Having grown up in Perth, Western Australia, Virginia Willcock’s introduction to winemaking began as a teenager when her father (and his friends) bought a small vineyard just north of the city.

“I was fascinated by the joy it brought them, since there wasn’t much of a wine community in Perth back then,” she says. “People were more beer drinkers.”

Her love affair with wine hasn't waned since. Virginia is now Chief Winemaker at Vasse Felix, the founding wine estate of Margaret River, located 260 kilometres (160 miles) down the coast from Perth.

“There are two types of winemakers – technical and intuitive,” says Virginia. “I’m the latter – I enjoy that beautiful process of learning and understanding what the fruit wants to do.”

It's an approach that has seen Virginia become one of the most awarded winemakers in Australia, but she modestly attributes much of her acclaim to the Margaret River region's unique location, surrounded by towering karri forest and the powerful Indian Ocean.

“We’ve got this Mediterranean climate that allows the grapes to ripen brilliantly, but being situated on a cape, surrounded by three sides of coastline, there’s also an extreme maritime influence,” explains Virginia. “It’s this crisp sea breeze that adds to the grapes’ fresh, vibrant flavours.”

Vasse Felix winery offers a full menu of tours showcasing its enviable location and coveted Chardonnay from Margaret River and fine sparkling from Tasmania’s Tamar Valley among them. Today, Australia is the sixth largest wine producer in the world, bottling over 1000 million litres of wine every year.

But it’s not the volume of wine that makes Australia’s wine regions so impressive – it’s the diversity. With wineries set in locations as exceptional as the people behind them, the Ultimate Winery Experiences Australia collective promises an equally diverse mix of travel experiences.

Guiding you through some of the country’s most stunning regions, meet a few of our leading Australian wine experts as they share their personal insights, adding even more life to what’s in your glass.

Virginia Willcock
Vasse Felix, Margaret River, Western Australia

The best way to understand Australia’s most highly-awarded wines? By sampling them right at the source. Reflecting the unique places and people behind them, these special experiences offer unique insight into Australia’s national identity.
Since he was a young boy, Pizzini Wines’ charismatic founder, Alfredo Pizzini (better known as Fred), has been farming in Victoria’s picturesque King Valley, 250 kilometres (155 miles) north-east of Melbourne. After his family migrated here from Northern Italy – alongside many other Europeans during the mid-20th century – he worked on their burgeoning tobacco farm into adulthood, experimenting with other crops and discovering an interest in grape growing.

“I’d married Katrina [co-founder of Pizzini Wines], our children were growing up, and we were also running the local Whitfield hotel,” recalls Fred. “We wanted to create a business that combined our love of people and farming in the King Valley.”

After buying a local vineyard and supplying grapes to other wineries for years, Fred launched Pizzini Wines in 1996. Since then, the King Valley has transformed into a multicultural wine centre, while Pizzini Wines has earned a shining reputation for its acclaimed Sangiovese and Nebbiolo.

“I think the King Valley really suits Northern Italian grape varieties because of the regions’ similarities,” says Fred. “There’s ample mountain-fresh water, mild temperatures, amazing soils and these terrific microclimates, which mean you can grow anything from Riesling to Sangiovese to Shiraz within a few hundred metres of each other, and have them produce entirely different characters.”

His self-described approach to winemaking – “wines built around food” – is reflected in the experiences on offer at the estate. No visit to Pizzini Wines is complete without learning the art of pasta-making at the winery’s purpose-built A Tavola! Cooking School, run by Katrina Pizzini (“Australia’s gnocchi queen,” says Fred, proudly). The relaxed, hands-on classes finish with a long lunch with Pizzini wine pairings. Fred also hosts meat smoking and curing classes.

You may also run into one of Fred and Katrina’s four children, who are also involved in the business. With son Joel now Chief Winemaker, Pizzini Wines is very much a family affair.

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“I make great wine and have fun” is the laidback mission statement of Brokenwood Wines, which Chief Winemaker and Managing Director Iain Riggs swears by.

Despite being a five-star winery in the Hunter Valley – Australia’s oldest wine region, situated about two hours’ drive north of Sydney – Brokenwood’s philosophy is far from straitlaced.

“While wine is our primary product here, we’re also in the business of selling good food and good times with good people,” says Iain.

Having grown up around the wine industry in South Australia, Iain studied winemaking before later joining Brokenwood in 1982, when it was still a small hobby winery. Largely responsible for Brokenwood’s subsequent transformation – from small-scale operation to internationally lauded commercial business – it’s Iain’s handiwork you’ll taste, when you visit the estate. “Our wines showcase both locally grown grapes, as well as fruit sourced from other prominent regions, to add more diversity to the range,” he explains.

Among Brokenwood’s most highly awarded wines are the Graveyard Vineyard Shiraz and Cricket Pitch Sauvignon Blanc Semillon, named after historic plans from the 1880s to establish a township close to where Brokenwood now stands.

“Many years ago, town planners were hoping to develop a local graveyard and a community playing field right where those particular vineyards were planted. Needless to say, no town eventuated,” says Iain.

