

DIVINE PROVIDENCE SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Fleurieu Peninsula is the home of the McLaren Vale winegrowing region, and while the local wine may be superb, CAROLINE BAUM discovers the region is also home to one of the country's best fresh produce markets and some excellent fine dining.



IN AUSTRALIAN TERMS, South Australia's Fleurieu Peninsula is as close to the charms of Tuscany or Provence as the southern hemisphere can offer. While everyone has heard of McLaren Vale, the small township wine capital of the region, few venture beyond the obvious network of high-profile cellar doors to explore the coast. To do so means to slow down to a different rhythm, meandering between olive groves, almond orchards and vines, happening on deserted stretches of sand and calm bays where dolphins are often spotted chasing schools of whiting.

My introduction to the peninsula came via much-loved local artist, Bridget Ohlsson, who painted exquisite still lifes of fruits and flowers, arrangements of deceptive simplicity that strongly echo Italian still-life painter Giorgio Morandi. Ohlsson lived at Port Willunga, before it became an expensive and fashionable place for city dwellers to have a beachside weekend. Now, driving through the region with a girlfriend, I am on a pilgrimage to some of the places I first discovered through Ohlsson.

High on her list of favourites was Russell's, run by shy local food guru Russell Jeavons, who danced with her at the tango nights he created at his tin shed pizza parlour – only open three nights a week and almost impossible to get a table at. Local resident Gay Bilson singled Russell's out for special praise in her memoir *Plenty*, saying that the food was so honest as to make her weep. The kitchen is primitive, dark and cramped, with the wood-fired oven Jeavons built himself at its heart. Around it are racks of wooden boards, their worn surfaces as eloquent as any weathered face, on which the thin-crust pizzas are served. It's a loud, frenetic place where neighbours catch up on the latest, spilling into the cobbled courtyard.

Ohlsson died young, but her paintings still adorn the walls of the Salopian Inn, the only decoration in an otherwise austere dining room, celebrating the seasonal cycle that Fleurieu is all about. A former »

Grape escape Fino's serves up unforgettable tapas, top right; vineyard views at d'Arenberg Winery, right. Opposite: turkey and asparagus involtini with pancetta, sage and verjuice (see recipe on page 50).



THE FACTS

Distance from Adelaide It's 39 kilometres to McLaren Vale.

Route Via the southern expressway.

Driving time 50 minutes.

Best times to visit March, April, September, October. The almond blossom festival is held in the last week of July.

Other sights See the Fleurieu Peninsula Art Trail. It includes galleries in Goolwa, Yankalilla, Victor Harbor and Aldinga Beach.

Information The McLaren Vale and Fleurieu Visitor Information Centre has tastings and information about all local wineries in the area; 08 8323 9944; www.mclarenvale.info

Recommended wineries to visit Coriole, d'Arenberg, Koltz, Rosemount Estate, Tatchilla, Tyrrell's and Wirra Wirra.





Reel time Casting a line at Port Willunga Beach on the Fleurieu Peninsula.

coaching inn dating back to 1851, the Salopian has a solid reputation in the area as one of its finest establishments. With a chef of Turkish descent in the kitchen, the menu has a Middle-Eastern flavour without feeling contrived. Host Michael Ewers invites us to go down steep stone stairs into the three-room cellar and choose a bottle for ourselves. The selection is impressive and includes local labels from small boutique wineries such as Thomas, which produces a fine shiraz, to Cascabel, known for its Spanish varietals. The Salopian has opened a new cellar door showcasing the wines of two small wineries, Gemtree and Dowie Doole, both of which make an excellent shiraz as well as chenin blanc and chardonnay.

After dinner, it's only five minutes' drive before we settle into the tall brass beds at Willunga House, a Georgian-era bed and breakfast run by Kingsley Knott (another friend of Ohlsson's) and his wife, Rosie. Quirky touches such as beaded lace doilies over jugs of fresh rainwater make up for the minuscule bathrooms and temperamental plumbing. Kingsley is also a qualified and sought-after masseur.

On our visit, a basket of complimentary fruit from the organic garden on the hall table includes perfectly ripe figs. At breakfast, the yolks from Rosie's hen's eggs are a yellow Van Gogh would have envied and the communal table is lively with plans to visit the market and then a few wineries before lunch.

