



## Spin the Bottle

# Yarra Valley

This month, we explore the Yarra Valley region – taste the wine, check out the cellar doors, sample the food and bed down for the night.

STORY BY PETER BOURNE

THE MIGHTY Yarra. Melburnians picnic on the banks of it; university students drag themselves out of bed in the dark to row on its waters. Trace the Yarra River's course upstream, through the north-eastern suburbs to its upper reaches, and you'll find its heartland – the bucolic Yarra Valley wine region, just an hour's drive from Melbourne but worlds away from city life.

It's hard to believe that 40 years ago it was home to a mere handful of wine growers. Today, Yering, Yarra Glen, Coldstream, Tarrawarra, Healesville, Gruyere, Woori Yallock and Wesburn are familiar names to wine-lovers and there are more than 70 cellar doors, with many more vineyards selling grapes to local and national producers.

It's equally hard to fathom that 40 years ago Australian pinot noir and chardonnay were in their infancy. They've rightly become synonymous with the region, which dates its first vines back to 1838. Many of the early vigneronns were Swiss – there was Paul de Castella at Chateau Yering, Charles Hubert de Castella at St Huberts and Frédéric Guillaume de Pury at Yeringberg (the latter is still in the

family's hands). The Yarra thrived in the late 19th century – its wines won top awards in Europe – before the phylloxera pest, war and depression saw it fade into obscurity.

The region's comeback occurred in 1963 when barrister Reg Egan planted Wantirna Estate and a surge of doctors, lawyers, vinous crusaders and big businesses followed in his wake. The arrival of Moët & Chandon in 1986 saw the scant chardonnay and pinot noir grapes diverted to sparkling wine and added to the “cool climate” signature of the region.

Geographical diversity has enabled the Yarra Valley to adapt to our changing climate. For instance, upper sites such as Woori Yallock and Toolangi, once considered marginal, are now perfect for fine-boned chardonnay and pinot noir. Sauvignon blanc also does well, while spicy shirazes and claret-like cabernets reprise the wine style that won all those awards in the 1880s.

Food is a must with these wines and most cellar doors offer a good-quality café, wine bar or restaurant. Don't miss Healesville, where wineries such as Giant Steps, Innocent Bystander and Mac Forbes rub shoulders with the multifaceted Healesville Hotel and Four Pillars gin distillery. There is as much diversity in the Yarra Valley's hospitality as there is in its wonderful wines.

Balgownie Estate (above) specialises in the region's most successful grapes: chardonnay and pinot noir



## Tasting notes

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**MOUNT MARY  
QUINTET**

2014 / \$148

Winery founder Dr John Middleton loved Bordeaux reds; his Quintet was a blend of the French region's five varieties. His son, David, and grandson, Sam, honour his vision with this deeply complex, ultra-refined cabernet blend. It needs a decade to show its best; otherwise, decant and serve with a traditional lamb roast.

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**GIANT STEPS  
SEXTON  
VINEYARD  
CHARDONNAY**

2015 / \$51

Chef-turned-winemaker Steve Flamsteed walks this thrilling chardonnay along a tightrope, balancing ample flavours of white stone fruit and melon with citrus-fresh acidity and honeyed cumquat. It's perfect with chicken tagine.

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**COLDSTREAM  
HILLS YARRA  
VALLEY  
PINOT NOIR**

2016 / \$39

James Halliday has relinquished ownership of the Yarra Valley winery he established in 1985 but his brilliant viticultural photos still grace its labels. This pinot features dark cherry and damson plum with hints of smoky spices in penetrating flavours that would suit duck à l'orange.

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**LA BOHÈME  
ACT THREE  
PINOT GRIS  
& FRIENDS**

2016 / \$24

This operatic brand from Steve Webber at De Bortoli may appear trite with its Belle Époque label but this is a seriously good wine. Poached-pear flavours of pinot gris lead, with spicy gewürztraminer and riesling's telltale acidity defining the finish. Drink with pulled-pork sliders.

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**CHANDON  
ALTIUS UPPER  
YARRA CUVÉE**

2012 / \$52

Chandon sources grapes from all over Victoria and Tasmania but Altius, an ode to the brand's home, contains only Yarra Valley fruit. The elegant white-peach flavours of chardonnay and robust, red-fruit pinot noir have warm bakehouse nuances. Parmesan wafers are an ideal match.

**Q** QANTAS EPIQUIRE

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Guy Bailey