Today you can sample Brokenwood’s excellent array of wines at the new multimillion-dollar cellar door, the largest complex in the Hunter. Boasting striking contemporary design, an expansive outdoor terrace, private tasting and dining rooms, and a wine museum, there’s also fine dining at The Wood Restaurant, where seafood takes centre stage. Look out for fresh wares on display from the iconic Sydney Fish Market – just add a Hunter Valley Semillon to complete the meal.

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“Wine should be the bridesmaid to food (never the bride), to bring out the nuances of the herbs and spices on your plate.”

“I think Australia’s wine industry is still relatively young when you compare it to parts of Europe, so there’s this very experimental and collegiate culture here.”

brokenwood.com.au
As a fourth-generation winemaker – his great-grandfather founded d’Arenberg in 1912 – wine runs in Chester Osborn’s blood. He spent school holidays picking grapes at his family’s prestigious McLaren Vale estate, 40 kilometres (25 miles) south of Adelaide. “I think I earned 30 cents an hour but put more grapes in my mouth than in the bucket,” he says, laughing.

Chester would go on to study the art of winemaking, taking over the reins as Chief Winemaker of d’Arenberg in 1984. In contrast to his signature colourful dress sense, Chester describes his winemaking style as traditional, since the sustainable, organic practices of early winemakers are back in vogue. Chester produces d’Arenberg’s award-winning wines through being “respectful of the old vines by using biodynamic practices and natural pest control”. d’Arenberg is renowned for its robust reds, which are characterised by a long palate, fragrant minerality and excellent ageing – but d’Arenberg’s menu of quirky guest experiences is arguably as impressive as the wines themselves.

Chester’s brainchild, the d’Arenberg Cube, is an architectural feat comprising five levels of tactile experiences to entice the senses, including a wine aroma sensory room, a virtual fermenter, a 360-degree video room and a Salvador Dalí art exhibition. The top floor is dedicated to an unparalleled tasting room, where you can take a wine-tasting masterclass, blend your own wine, or dine at one of the most acclaimed restaurants in South Australia.

SIMONE FURLONG
Leeuwin Estate, Margaret River, Western Australia

Simone Furlong grew up on the family vineyard, Leeuwin Estate, but left for university and then spent years working in marketing in London before she considered a career in the wine industry. Her parents planted Leeuwin’s first vines in 1973 in the beautiful Margaret River, 280 kilometres south of Perth, and produced their first commercial vintage in 1979.

“I had many fond memories of exploring the white sandy beaches and tall karri tree forests around the property,” says Simone, “but it wasn’t until I was much older that I considered promoting it as a career path.”

Now she is the joint Chief Executive of Leeuwin Estate, along with brother Justin Horgan, and the property has been transformed from a humble beach-holiday destination to one of Western Australia’s most highly regarded wineries.

“We’ve always been a low-volume, high-quality wine producer,” she says. “It’s quite a small parcel of exceptional land, so the wines are very site expressive.”

Describing the Margaret River as “one of the world’s most remote wine regions”, Simone believes it’s the area’s ancient gravelly soil, coupled with its cooling maritime conditions, that has allowed the vineyards to produce such rich, high-quality wines.

You’ll find Leeuwin’s most age-worthy wines released under the Art Series label, in which each wine is represented by an original painting, commissioned from a leading contemporary Australian artist. The painting is then featured on the bottle labels and exhibited at the winery’s

“I feel I’ve never worked a day in my life; I’m still having too much fun meeting people and telling stories.”

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“My role is about bringing together the technical and creative elements of winemaking and hospitality, so everyone can experience this place in a unique way that resonates with them.”

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Diana Ross and Carole King – where up to 6500 concertgoers picnic around the natural slopes. The estate also offers wine tastings and guided tours, as well as fine dining at the Impressive Leeuwin Restaurant where the menu highlights seasonal West Australian produce.
There's a poetic symmetry to Santiago (or Santi) Fernandez, Head Chef at Voyager Estate, and the love he shares for the surrounding Margaret River wine region, south of Perth.

Santi grew up in a small fishing town in Spain and his cooking career began with peeling potatoes at his parents’ restaurant. Later he became a chef as a means to travel the world, before moving to Australia in 2010 with his equally well-travelled wife. When the opportunity to join Voyager Estate arose in 2017, Santi promptly relocated to the striking Western Australian coastal wine region, and brought with him his keen understanding of sourcing from local growers.

“In a way I’m returning to my roots, but on the other side of the world,” says Santi. “I’m again getting to make beautiful food with organic produce, showing my love of local seafood and sustainable practices, and in a very beautiful place.”

Since Santi’s arrival, the estate’s restaurant has received wide acclaim as a culinary destination, and is routinely voted one of Western Australia’s best regional restaurants, offering four- and seven-course degustations. Santi explains it’s a careful collaboration between himself and Voyager’s sommelier to craft a balanced menu.

“Here, the wine is the beginning – it gives us all the information we need to build the right dish,” says Santi. The result is an ever-changing seasonal menu that thoughtfully complements the Voyager wines and showcases local ingredients such as Pemberton marron, Busselton abalone, Margaret River lamb and wagyu beef, and Manjimup truffles, as well as fresh herbs and vegetables from the estate’s kitchen garden.

Beyond the restaurant, you can also take part in winery and vineyard tours, as well as casual wine tastings at the cellar door. Voyager is working towards becoming a fully certified organic winery by 2023.

