

The Reds' Centre

You'll need to head off the beaten track to discover Coonawarra, but the long trip will be worthwhile for wine lovers, writes Winsor Dobbin.

It's one of Australia's most remote, but also most rewarding, wine regions. Coonawarra is **midway between Melbourne and Adelaide** – roughly a five-hour drive from either – or 45 minutes by air from Mount Gambier's pocket-sized airport.

Coonawarra is a place of pilgrimage for wine lovers from around the world – drawn by the **magnificent cabernets and shirazes** produced locally as a result of the region's unique terra rossa land, which has red-brown topsoil sitting on a white limestone base.

A thin cigar-shaped strip of **red soil** that runs from the hamlet of Penola in the south (along the Riddoch Highway) to tiny Coonawarra township in the north – a distance of just 24 kilometres – this small area produces some of Australia's very best reds (and some pretty good chardonnays and rieslings) and its winemakers, grape growers and local businesses are all **immensely proud** of their little strip of red dirt.

"We are lucky in that the visitors we get at our cellar doors have been enthusiasts who have visited the region because they are interested primarily in wine and food," says **Doug Balnaves**, patriarch of one of the region's leading winemaking families. "We get very few tyre kickers."

The number of visitors to the region is set to soar later this year with **Penola**, the only town in the region, having close links with **Mary MacKillop**, who is scheduled to become canonised as Australia's first saint on October 17. The Mary MacKillop Interpretative Centre in Penola is the region's major drawcard, along with the many cellar doors.

So the message is: visit soon. Coonawarra certainly has plenty to offer throughout the year thanks to a series of annual food and wine festivals that include the **Coonawarra Vignerons Race Day** festival each January, **After Dark**, held each April, the **Cellar Dwellers** events in June and the **Coonawarra Cabernet Celebrations** every October.

Some of the **biggest names in wine** are to be found here: Wynns Coonawarra Estate, Bowen Estate, Hollick, Yalumba The Menzies and Brand's Laira. Add family-owned operations like Rymill, Redman, Zema Estate, S Kidman, Majella, Patrick and Koonara, add great red producers like Katnook Estate, Leconfield, Balnaves and Parker Coonawarra Estate, and any serious grape fancier will be in his or her element.

A glass or two of the **2008 Leconfield Cabernet Sauvignon** should be enough to convert any doubters.

"This is the country and it is a small community, but there is a lot of wine heritage here, and a lot of people who really care about wine," Wynns Coonawarra Estate chief winemaker **Sue Hodder** says. "I'm here forever because I don't believe there is anywhere else to match the dirt and vines that we have here."



Coonawarra is on its way to becoming the new Hunter Valley

All the wineries have cellar doors that are open seven days a week, from the biggest to tiny newcomer **Raidis Estate**, which had almost sold out of wine when I visited a couple of months ago.

Penola has a population of 1200 and Coonawarra is home to just a couple of hundred people – but this is no sleepy backwater. There are close to 30 cellar doors and several spots to eat and drink, including the new **Terra Rossa Producers' Club** in Penola, which serves local wines and tapas and a couple of good local pubs.

On the main street is the **Koonara** cellar door, which also sells kitchen goods and homewares, as well as local produce. It doesn't get any more country than this.

Even better, many of the cellar doors are manned by winemakers, such as **Greg Clayfield** at **Zema Estate**, or members of the family whose name is on the label.

At Fodder, a popular Coonawarra café that serves superb

pizzas, you'll be served by former Rymill winemaker **John Innes**, or his wife **Melissa**, both of whom are hugely enthusiastic about the region and its wines.

Looking for fine dining in a small rural town can often be a thankless task, but not in Penola, where **Pipers of Penola** is run by chef **Simon Bowen**, a member of one of the region's most famous winemaking families, and his wife **Erika**. Both formerly worked at the Lake House in Daylesford and have created one of the best restaurants in regional Australia. Wild rabbit and mushroom pithiviers served with shallot purée are a triumph, as is roasted duck breast with shitake mushrooms and truffle dressing (see www.pipersofpenola.com.au).

Just down the road is **Upstairs At Hollick**, which has long been regarded as one of Australia's best winery restaurants. Sample dishes featuring local produce, including daily specials, like crispy skinned local pork belly and artichoke purée, which are accompanied by wines from a list of local and imported bottles. Diners can enjoy vineyard views or look in on the winery through a glass wall. www.hollick.com/upstairs.

Must@Coonawarra, Merlot and Verdelho Townhouses, Punters Vineyard Retreat, Yalumba The Menzies Retreat, the Alexander Cameron Motel and Chardonnay Lodge all offer accommodation in and around the vines – and there are also several excellent self-catering cottages from which to choose for those who want to spend a few days enjoying the atmosphere of one of the country's friendliest wine regions. ■

The facts

- Visit www.southeasternaustralia.com/LimestoneCoast.aspx or call the Penola Coonawarra Visitor Information Centre on (08) 8737 2855.
- **The Coonawarra Roadshow**, featuring the wines and winemakers from the region, offers an excellent opportunity to taste some of Australia's best red wines – and a few whites.
- The Roadshow hits **Sydney on August 17** at The Menzies Hotel.
- This year marks the eighth Coonawarra Road Show and guests are promised the chance to **taste over 100 wines** with entry just **\$25**. For full details call the Coonawarra Vignerons Association on (08) 8737 2392 or visit www.coonawarra.org.

Our favourites beyond Paris

No matter what your interest, France is the place to indulge and discover. Here are a few of our favourites beyond Paris...

● Smaller City – Lyon

Much smaller than Paris, Lyon is a wonderful city to navigate by foot and still offers the variety of districts. For something traditional, visit the silk workshops located in Crioix-Rousse or wander through the historical passageways, traboules in Old Lyon. Known as the French capital of gastronomy, there are many classic bouchons where you can enjoy a meal. For those who love to shop, there is the mall in Presqu'île or head out to the large shopping centre at Part-Dieu for European chains.

● Canal Boating – French Rivers

Barging allows you to leisurely meander down France's rivers discovering the charm of the local villages at your own pace. You can stop and buy produce at local markets and cook onboard or enjoy the local hospitality. There are a variety of boats so whether there are two of you or a small group of family and friends this is a great option to explore a region well.

Not confident skipping yourself? No worries, there are also crewed canal barge options or join a larger river boat with touring and fine dining included.

● Cathar History - Carcassone

Begin in the town of Carcassone and step back in time wandering through the medieval castle town which appeared in the movie *Robin Hood*. Leave time to explore by car the smaller, quaint villages in the surrounding area discovering old caves, abbeys and local wineries. For the more adventurous there is mountain biking or white water rafting.

● Cooking Classes – Provence

Spend five nights at Hostellerie Berard, a family-run hotel where you will have a four-day introduction to the flavours of Provençal cuisine. As well as practical lessons, the program includes visits to local markets, an oil mill, vineyards and herb picking in the hills.

Thinking of France — call, email or drop in today!

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