well as the vines.

Cost: \$500 a night for two on weekends, with minimum two-night booking, and \$350 a night mid-week. 3471 Great North Road, Laguna. Phone: 4998 3312; email info@valleyfieldescape.com.au.

Eat

Esca Bimbadgen

Faced with this slick, modern interior – blond wood and chocolate banquettes – you could be forgiven for thinking you're not in the Hunter. Only the expansive views from the balcony remind you that you are, indeed, in wine country. Choose from three-course tasting plates matched with red or white Bimbadgen wines, or an à la carte menu with a strong Asian influence, including entrees such as king prawns on a bed of coconut rice and a pile of

coriander with cucumber and chilli jam. *Bimbadgen Estate*, 790 McDonalds Road, Pokolbin. Phone: 4998 4666.

Amanda's on the Edge

A comfortable homestead set on a hill on Windsor's Edge vineyard, with country decor, friendly service and a warm atmosphere. There's nothing particularly inventive about the food – think eye fillet with button mushrooms, herbed potatoes and a whipped cheddar pot – but no-one is complaining. The dessert list is something to behold, with more than a dozen choices including retro treats such as apple pie served with whipped cream. Ask for a table on the balcony. *Windsor's Edge Vineyard, McDonald's Road*, Pokolbin. Phone: 4998 7900.

Rock

It's unashamed fine dining at this Poole's Rock winery restaurant that was *The Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide's* pick of Hunter eateries last year. Chef Andrew Clarke (ex Claude's) combines classical French technique and exceptional produce. The menu, with tasting, entree and main sizes, is either flexible or irritating depending on your perspective. Portions are not what you'd describe as generous. Expect to spend more than \$100 a head for dinner. *Poole's Rock*, 576 DeBeyers Road, Pokolbin. Phone: 4998 6968.



French technique at Rock Restaurant.

Shop

Monsoon Living

There's everything from the requisite buddha heads to Kashmiri silk rugs in this store devoted to all things Asian. Large, ornamental pieces such as a brass horse



sit alongside wooden furniture and smaller curios such as Thai incense boxes. A good collection of cookbooks, including recent offerings from Kylie Kwong. *Cnr Broke and Ekerts roads*, Pokolbin. Phone: 4998 6868.

Les Indiennes de Provence

Indiennes are Indian hand-painted cottons first adapted by the French in the 17th century and this shop sells distinctive fabric from top brands such as Les Olivades and Valdrôme. French country-style furniture, dinnerware and luxurious body products can also be found here. *Cnr Broke and Ekerts roads*, Pokolbin. Phone: 4998 7532.

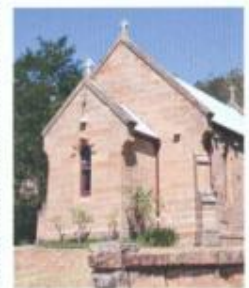
Do

Hit the food trail, including Stone Pantry (cnr Broke and Ekerts roads, Pokolbin; phone: 4998 6913) for such gourmet food products as Simon Johnson condiments and Max Brenner chocolates, and The Hunter Valley Cheese Company (McGuigans Complex, McDonalds Road, Pokolbin; phone: 4998 7744) for the Grape Vine Ash Brie

that uses ash from local vine prunings. The Hunter Olive Centre (Pokolbin Estate Vineyard, McDonalds Road, Pokolbin; phone: 4998 7524) has local olives and olive oils.

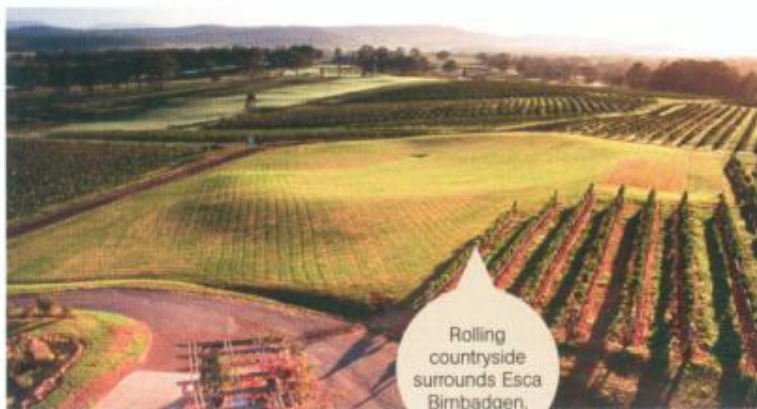
Drive

Take the slow road to the Hunter by exiting the F3 at Peat's Ridge and joining Tourist Route 33. It's winding in parts but you'll be rewarded with bucolic scenery and the chance to stop in the historic village of Wollombi en route.



Don't Miss

Get away from the traffic-clogged arteries around Pokolbin and explore the less populated sub-regions of the Hunter such as Lovedale, Wollombi (above) and Broke.



Rolling countryside surrounds Esca Bimbadgen.