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**LEANNE DE BORTOLI**
De Bortoli Wines, Yarra Valley, Victoria

Family and winemaking go hand-in-hand for Leanne De Bortoli. Having grown up on the original De Bortoli Wines estate in country New South Wales, established in 1928 by her grandfather Vittorio De Bortoli, Leanne is a third-generation De Bortoli family member and is responsible for bringing to life some of Australia’s most beloved wines. Today, she manages the family’s Yarra Valley winery, 60 kilometres (37 miles) north-east of Melbourne.

As one of three De Bortoli wineries now dotted across New South Wales and Victoria, it’s the Yarra Valley estate that has been dedicated since 1987 to producing the De Bortoli premium range, overseen by Leanne’s husband, winemaker Steve Webber.

“The Yarra Valley has proved the perfect place to grow grapes for our premium range because the cooler climate makes for wines that are both fine and food-friendly,” explains Leanne.

De Bortoli is renowned for its award-winning Chardonnay but also embraces newer styles like Nebbiolo Rosé. Leanne shares the lessons instilled by her grandfather: “He had immigrated from Northern Italy to Australia before establishing the first vineyard. But that was his great skill: he took opportunities where he saw them, he wasn’t afraid to experiment, and he found a way to give people the wine they really wanted.”

It’s not just De Bortoli’s wine that has evolved in the Yarra: its menu of experiences has, too. At Locale Restaurant, you can indulge in shared plates of authentic Italian dishes made with fresh local produce, alongside your favourite De Bortoli drop. Further wine tastings are offered at the cellar door, as are winery tours, barrel tastings, even blending your own wine. But the signature experience is the Wine and Wildlife package, beginning at the nearby Healesville Sanctuary where you can get up close to some of Australia’s unique wildlife, including koalas, wallabies, Tasmanian devils and emus, followed by a leisurely winery tour and long lunch, finishing at the Yarra Valley Chocolaterie and Ice Creamery.

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Sustainability is at the heart of Melissa Brown’s work as a third-generation viticulturalist at Gemtree Wines. Nesting in South Australia’s McLaren Vale, 40 kilometres south of Adelaide, Gemtree has been impressively operating as a fully biodynamic and certified organic winery since 2007 but, as Melissa admits, “It’s the last place on earth I thought I’d end up.”

After completing a business diploma, followed by a considerable stint backpacking around the world, Melissa found herself at a career crossroads. A friend suggested she return to the family vineyards for a vintage. “Dad said he’d give me three weeks before I quit,” Melissa says, laughing. Surprising everyone, most of all herself, Melissa fell in love with grape growing, the outdoor life and the connection to nature. “I was terrible at science at school, but it somehow made perfect sense in the vineyards,” she says.

Viticulture wasn’t the only thing Melissa fell for. Mike Brown, then an aspiring young winemaker, later became Melissa’s husband and is now Gemtree’s Chief Winemaker and Managing Director. Since joining the business in 1994, Melissa has been a driving force in converting Gemtree’s operations from conventional to being one of Australia’s largest biodynamic wineries, becoming a market leader along the way.

On Gemtree’s guided tours you can learn all about the winery’s innovative practices, such as using sheep for natural weed control, growing native plants to protect vineyards, and turning grape waste into compost. The Wine and Wander tour also takes in the winery’s one-kilometre (0.6-mile) eco walking trail, where you’ll likely see Australian wildlife along the way, such as koalas and emus. It is followed by a five-course wine-paired picnic in a native bush setting.

Otherwise, Gemtree’s sustainably run tasting room serves organic gourmet platters which champion the region’s best produce, including vegan options, and can be enjoyed out on the sprawling lawns which are popular with visiting families.

“I get a lot of satisfaction from being able to educate people about our biodynamic philosophy and the importance of looking after our local environment.”

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Living by the motto “If I can’t afford to stay there, I’ll work there”, Sales Manager of Josef Chromy Wines David Milne has experienced his fair share of luxurious destinations. His hospitality career has taken him across Asia, the United States and the United Kingdom. Unexpectedly, it was while David was on a last-minute holiday to Tasmania that one of the state’s most storied vigneron, Josef Chromy, invited him to join the launch team of Josef Chromy Wines, luring David back to Australia.

“I knew that if Josef was going to create anything, the quality would be unparalleled,” he says.

He wasn’t wrong. Josef Chromy Wines has since earned a raft of awards and accolades, with international acclaim for its elegant Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and sparkling offerings.

David attributes the success to the cool climate of the Tamar Valley coupled with the expertise of Chief Winemaker Jeremy Dineens’ minimalist approach to winemaking. But he is also quick to boast, “It’s just the most beautiful vineyard in Australia.”

In a picturesque valley 190 kilometres (120 miles) north of Hobart, the winery is set among lush rolling hills and a dreamy 1800s old English garden, near the city of Launceston. The estate also overlooks a set of freshwater lakes where guests can fly fish or cycle around.

But inside the winery you can learn about making traditional sparkling, explore the cellar door or sample the finest Tasmanian produce from the restaurant’s à la carte menu.

“Having worked all over the world, I’ve realised that what makes Australia’s wine industry so unique is this authenticity. You meet with people who are truly passionate about their region, their varietals and their contribution.”