On Saturday mornings, a visit to the Willunga Farmers' Market is an unmissable ritual. If you don't have a kitchen to cook in, you can always picnic on your bounty. We get there before 9am; produce runs out early on busy weekends, which draw up to 2000 shoppers. This morning there are 35 stalls at the market, so we agree on a plan: a quick circuit to see what we want to buy. Before we get very far, we »

TURKEY & ASPARAGUS INVOLTINI WITH PANCETTA, SAGE & VERJUICE

300ml good-quality verjuice

80g (½ cup) sultanas

16 spears of asparagus, trimmed

8 x 100g turkey breast fillet steaks (see note)

150g romano cheese, sliced into 16 pieces of 5cm x 1cm

8 long, thin slices of pancetta or prosciutto (about 150g)

16 sage leaves

80ml (⅓ cup) extra virgin olive oil

Bring half the verjuice to a simmer in a small saucepan, add the sultanas and cook for 1 minute. Transfer the mixture to a bowl and cover with plastic wrap. Let stand for 12 hours, or until the sultanas are plump.

Cook the asparagus spears in lightly salted boiling water for about 2-3 minutes or until just tender, drain well, cool under running water then drain again. Refrigerate until needed. Preheat oven to 200C. Place one turkey steak between two lengths of plastic food wrap then, using a meat mallet, gently pound the meat until it is 3-5mm thick. Place the flattened turkey breast on a clean work surface and season with salt and white pepper to taste. Place 2 asparagus spears and 2 pieces of cheese across one narrow end of turkey then roll up firmly. Lay out a piece of pancetta, place the turkey roll across one end, tuck a sage leaf between turkey and pancetta then roll up firmly,

tucking in another sage leaf as you go.

The piece of pancetta should go all the way around the turkey roll – this will keep it together while cooking. Repeat the process with the remaining turkey steaks, cheese, asparagus and pancetta.

Heat half of the olive oil in a frying pan and cook the turkey involtini, in two batches, for about 5 minutes or until browned all over and pancetta is crisp.

Leave pan on one side. Transfer turkey to an oven tray and roast for about 10 minutes or until turkey is tender and cheese is starting to melt.

Meanwhile drain the sultanas, reserving any liquid and add remaining verjuice. Return reserved pan to the heat, add sultana mixture then cook, stirring, for about 2 minutes or until reduced by half. Add the remaining olive oil, simmer for 1 minute, and season with salt and pepper to taste. Place turkey involtini on a warmed platter, pour over the sultana and verjuice sauce and serve immediately.

Serves 8

T+L NOTE Slice the turkey lengthways from the breast to give long, thin slices, otherwise they may not completely wrap around the filling.

Wine suggestion
Torbreck Juveniles
Grenache Shiraz
Mouvèdre, 2005
Barossa Valley,
South Australia



To explore the Fleurieu coast means slowing down to a different rhythm, meandering between olive groves, almond orchards and vines.

RABBIT WITH CHORIZO

80ml (1/3 cup) olive oil

1 x 1.2kg farmed rabbit, cut into 12 pieces

1 chorizo sausage (about 100g), casing removed and coarsely chopped

8 shallots, peeled

2 cloves of garlic, peeled and bruised

1 1/2 tablespoons chopped preserved lime rind (see note)

80ml (1/3 cup) good unwooded Chardonnay

250ml (1 cup) chicken stock

6 chat potatoes, steamed and cut in half

1/3 cup parsley leaves, coarsely chopped

45g (1/3 cup) slivered almonds, lightly toasted

1/4 cup mint leaves, washed, dried and torn

1/4 cup spring onions, finely chopped

1/4 cup coriander leaves, washed and dried

Steamed peas, or green beans, to serve

Preheat oven to 180C. Heat 1 tablespoon of the olive oil in a large, heavy-based frying pan then cook rabbit, in batches, for about 4 minutes, turning often, or until browned all over.

Transfer browned rabbit to a large flame-proof roasting pan, add sausage, shallots, garlic and remaining olive oil, season to taste with sea salt and freshly ground pepper and toss ingredients to combine well. Roast the mixture for 35-40 minutes, basting with roasting juices every 10 minutes or so, or until rabbit is cooked through and the shallots are caramelised.

Add preserved lime rind and wine, place over medium-high heat on stove top and bring to the boil. Cook for 3-4 minutes or until wine has nearly evaporated then add chicken stock and potatoes and simmer for 3-5 minutes. Add parsley, almonds, mint, spring onion and coriander leaves and toss to combine well. Stir to combine then serve immediately with steamed peas or beans, drizzled with pan juices.

Serves 4

T+L NOTE Preserved lemons, purchased from gourmet food stores or delicatessens, can be substituted. Chapel Hill sells home-made preserved limes at the cellar door.

Wine suggestion

Wirra Wirra Woodhenge Shiraz, 2004
McLaren Vale, South Australia



are poured a lilac-coloured lavender cordial that tastes a little soapy but looks like distilled jacaranda petals. Small croutons topped with Spice Girlz fiery chutneys are proffered, rounds of Wahroonga Dairy Goat Farm cheese are cut. The array of produce is dazzling, not only for its quality and diversity, but because of the clever value-adding that has gone into making a success of many of its star performers: not content to sell them fresh from the tree, the market's growers sell plump almonds salted, spiced, sugared and transformed into dukkah.

