

turning point

FIFTY YEARS AGO, AN AGRICULTURAL REVOLUTION SET AUSTRALIA'S SOUTH-WESTERN TIP ON THE WAY TO BECOME A WINE-LOVER'S PARADISE.

WORDS **BARBARA SWEENEY** PHOTOGRAPHY **PRUE RUSCOE**

THE STORY OF Margaret River in recent times is a story of wine. From the founding of the Vasse Felix winery in 1967, the region, which lies 270 kilometres south of Perth and juts out into the Indian Ocean just before the coastline turns east, rapidly became famous for just one product. There are now more than 200 wineries and a drive through the region — for that is the best way to explore it — is to experience firsthand a smart restaurant's boutique wine list. Well-known names, such as Vasse Felix, Cullen Wines, Evans & Tate, Cape Mentelle, Howard Park Wines, Moss Wood and Leeuwin Estate, flash by on signposts of many colours and styles.

The concentration of wineries is in the north and inland from the coast, on a complex network of small roads lined by tall trees with thin trunks and high canopies. Like a hand cupped around school homework to prevent an unwanted gaze, the wider view is only revealed when there's a break in the trees or a corner is reached. Sunlight dances through the trunks and, at sunset, casts a ruby glow.

This was timber country in the late 1800s, and also dairy country. Now, the neat ribbed lines of vines on gentle

slopes declare it wine country. The secret to the success of Margaret River wines lies not only in the geography — a land mass surrounded on three sides by water at a latitude that mirrors the famed wine region of Bordeaux in the northern hemisphere — but also in the variety of soils, the Mediterranean-style climate and the warming and cooling winds that play off the water.

"You need to eat, drink and put your feet in the ocean when you come to Margaret River," says Kate Lamont, of Lamont's restaurant and Smiths Beach Resort at Yallingup.

The Lamonts are part of West Australian food and wine history. They have been involved in wine since the 1930s and current interests include a winery, cellar doors in the Swan Valley and Margaret River, a restaurant and wine store in Perth, and the Yallingup resort, restaurant and café, which stocks many locally made products, including Bahen & Co.'s bean-to-bar chocolate.

Like many from Perth, generations of Lamonts have 'gone south' for their annual holidays — among Kate's childhood memories is one of her dad helping plant out the original Vasse Felix vineyard. The attraction is the wine and food, >



WHAT TO SEE AND DO

- Cape Mentelle Planted in 1970, this is one of the founding five wineries of the region. The winery encourages loitering; there's an outdoor cinema in summer, petanque courts and daily behind-the-scenes tours. 331 Wallcliffe Road, Margaret River. (08) 9757 0812.
- Cheeky Monkey Brewery & Cidery Taste one (or more) of the seven craft beers on tap at the brewery, then stop for lunch at the restaurant, which offers great views. 4259 Caves Road, Margaret River. (08) 9755 9555.
- Koomal Dreaming See the regions through the eyes of Indigenous local Josh Whiteland. Learn about bush foods, enjoy didgeridoo music sessions and visit Ngilgi Cave. 0413 843 426.
- Margaret River Farmers' Market The relaxed, community vibe and charming setting makes this one of the best farmers' markets in the country. Food ranges from Bahen & Co.'s handmade chocolate to treats from Yallingup Woodfired Bread. Every Saturday from 8am. Corner Tunbridge and Farrelly streets, Margaret River. (08) 9757 9095.
- Margaret River Venison Farm Shop A family business that has grown like topsy over the past decade. Pick up venison cuts for dinner or try one of the salamis. The venison chorizo is justifiably popular. 5103 Caves Road, Margaret River. (08) 9755 5028.
- Vasse Virgin Taste local olive oils and mustards, and see olive oil soaps and other skin-care products being made. 135 Puzey Road, Wilyabrup. (08) 9755 6111.



Rugged Prevelly Beach is a surfer favourite. FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT The White Elephant Beach Café at Prevelly Beach; bushland at Moses Rock; the dramatic landscape at Cape Naturaliste; Vasse Felix is Margaret River's founding wine estate; the driveway leads to the Vasse Felix restaurant; the cellar door at Vasse Felix.