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“Melissa Brown
Gemtree Wines, McLaren Vale, South Australia

David Milne
Josef Chromy, Tamar Valley, Tasmania

Tourism Australia
Ultimate Winery Experiences Australia
It's not often as a winemaker in Australia that you're handed the custodianship of century-old vines. But that's what awaited Ryan Sudano at Mandoon Estate. The scenic property hugging the curves of the Swan River in the Swan Valley was among the first land grants ever made in Western Australia, with its first block of Verdelho planted in 1895. When Allan Erceg purchased the site in 2008, he called Ryan, then Chief Winemaker at Western Range Wines.

"His grand vision and passion for the valley and wine got me interested," Ryan says. It was a tantalising opportunity to start with a blank canvas. Their first move was tackling the original vines, which were "overgrown and rundown". "A mountain of hard work and resources were applied to restore these historic blocks," he says. It was a task Ryan was well suited for. "Having started my career in the vineyard I think I have a real understanding and passion for growing quality fruit," he says. "I also understand that great wine comes from great fruit, so I spend a lot of time in our vineyards." His "hands-on" approach to the Swan Valley vines and another historic planting of Cabernet acquired in Margaret River has yielded acclaimed results, with Mandoon’s Chenin, Shiraz, Grenache and Verdelho in particular winning accolades. It’s a level of quality found throughout the destination winery outside of Perth, from the cellar door to the on-site Homestead microbrewery headed by winemaker-turned-brewer Justin Bishop and fine dining restaurant Wild Swan (where Ryan and chef Michael Hartnell have paired plates and estate drops). In these hands, Mandoon is leading the evolution of Western Australia’s oldest wine region.

"We are very lucky to have access to these wonderful old vineyards and consider it a privilege to look after them."

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**RYAN SUDANO**

Mandoon Estate, Swan Valley, Western Australia

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**DAN SWINCER**

Jacob’s Creek, Barossa Valley, South Australia

Every day, over a million glasses of Jacob’s Creek wines are enjoyed around the world. And the responsibility for ensuring each one upholds the standard set by the iconic winery, located in South Australia’s Barossa Valley, rests with Dan Swincer. “The quality of Jacob’s Creek comes down to the commitment of people across the business to deliver the best wines across all price points,” he says. From the $10 to the $120 mark (and above), Dan and his team carefully manage each vintage from block to bottle.

It’s this attention to detail that has fuelled Dan’s notable career progression since joining the Pernod Ricard family 14 years ago, firstly from Group Red Winemaker to Chief Winemaker of revered Australian label St Hugo, then to Chief Winemaker at Jacob’s Creek.

In his current role, which he’s held since 2018, Dan works with Jacob’s Creek growers located right across the Australian continent. “I think Australia is blessed with such a diverse viticultural landscape that there is no one thing that represents Australian wine and viticulture,” he reflects. “What we do at Jacob’s Creek is represent a good portion of that amazing diversity and the desire to innovate and change.”

Despite the business’ continental reach, however, the Barossa remains at the heart of the Jacob’s Creek operations. “Since the first vineyards were planted on the banks of Jacob’s Creek in 1847, the Barossa has been the spiritual home of the business,” Dan says. At the state-of-the-art cellar door, located beside the namesake creek, guests can partake in a variety of memorable experiences: taking a masterclass pairing Barossa Signature wines with a locavore menu, blending their own drop to take home, or letting the approachable crew guide them through a tasting. "I want visitors to take away the perspective of the people and passion that go into our wines, as well as a sense of our little place in the Barossa,” Dan says.

“Despite being a global wine brand, Jacob’s Creek has a great sense of place here in the Barossa, which is such an important part of the soul of the business.”

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Heidi Williams likes to describe her parents' winery as a “retirement project that got out of hand”. When John and Wendy Mitchell bought their vineyard in Victoria’s Mornington Peninsula, it was meant to help them shift into a slower gear. But instead, the family now helms one of the most esteemed wineries and restaurants in the holiday hamlet outside Melbourne, where rolling vine-covered hills slope down to the sea.

“I think that our family has always come from a place of sharing and generosity,” says Heidi, who left a law career behind to become Montalto’s Director of People, Hospitality and Community. “We do things that we like doing, and ultimately, want to share that with other people.”

Montalto grew somewhat organically out of those shared passions. The cool-climate vineyards were inspired by John’s encounters with the coastal vineyards of Europe. The Piazza, where visitors graze on seasonal bites and sip estate-grown Pinot Noir, is enfolded by thriving kitchen gardens Wendy established. The family’s love of art inspired the open-air sculpture trail that winds around the scenic property. Cumulatively, it’s an experience that Heidi hopes sates more than the tastebuds.

“We like to offer people who visit our place a moment out of the ordinary,” she says. “Of course, we make wine, of course we have food, but we also offer an experience that can touch people in different ways. It isn’t just about the sensory experience you might have when you’re eating or drinking. It’s about nourishing the whole person, really.”

“'We're not promising that we're going to change their life or that they're going to have a completely extraordinary experience all the time. We're promising that we will offer them something that just takes them out of their ordinary conditions for a time.”

