

10 OF THE BEST

By Nikki Wallman

Regional restaurants

The great Australian escape takes a delicious turn with this outstanding crop of destination-dining eateries peppered around the country worth hitting the road for.

REGIONAL AUSTRALIA HAS long brimmed with innovation and flavour. Incredible produce is plucked fresh from the ground or the ocean, or raised on land that's sometimes just outside your dining table window. Some of the latest culinary stars opened just before the pandemic shut down all hopes of a road trip; others emerged among the green shoots of recovery, ready to welcome travellers overdue for a home-grown adventure. Some are fine-diners with laid-back country warmth, while others are more casual, the setting an easy-going stage for good times. From a heritage sandstone building to a restored haberdashery store and a hillside ode to Tasmanian coastal splendour, each setting is uniquely of its place. We say hit the road, stat.

1 MUNI, WILLUNGA, SA

"We don't have much," reads Muni's website, humbly describing this 28-seater, opened in late 2021 in the pretty town of Willunga, south of Adelaide. "Just a set menu, some bottles we enjoy, and genuine people around." Pared-back it may be with its soothing surrounds (courtesy of Sans-Arc Studio) and dégustation menu. But Muni – named after the Japanese term for "one and only" – celebrates interesting natural and low-intervention wines, sakes and seriously good food, and word is getting around. The menu is vegetable-led, with carefully selected meat and seafood woven in, and reverence for the produce and the people who nurture it shines through, as does the Taiwanese backgrounds of chefs Mug Chen and Chia Wu. Expect inspired combinations of flavour and texture: a sake-marinated oyster on a bed of somen noodles, set in a pool of 72-hour dashi with coriander and society garlic, say, or rice pudding with fish floss and pork jowl smoked over hay. Menus give a shoutout to producers, should you be inspired to stock up on the way home. Go for the pairings (including sake) or choose your own wine adventure (somm Travis Tausend is also a renowned winemaker) for a truly "one and only" experience. munirestaurant.com



ON THE MUNI
Muni's chefs Mug Chen and Chia Wu and their chargrilled snook with finger lime, pickled onion and kaffir lime dressing (right).



3 VAN BONE, BREAM CREEK, TAS

Opened in early 2021, Van Bone is a truly Tasmanian experience where the riveting Marion Bay views, rolling land, and fire-licked food served up within its rammed-earth walls all work in striking harmony. The restaurant has collected accolades for both its fit-out and food, served in up to 14 courses at each set-menu dégustation lunch (Curtis Stone called it the best meal he's enjoyed in a decade). Chef Timothy Hardy (formerly of Brae, the Lake House and Garagistes) and partner Laura Stucken (restaurant manager and interior architect) immerse diners in the landscape via the plate and the views, creating a long lunch experience well worth the trip (under an hour's drive) from Hobart. Clad in warm-hued oak, the dining room sets the stage for the local bounty. The restaurant's own kitchen garden and orchards form the backbone of its ever-changing, minimal-waste, minimal-intervention offering, with further produce sourced from the nearby ocean and pastures. Hardy credits some of the Nordic culinary greats, including Magnus Nilsson and René Redzepi, with influencing his approach to hyper-local seasonality and the tightrope walk between humble ingredients and technical prowess, but what he and Stucken are doing here is innately, uniquely Australian. Tasmanian. Van-Bone-ean, really. vanbone.com.au

2 ANTICA AUSTRALIS, CARCOAR, NSW

Antica Australis serves up food and stories each weekend in the tiny, film-set town of Carcoar, in the Orange wine region. Just like husband-and-wife team Kelly and Paolo Picarazzi, the experience is a joyful coming together of culture and cuisine. She's Australian; he's from Ciociara, near Rome, from which he draws his recipe inspiration, realised with the bountiful produce of the area in dishes that are at once traditional and creative. Housed in a restored heritage building, once a haberdashery, Antica opened three weeks before Covid hit, but survived and thrived (while Carcoar has also earned plaudits such as 2022 NSW Top Tiny Town). The set menu is served to all diners at once, with Kelly recounting the history of each dish throughout the meal. It's BYO, so visitors exploring the region can bring their discoveries. Close relationships with producers yield everything from freshly picked hazelnuts – used in a heavenly hazelnut-infused risotto served with toasted hazelnuts and guanciale – to pasture-raised meat and local wines. The end of the last vintage was celebrated "by throwing a lot of wine into the dishes", says Kelly. Think local sirloin steak with Angullong Montepulciano sauce and ethereal tiramisù featuring local pomegranate and See Saw prosecco. Stovetop espresso and biscuits are served before you head back to reality. anticacarcoar.com

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DUJ HUYNH (MUNI DISH), JONATHAN VDK (PORTRAIT) & MARNE HAWSON (MOONAH)

RICH PICKINGS

Cherry tomatoes with goat's cheese, sweet mace, fried saltbush and whey vinaigrette at Moonah.