The restaurant at the five-star boutique hotel Cape Lodge in Yallingup. FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT A crab salad served at Vasse Felix; the swimming pool at Cape Lodge; rhubarb panna cotta at Cape Lodge's restaurant; the walkway beside Prevelly Beach; Josh and Jacq Bahen, founders of Bahen & Co. chocolate makers, enjoy the view over the Bantry Bay vineyard at Yallingup; Cullen Wines, another long-established estate in the region.



WHERE TO EAT AND STAY

- **Burnside Organic Farm** Choose a rammed-earth or limestone bungalow, pick vegetables for dinner and learn about organic food production at this working farm. 287 Burnside Road, Margaret River. (08) 9757 2139.
- **Cape Lodge** Stay in luxury, enjoy the restaurant's fine menu and unwind by the pool at the five-star Margaret River experience. 3341 Caves Road, Yallingup. (08) 9755 6311.
- **Cullen Wines** Chef David Hull is passionate about his organic kitchen garden from which everything, from heritage carrots to edible flowers, is picked fresh daily. Snap up a beanbag under the shade of the trees. 4323 Caves Road, Wilyabrup. (08) 9755 5656.
- **Smiths Beach Resort** A secluded contemporary resort with outside showers, space for surfboard storage and Lamont's restaurant and a café onsite. Lot 2, Smiths Beach Road, Yallingup. (08) 9750 1200.
- **The Margaret River Dairy Company** Sample brie, cheddar, fetta and ricotta, as well as pot-set yoghurt, at the tasting room and shop. Bussell Highway, Cowaramup. (08) 9755 7588.
- **Vasse Felix** An ambitious menu based on local produce and designed to suit Vasse Felix wines, and a delightful elevated setting overlooking the vines, adds up to a special experience. Corner Tom Cullity Drive and Caves Road, Cowaramup. (08) 9756 5050.
- **Bahen & Co.** Josh and Jacq Bahen use vintage chocolate making equipment and just cacao and cane sugar to create wonderful, traditional-style chocolate at a family operated farm. (08) 9757 1990; www.bahenchocolate.com.



journey | MARGARET RIVER WA

The beach at Yallingup, a small town north along the coast from Margaret River.

certainly, but also the ocean, beaches, forest, surfing and laid-back nature of Margaret River itself, a town of some 4000 inhabitants at the heart of the region.

In the north, on the wide sweep of Geographe Bay, a series of protected beaches — Bunker Bay, Eagle Bay and Meelup Beach — provide ideal conditions for swimming and snorkelling in contrast to the ocean coastline, scalloped with surf beaches and characterised by south-west winds.

Experience the windswept beauty of the coast at Gracetown, Prevelly (also known as ‘Surfer’s Point’), Cape Freycinet and Hamelin Bay — or walk the remarkable Cape to Cape Track and see it all. The 135-kilometre track links Cape Naturaliste in the north with Cape Leeuwin in the south, hugging the coastline and winding through the Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park.

Both capes offer front-row views of the annual whale migrations, and the chance of seeing humpbacks and

southern right whales at play is a drawcard for much of the year — from June to October at Cape Leeuwin and then September to December in the north, at Cape Naturaliste.

Another natural wonder are the caves. The easiest to access is Mammoth Cave, which has fossils dating back 35,000 years, but a network of smaller caves provides plenty of challenges for serious speleologists.

Even after a day spent in the great outdoors, the draw of the wineries is inevitable and is about more than the cellar door. Many, including Cullen Wines, Vasse Felix, Moses Rock Estate and Cape Lodge, have restaurants of repute. Some run events, such as the outdoor cinema at Cape Mentelle in summer. Also interspersed among the vineyards are various food producers, such as Margaret River Venison (try the chorizo), and many new micro-breweries, evidence that the Margaret River renaissance has broadened its gourmet interests well beyond the original wine revolution. *