Nick Toy
Feathertop, Alpine Valleys, Victoria

As Feathertop’s Head Winemaker, Nick Toy has his work cut out for him. In their “patch of paradise” in the Ovens Valley beneath Mount Buffalo, he oversees production of 22 varietals and over 50 clones on a modest 50 acres. “Obviously it adds some real diversity and challenges to my role, which I really love,” Nick says. “I make about 25 different wines each year and they’re all in very small volumes; all hand-picked, handcrafted wines.” But then, Feathertop has never been about doing things the easy way.

The winery was the outcome of a single-minded quest by its founder Kel Boynton. “He spent years looking for what he believed to be the perfect growing conditions in Australia, and he was willing to go anywhere,” Nick says. Kel found it in Victoria’s Alpine Valleys, transforming a blackberry-choked patch into the area’s first commercial winery in 1988.

Kel’s instincts bore fruit, with the region’s sunny days and crisp nights offering extended ripening periods and grapes with complexity. “Its growing conditions are definitely its greatest asset,” says Nick, who joined seven years ago. From the outset Kel favoured alternative varietals, letting traditional blenders such as Petit Verdot and Pinot Meunier shine. Over the years, he and Nick have introduced sub-Alpine European vines including Friulano, Vermentino and Savagnin, applying a hands-on approach that respects the fruit’s characteristics. “The ethos I live and die by here is that I love the individual varieties and clones to be able to express themselves,” says Nick. “We’re learning about them all the time and that’s one of the most exciting things – there’s no rulebook for this.”

“We believe that we live in the best part of the world, and we’d love people to just walk away with a little slice of that by the time they leave.”

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“We are really very aware that our story starts with the land and the river... it doesn’t start with the winery being built,” says Hayley Purbrick, the fifth generation of her family to helm Tahbilk. This sustainable ethos underpins the historic winery in Victoria’s Nagambie Lakes, which has achieved carbon neutrality and is transitioning to organic management under Hayley’s tenure as Environmental Manager.

Hayley spent her formative years playing in the heritage cellars and helping out across the business. Even after a career in finance took her away, the land continued to exert a pull. “I was always a country kid... I have a really deep connection with the earth,” she says. One day, Hayley made a decision; if she had to work past 6pm once more, it was time to go home. “I worked until 11pm that night and I handed in my resignation the next day.”

Tahbilk can trace its origins to the 1860s (it boasts some of the world’s oldest Marsanne and Shiraz plantings). To visit is “like walking back in time”, Hayley says, but the business is very future-looking. “Our environmental journey has really been born out of being able to continue to grow high-quality produce to use in all our products long into the future.”

As well as the nurturing the Rhone varietals Tahbilk is famous for, the entire ecosystem has been considered. Guests are encouraged to explore the property’s regenerated wetlands—home to everything from platypus to pelicans. It encapsulates the holistic vision Hayley is helping realise. “I would love [visitors] to walk away feeling a sense of calm, a sense of warmth and a really deep connection to the place that they’ve just walked within,” she says.

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Hayley Purbrick
Tahbilk, Nagambie Lakes, Victoria

“Ultimately, as farmers, we rely on the natural environment to be able to create a beautiful product.”

“Conor van der Reest
Moorilla, Hobart, Tasmania

“If Mona is irreverent, Moorilla is reverent,” says Conor van der Reest. “We know what we grow and we know what we make and we’ve focused on that.” Moorilla’s enigmatic owner David Walsh enlisted the Canadian-born winemaker in 2007 to overhaul the winery, which shares its peninsula with Hobart’s Museum of Old and New Art (Mona). Conor proceeded with reverence for the terroir of one of Tasmania’s oldest vineyards. “We’re really in it for the long term,” he says. “It’s quite different to David’s vision for Mona, which he jokes could all be underwater in 50 years!”

Conor had long seen parallels between Australia’s southernmost state and his homeland. “Here is very similar to back home, both from a cool-climate perspective but also from the size and scale of our industries.” Even so, he was surprised by the diversity at Moorilla, which yields dozens of distinct small batches. It offers an extraordinary palette to work with and has translated into three labels – Praxis, Muse and the hallmark Cloth Label Series. “That variation we see in our vineyards extends out to the island as a whole,” Conor says. “All of that natural complexity makes Tasmania a perfect wine-lover’s playground.”

Over 13 years, Conor has created something that sits alongside the cultural phenomenon that is Mona while holding its own. It’s an experience he encourages visitors to unpack at their own pace. On their commanding perch over the pristine Derwent River, Mona and Moorilla reward a full day’s exploration (or two). “Between the winery and the museum, it was always David’s desire not to point the way for our visitors,” Conor says. “It’s really about self-discovery and self-exploration. If I tell you more then I might ruin the surprise.”

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“It was and always has been Tasmania’s natural environment that was the attraction: the cool climate, seasonal variation and varietals that I love to work with.”
From the second you glide down the expansive driveway to the swooping entrance guarded by Inge King's Grand Arch, everything about Pt. Leo Estate makes an impact. “My job as the General Manager, since my very first day here, has been to make the guest journey throughout these spaces just as grand and impactful as the building itself,” says Roger Lancia, who steers this heady trinity of fine wine, fine dining and fine art on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula. But the aim of this game-changing cellar door isn’t to intimidate– it’s to inspire.