At the Herbivorous stall, we breathe in the medicinal fragrance of sage, mint and flowers arranged in tussy-mussies, pretty, old-fashioned Victorian posies. Turkey from nearby Aldinga gets turned into pate as does venison from Mount Compass, together with rabbit from Meningie; there is also kangaroo prosciutto from a German butcher named Hamlet.

We gather what is easy to pack before succumbing to the ultimate temptation, barely two hours after breakfast: miniature custard tarts lined with dark chocolate and topped with muscat-drenched prunes from Sweet Tart, a cake and pastry stall run by a former hairdresser. All her ingredients are organic, so the sinful indulgence feels almost virtuous, not to mention sublime with a shot of strong coffee from another stall near the gate. This is where we bump into the market founder, Zannie Flanagan. She explains that much of the produce is cooked in a communal kitchen thanks to a smart initiative by stallholders. Instead of spending money on costly equipment that small-scale production would struggle to justify, they simply share facilities according to a roster.

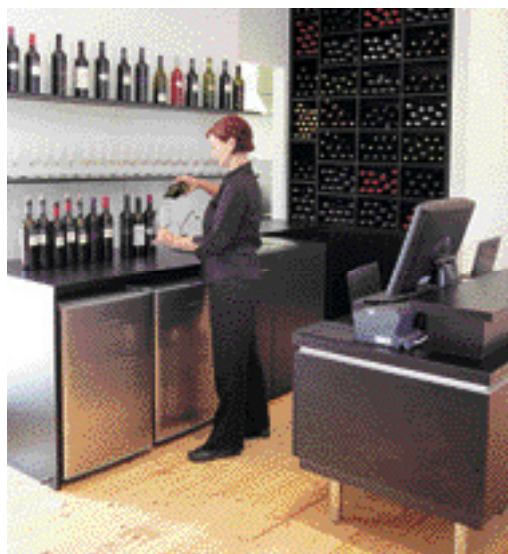
The passing parade is entertaining enough, but on some Saturdays the market's own choir, Soul Food, performs songs inspired by the agricultural plenty of the area.

Having grown from modest beginnings four years ago, the market is moving to an architect-designed, shaded space in the centre of the township later this year – which will give farmers plenty to sing about.

When we trundle up to d'Arry's Verandah, the restaurant at d'Arenberg winery on the hill outside McLaren Vale, we recognise many of the faces at neighbouring lunch tables. This is where locals bring guests to eat after shopping on a summer's day. Green olives are always centre stage, along with other regional produce, interpreted with the flavours of Asia or the Mediterranean and presented in hearty dishes – think mod Oz meets comfort food.

The patchwork of vines spreads in a fine view across the Willunga escarpment from the cellar door where there's a story in every glass: Dead Arm shiraz (named, perversely, after a vine disease), Feral Fox pinot noir (the area's pest displays a taste for grapes as a substitute for its preferred rabbit) and Broken Fishplate Sauvignon Blanc (in honour of a mechanism that sits underneath harvest tractors).

Just a few minutes further up the hill, past Coriole's vineyards, Chapel Hill winery offers a unique experience of Fleurieu; a purpose-built cooking school with a fabulous state-of-the-art »



Wine and dine From the top: the cellar door at the Salopian Inn, a former coaching inn that dates back to 1851; inside the Salopian Inn; from the menu at Chapel Hill, roast tomato and onion tart. Opposite: rustic touches from the much-loved Russell's pizza restaurant.



Stars and stripes Inside the Star of Greece restaurant at Port Willunga, above; Russell Jevons at his wood-fired oven in his tin-shed pizza parlour in Willunga. Opposite: the unmissable Willunga Farmers' Market.



RICOTTA & NOUGAT ICE-CREAM WITH VANILLA ROASTED PEACHES

450g firm, fresh ricotta

175g caster sugar

150g Italian hard nougat (torrone), finely chopped (available from gourmet food stores and delicatessens)

Zest of half a lemon, finely grated

Zest of 1 lime, finely grated

250ml (1 cup) thickened cream, whipped

8 firm, ripe, small freestone peaches, halved and stones removed

1 vanilla bean

80ml (1/3 cup) sweet white wine

Combine ricotta and 150g of the sugar in a food processor and process until smooth. Remove to a large bowl, stir in nougat and citrus zests then fold in whipped cream until well combined. Pour into a 21 x 11 cm (4 1/2 cup capacity) loaf tin, smooth top even then freeze overnight or until firm.