“The one thing that we do really, really well is disarming all our guests and just having them switch off,” says Roger. “This is everyone’s weekender, no matter what you’re doing and what you’re here for.” Pt. Leo started as the weekend retreat and private vineyard of the philanthropic Gandel family. John and Pauline Gandel initially had more modest intentions for a simple cellar door on an unused parcel of land overlooking the ocean, with pieces from their sculpture collection dotted about. But as the potential of the offering became apparent, the vision expanded to match. “What was really exciting about the project was this incredible evolution,” says Roger.

Today, Roger’s team strives to offer a transformative experience for every visitor, whether that’s a degustation with all-Victorian wines in the two-hatted restaurant Laura, named for the Jaume Plensa sculpture it overlooks; a wander on three kilometres of undulating paths through a world-class open-air gallery; or cultivating a taste for the nuanced estate wines at the cellar door. “We hope that every guest leaves feeling absolutely surprised,” Roger says. “And then we love that sense of absolute familiarity when they come back.”

“The vision for the business was certainly to construct a building and a little corner of the world that is absolutely world class.”

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CHRIS TYRRELL
Tyrrell’s Wines,
Hunter Valley, New South Wales

The story of Australia’s oldest wine region is interwoven with that of one of its oldest winemaking dynasties. The Tyrrell family has been crafting wines in New South Wales’ Hunter Valley since 1864. “You’d be silly to not embrace the past and respect it, and I think that’s something that we do every day,” says Chris Tyrrell, who represents the family’s fifth generation, alongside siblings Jane and John. But improving on that foundation is his main responsibility, he says. “It’s about being able to hand this business on to the next generation in a better place than when we got it.”

Chris joined his father Bruce in the winery in 2001, a year after the death of his larger-than-life grandfather Murray Tyrrell (an industry pioneer, who introduced Australians to Chardonnay). It was a symbolic passing of the baton. But then 18-year-old Chris had no such nostalgic ideals. “I started working here because I wanted some money,” he laughs. He grew into the winemaking craft, working alongside colleagues who’d been there since he was born. “It’s just always been a very natural thing and I think I’m better for that and a bit more rounded,” he says.

Chris welcomes Australia’s growing awareness of its viticultural diversity, with winemakers embracing what their regional specialties bring to the whole. In the Hunter that’s Shiraz, Chardonnay and most notably Semillon, the variety synonymous with the valley. Since 2004, Tyrrell’s has bottled its most distinguished expressions – from some of the world’s oldest vineyards – under the Sacred Sites label. In the spirit of Tyrrell’s, it’s a legacy Chris sees as his children’s. “The things we do in the vineyard, the things we do in the winery, those things will be at their best when my kids are working here – which is exciting I reckon.”

“We strive for what my grandfather did – continually look for new ways to make delicious wines that are accessible for everyone to enjoy. Wines to enjoy with family and friends.”

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tyrells.com.au

ROGER LANCIA
Pt. Leo Estate,
Mornington Peninsula, Victoria
Most of the time, wine is matched to food. But at St Hugo, one hour’s drive from South Australia’s capital city, Adelaide, everything the kitchen creates is explicitly designed to frame the wine. Executive chef, Mark McNamara, who opened the 50-seat restaurant in the bucolic Barossa Valley four years ago, says it’s his underpinning philosophy. “If you put the right food with the right wine, you’ll see the wine in better balance,” he says. Far more sophisticated than the usual rules of ‘white wine with seafood’ or ‘red with meat’, the team at St Hugo takes a scientific approach to pairing. “We look at the wine with a bank of flavours – which are judged and scored by a panel as being the best flavours – and we use that data to create a dish. It’s back-to-front to what happens normally,” he says.

In all, there are some 60 flavours identified in St Hugo’s flavour reference palate. It’s a process that’s led the chef to smash culinary rules. “On the degustation menu, we serve Cabernet with grilled lobster,” he says. “We team it with fresh peas, wakame and miso butter. It’s a sweet meat, but the salinity from the seaweed and the umami from the miso work. That’s where it’s exciting; the protein doesn’t lead it, the flavours do.”

Among the suite of experiences at St Hugo, a standout is the Chef’s Table, whereby guests sit ringside over the open kitchen and chat to Mark and his team while they’re preparing meals. The experience also begins with a vineyard and kitchen garden walk, and an underground cellar tasting.

**ANDREW KAY**
Wirra Wirra, McLaren Vale, South Australia

Wirra Wirra was founded by an eccentric South Australian cricketer by the name of Robert Wigley, in 1894. After his death, the McLaren Vale property, about 40 kilometres south of Adelaide, was left to ruin. Decades later, another fellow with a love of parchingly dry humour, Greg Trott, geared things up again, building a culture of quality blended with fun.

The two personalities, who’ve both since departed this world, would be proud of what it has become. Following their lead, today’s generation likes to inject hilarity into the day-to-day, randomly ringing the estate’s three-quarter tonne bell, sporadically surprising visitors with their on-site medieval siege machine – which they use to launch watermelons into the air – and donning costumes for events.

Managing Director, Andrew Kay has been with the winery since 2006 and, beyond the lightheartedness, he’s working on a very serious project. Wirra Wirra plans to open the region’s first five-star resort in 2022. “You can’t actually stay at five-star accommodation on the grounds of a winery anywhere in South Australia,” he says. Guests of the 33-room health and wellness spa will overlook the certified organic and biodynamic vineyards, a scamper from the winery and a 15-minute drive to the region’s untouched beaches. Included will be the now heritage-listed Wigley house, which will become the presidential suite.

Wirra Wirra means ‘amongst the gum trees’ in the region’s Aboriginal language, and the ancient trees make for an idyllic picnic setting enjoyed by many visitors. Guests can also dine at Harry’s Deli, a local produce haven named after a bib and brace-sporting Lithuanian carpenter who crafted much of the winery’s timberwork. One of the best experiences is also the cheapest: a storytelling session called Trott’s Tales, held over tastings in a cellar Trott constructed years ago.

“**Our forebears were both eccentric in different ways. That history has embedded itself into our culture, so we’re always known as a place that likes to do things a little bit differently, and we attract people that like to have fun.”**

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**MARK MCNAMARA**
St Hugo, Barossa Valley, South Australia

“The Barossa Valley knows its heritage. In my restaurant, I like to champion little producers and quirky things. I love that the local bakery still uses a Scotch oven and cuts its own wood. I source from the town’s 80-year-old butcher, who uses traditional recipes from his father, and maintains a brick smokehouse. I moved to the valley 28 years ago and it was partly due to his cured, smoked ham.”

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How James Agnew went from being a suited Sydney lawyer to running a historic, rural winery is quite a story. On one of many trips to help out at his father’s thoroughbred stud farm in the Upper Hunter region of New South Wales, a few hours north of Sydney, James and his siblings were given a cryptic request. “Dad said, ‘I want you to go somewhere for me. It’s this place called Audrey Wilkinson. Give me a call when you arrive.’” With vineyards stretching all around them, they did as he’d asked. Brian Agnew answered the phone and told them, “I’m thinking of buying it.” That was 16 years ago. Despite “knowing nothing about the wine industry”, the Agnew family has developed a place where proposals of marriage are frequent, cellar sessions are coveted and the property’s rich history is celebrated.

“As you come up over the hill, everything drops away and sweeps around you and you get this stunning view with mountains in the distance. The second we saw it, we knew this place was something special.”

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To fall into wine by accident and end up working at arguably Australia’s most iconic winery as a senior winemaker is quite an achievement. But spend some time with 34-year-old Steph Dutton and it’s easy to see what Penfolds, maker of the country’s most iconic wine, Penfolds Grange, sees in her.

“I was working in hospitality on the side while I was at university. I really loved being surrounded by wine, serving it and learning from the sommeliers,” she says. After completing a science degree specialising in genetics, Steph followed her passion, moving from metropolitan Melbourne to wine-centric Adelaide, the capital of South Australia. There, she studied a Masters of Oenology while sticking to hospitality, at Penfolds’ lauded Magill Estate Restaurant. “If I hadn’t worked at the restaurant, I wouldn’t have as deep an understanding of the brand because every night you’re opening up wines from the ‘60s through to the ‘90s and beyond,” she says. “It means you understand the Penfolds style across time.” Her passion was noticed and she was invited to join the wine team for the 2010 vintage. Clearly, it went well because seven years later, the now mother-of-two was appointed Penfolds’ Senior Red Winemaker, working with the team on Grange, and taking special care of the revered St Henri label.

Steph is now based in the Barossa Valley, where the label’s regional cellar door is. It’s about an hour’s drive from Adelaide city, where the label’s flagship cellar door – and that coveted Magill Estate restaurant – sits. Her hot tip is the Penfolds Magill & Block 42 Barossa VIP Experience, which tours both properties, focusing on off-limits barrel rooms, underground tunnels, Grange Cottage, (the original home of Penfolds’ founders in Adelaide) and includes a helicopter ride to Block 42, the oldest Cabernet-producing vineyard in Australia.

“At the cellar door, doing a Taste of Grange tour and tasting is what it’s all about. Trying the wines in the setting they were sourced from makes you understand them that much more.”

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JAMES AGNEW
Audrey Wilkinson, Hunter Valley, New South Wales

STEPH DUTTON
Penfolds, Adelaide and Barossa Valley, South Australia
“I just want to make the best goddamn wine on the planet,” is how Mike Hayes of Queensland’s Sirromet Wines describes his purpose. The Australian Winemaker of the Year for 2017 has been working up to that lofty goal since he was 15 years old. That’s when his farmer parents took over the management of a vineyard and he discovered his calling. “I wanted to leave school and work on the vineyard full time, so my father punished me by putting me on the chipping hoe, sometimes for up to 13 hours a day, to encourage me to return to school. I worked that hoe for eight months,” he says. The tactic only fortified him, and after more than 40 years in the industry, he’s still doing things his way.

At Sirromet (pronounced sih-roe-may), found 35 minutes’ drive from Brisbane, Mike is both the Director of Viticulture and the Chief Winemaker – key roles usually held by two people. He has forensically studied grape varieties that have adapted to climate change, leading him to make distinctive wines with Vermentino, Lagrein, Montepulciano and Petit Manseng, among others. In 2019, he also brought out Sirromet’s first organic and vegan wines. “We’re trying to capture the personality of the vines and Mother Nature and put it in a bottle for people to enjoy,” he says.