Preheat oven to 190C. Place peaches in a gratin dish, cut side up. Cut vanilla bean in half and, using the tip of a small, sharp knife, scrape out seeds. Combine seeds with white wine in a small bowl, stirring to combine well, then pour over peaches. Sprinkle peaches with remaining sugar then bake for 15 minutes or until tender. Cool. Dip loaf tin very briefly in hot water to loosen ice-cream then turn out onto a chilled platter (this can be done several hours before serving and stored in freezer until required). Use a large, warmed knife to cut slices of ice-cream, divide among plates and serve with peach halves to the side and cooking juices spooned over.

Serves 8

Wine suggestion

Lillipilly Estate Noble Sauvignon Blanc, 2002
Riverina, New South Wales

demonstration kitchen looking out onto the vines and on-site accommodation. We make a mental note that this would be the ideal place for a special occasion to gather with a group of good friends and learn a new repertoire of recipes under the capable tutelage of Pip Forrester, a woman who comes with Fleurieu pedigree, having been another of the founders of the Salopian Inn (forget six degrees of separation here, you're lucky if you manage two) and a real champion and advocate of the region's treasures and talent.

Before the sun sets, we take the winding, gum-lined road over and down Mount Compass to the pounding surf of Victor Harbor and Port Elliott, where Flying Fish Cafe nestles on the rocks of Horseshoe Bay. Named after the last shipwreck in the area 138 years ago, it has not shared its misfortune.

The former beach kiosk is now a streamlined, modern casual place with two personalities: in its lunchtime cafe incarnation it serves justly famous fish and chips. At sunset it becomes a more romantic spot, well away from the high concentration of competing restaurants on the other side of the mountain. The menu includes home-smoked meats and the wickedest of dark chocolate creme brulees.

Other kiosks are now flourishing along the previously neglected stretch of wide, flat beaches lining Gulf St Vincent – inspired by the Star of Greece (named after another shipwreck), which overlooks the clay and limestone cliffs at Port Willunga and pioneered this style of casual seaside cuisine. Its salt and pepper squid set the standard for everyone else. Now the Star's ex-chef, Glen Robson, runs the kiosk at Maslin Beach, while Aldinga's has been revived by Doug Govan, the man behind the region's best fish and chips and its most surprising hotel. You can't miss the Victory Hotel at Sellicks. Here, whiting is barely out of the sea before it is captured in the lightest whisper of a batter. Ignore the poker machines and pine decor. What lies beneath is what counts: an award-winning cellar of 8000 bottles, featuring hard-to-find drops and aged bottles at remarkably low prices – a Victorian much sought-after Giaconda chardonnay or a rare Bindi 2003 pinot from the Macedon Ranges – again, it's a case of exploring for yourself. There are always three or four featured wines by the glass, too. Govan, a true connoisseur, has planted his own vines under the Rudderless Wines label on terraces around the hotel – his keen palate suggests the results will be anything but lacking in direction.

Friends tell us it's a mistake to leave the area without sampling the Mediterranean tapas-style dishes cooked over charcoal at Fino's in Port Willunga. We duck into the cafe built of locally quarried 1860s slate and surrender to dishes of char-grilled quail, oven-baked chevre with garlic, lemon and olives and lamb meatballs. Next time, we promise ourselves, we'll adopt the market-goers ritual and join the breakfast queue that forms every Saturday for David Swain's Spanish eggs with chorizo and feta or chicken livers baked in earthenware dishes, served with crusty bread. It's a place Bridget Ohlsson would have loved, so we drink to her memory. +



WHERE TO EAT

Russell's

Dinner only Thurs, Fri, Sat.
Dinner for two \$30.
13 High Street, Willunga;
08 8556 2571.

Salopian Inn

Dinner for two \$145.
Corner of Willunga and
McMurtrie roads, McLaren
Vale; 08 8323 8769;
www.salopianinn.com.au

d'Arenberg Winery and d'Arry's Verandah

Lunch for two \$150.
Osborn Road, McLaren
Vale; 08 8329 4848;
www.darenberg.com.au

Victory Hotel

Dinner for two \$95.
Main South Road, Sellicks
Beach; 08 8556 3083;
www.victoryhotel.com.au

Flying Fish Cafe

Dinner for two \$124.
1 The Foreshore,
Horseshoe Bay, Port Elliott;
08 8554 3504.

Chapel Hill winery and cooking school

Courses \$720 per person
or \$940 for weekend courses.
1 Chapel Hill Road, McLaren
Vale; 08 8323 9182; www.
chapelhillwine.com.au

Fino's

Dinner for two \$110.
8 Hill Street, Port Willunga;
08 8556 4488.

Star of Greece

Dinner for two \$90; tasting
menu from \$75 per person.
Corner of Port Road and The
Esplanade, Port Willunga;
08 8557 7420.

WHERE TO STAY

Willunga House

Doubles from \$160 to \$230.
1 St Peters Terrace,
Willunga; 08 8556 2467;
www.willunghouse.com.au

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