Bay views, wallaby-filled grounds, bush glamping and Supa Golf, using oversized clubs and balls, are all part of the Sirromet experience, but perhaps the highlight is joining Mike on a grape-picking day in January or February (bookable online only in those months), where guests crush grapes and help make wines, followed by a breakfast banquet.

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“Here we’re into emerging varieties. We don’t call ourselves the best Shiraz or Chardonnay makers, but we can say that for Nebbiolo, Fiano or Saperavi. We’re not governed by tradition, so we can let our hair down.”

Yalumba has never stopped being Jessica Hill-Smith’s playground. The South Australian winery has been in her family for six generations, started by one Samuel Smith, who planted the first vineyard by moonlight in 1849. “As kids, we were always told the story about him sailing over to Australia with his family, which seemed like such an adventure to us. I reflect now on the risks he took and the vision he had for a different life.”

His determination led to her idyllic childhood in the storied Barossa Valley, found one hour’s drive from Adelaide. “My sisters and I used to rollerblade around the warehouses, play secretaries in the office and pick grapes in the vineyards that we’d feed to the emus and roos we had in a sanctuary,” she says.

These days, she wears shoes as she walks through the winery, as the Brand Manager for Yalumba’s Rare & Fine collection. Having previously overseen iconic Champagne brands Moet & Chandon, Dom Perignon, Krug and Ruinart, Jessica was well placed to slide into the role. “I wanted to achieve things on my own, and earn my stripes first,” she says. “But Dad was really happy when I called and said I was ready to come back.”

Yalumba is one of only four wineries in the world that make barrels from scratch on site, so Jessica picks the Cooperage Experience as the most thrilling. “The barrels are often forgotten when people are enjoying a glass of wine, but there’s a beautiful craft to making them,” she says. “The cooper and winemaker here work together to create the perfect type of barrel for our most premium wines.”

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“I often lead the tours because people love to meet the family. You really feel the history when you come on site, and you can discover so much.”
KATHERINE BROWN
Brown Brothers, King Valley, Victoria

Katherine Brown has something many winemakers can only dream about, a micro lab known as the Kindergarten winery. It’s kitted out with micro presses, miniature tanks and all the winemaking equipment usually needed – only smaller. “It allows us to work on new creations in a micro way,” she says. “If an experiment works, and we produce a wine we think is going to be a great success, we can turn it around and upscale it.”

Katherine is the first female winemaker in more than 130 years of the Brown Brothers family business. She grew up five kilometres from the King Valley winery, nearly three hours’ drive north-east of Melbourne. She and her young family now live in her grandparent’s renovated homestead; grandfather John was also a winemaker. Katherine’s grandmother Patricia was known as the “non-official CEO”, and in her memory, the winery’s flagship wines and its restaurant have been named after her.

Katherine has been keen on winemaking since her dad brought grapes and yeast home to make DIY creations with. “I thought they were normal childhood games,” she says. In 2020, the fourth-generation Brown has been playing with four different varieties that are so new, they don’t even have names. “There’s one called M11 that’s got a Pinot Grigio character, but with the acid kick of a Riesling,” she says.

Visitors who join the Gourmet Discovery ‘winemaker for a day’ experience get to peek into the Kindergarten winery where they can taste experimental drops, then lose themselves in the family cellar where museum vintages are stored. “It’s nice to get an insight into the day-to-day,” says Katherine. “Some people know little about wine – other than that they like drinking it – but here, they can walk away with a next-level understanding.”

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NIGEL THIELE
Seppeltsfield, Barossa Valley, South Australia

Nigel Thiele has been surrounded by vineyards since he was six months old. “My father Tony got a job at a Barossa Valley winery when I was a baby, so I grew up on a vineyard,” he says. “It got wine into my veins at a pretty green age.”

When Nigel finds a good thing, he sticks with it. He’s been working at Seppeltsfield – named in the World’s 50 Best Vineyards in 2019 and only an hour’s drive from Adelaide – for more than two decades. Rising from cellar door assistant to his current position as Brand Ambassador, he leads most VIP experiences through the historic winery.

Showing off the winery’s cellared collection of century-old Tawnies, which began in 1878, is a highlight, he says. “It’s the unbroken lineage of wine that’s unique. We’re the only winery in the world to release a century-old wine, every year.”

It means those on the Centenary Tour can taste their birth year as well as a 100-year old Tawny straight from the barrel. Nigel also treasures the This is Your Life experience, where guests sample vintages that mean something to them. “We ensure the reason they’re tasting that wine is referenced,” says Nigel. “We’ve had some pretty misty moments – tears of laughter, almost rolling on the floor reminiscing, versus moments where it’s gotten incredibly emotional.”

The wider Seppeltsfield estate is full of drawcards, from food critic-favourite Fino restaurant to an operating cooperage, a design studio, bike hire, Segway tours and picnic grounds. In 2022, a $50 million, six-star hotel is expected to complete the leafy grounds. “We have the space, the environment and the postcard views,” says Nigel. “This will help us take things up to a whole new level.”

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MORE INFO

For more information on any of these experiences, including famill opportunities, high-res imagery or to arrange interviews, reach out to:

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