4 MOONAH, CONNEWARRE, VIC

Moonah is, quite literally, off the beaten track, though the rapidly mounting culinary citations since its November 2020 opening may see that path more trodden. Still, there's little chance of overcrowding – this 12-seater on The Minya Winery on Victoria's Bellarine Peninsula is all about slow, secluded immersion in the surrounds. A turn-off onto a long dirt road leads to the peaceful restaurant overlooking a tree-fringed billabong. Lunch, a three-hour affair, consists of a single set menu. Chef-owner Tobin Kent (late of Brae) sources his fresh produce from his off-site farm or within a 200-kilometre radius, moving with the seasons to pluck the very best from nature at any given moment. A recent menu featured southern bluefin tuna caught "only a few kilometres from the restaurant, just off the coast of Barwon Heads" and "seryed with samphire foraged from the banks of the billabong and fermented summer truffles from Ballarat." Wines are all Australian, organic or biodynamic, and rested lovingly in the underground cellar. For non-alcoholic pairings, Kent fashions his own kombucha. Making a weekend of it? Torquay is a short drive away, and "the beaches at the end of our driveway are spectacular", Kent enthuses. moonahrestaurant.com.au



5 FRUI MOMENTO AT CHERUBINO, WA

It's easy to get caught up in the good life at this newcomer to Margaret River – a region spoilt for choice when it comes to sipping in style. Frui Momento translates from Latin to “enjoy the moment” and chef Seth James has orchestrated all the conditions for guests to do just that, taking full advantage of the poetic surroundings of the Cherubino vineyard (including a rose garden for gentle wine-tinted perambulation between courses) as a stage for his food offering. Feeling a little footloose? Hit the pleasing, shaded veranda for the alfresco menu, with its cold bar of cooked and raw seafood and natty small bites – perhaps whipped cod roe with chips, Albany rock oysters or Moreton Bay bugs with accompaniments (roasted seaweed, pickle, spiced cocktail sauce) or – go on – your choice of caviar, served with blini, sour cream and chicken cream (conjured from a whole roasted chicken in a double chicken stock, puréed and transformed into cloudlike perfection). For those ready to commit to a serious afternoon's indulgence, take a seat in the stone-and-wood gorgeousness of the dining room for a confident, tightly composed menu of polished dishes bolstered by the extensive cellar (including, naturally, wines from Larry Cherubino). Definitely worth a stop to smell the roses – and the wine. fruimomento.com.au



IN THE MOMENT
A Spicy Matador with pineapple tequila, banana liquor, jalapeño syrup and pineapple juice (left) and caviar on ice with roasted chicken skin (below) from Frui Momento. Bottom: Chauncy's light-filled dining room in an elegant Georgian building.



6 ANEKAWA, MUDGEERABA, QLD

As a young man, Koki Anekawa came to Australia to try the “multicultural cuisine culture” and chase waves. Now he's making them with his eponymous gem of a Japanese fine-diner in Mudgeeraba, on Queensland's Gold Coast. Opening his own restaurant was always the dream, honed during his time at Sydney's Bistro Moncur under Damien Pignolet, then back in Japan at three Michelin-starred Quintessence. But he didn't get to see customers' faces, says the chef, who wanted to create a “more personable experience”. At Anekawa he realises his vision in an intensely personal way, from the design of the plates to the painstakingly sourced produce. “I wanted people to feel like they are stepping into another place, far from everything that is the day-to-day outside,” he says. “To feel like this is the place where an adventure begins.” Hyper-seasonal produce, sustainably farmed fish, and same-day catches from local fishermen are transformed into the likes of Tweed Spanish mackerel, grilled and offset by salted zucchini and sea purslane, with burnt miso butter and black lime. Biodynamic Australian wines are joined by a range of sake, including a brew from Anekawa's hometown of Saga in Kyushu. It has struck a chord: regulars make the trip from Brisbane and Byron Bay for a taste of what Anekawa is serving. anekawa.com.au



7 CHAUNCY, HEATHCOTE, VIC

At Chauncy, it's personal. Husband and wife Louis Naepels and Tess Murray meld their respective talents and backstories (he ex-Grossi Florentino, she formerly of Supernormal) to create a beautiful piece of France in central Victoria using the freshest local produce they grow or can get their hands on. The standards are sky-high, the details carefully considered (down to the Georgian Wedgwood crockery inspired by the building's Georgian roots), but the vibe is relaxed and open-hearted. “We like to think of Chauncy as a place where you come to be nourished. You're always in good hands and we'll take care of everything for you, making sure you eat and drink beautifully,” says Murray. This sensibility was nurtured during the pair's time in the Basque Country, where their focus was on fostering relationships with producers. Here, “our producers often come in for a meal to share with friends and family, who are excited to see their produce presented locally in a respectful way.” The four-course menu du jour switches things up every four to six weeks. Classics include chou farci (stuffed cabbage) and Comté gougères. Murray leans towards Burgundy grapes for her wine selections, pinot noir and chardonnay forming the backbone of a list that works in symbiosis with the food – perfect partnerships all round. chauncy.com.au



9 OLD YOUNG'S KITCHEN, SWAN VALLEY, WA

In a region largely fêted for the fruit of its vines, this bright new kid on the block switches things up with a menu created in concert with the house pours – largely gin (Old Young's Distillery is right next door). It's a casual set-up done with care and flair, chef Rohan Park translating his vast knowledge of native ingredients and their culinary possibilities – honed during his time at roaming restaurant Fervor – into a menu ripe for exploration. The food pushes well beyond the bounds of your average pub or distillery kitchen – think crocodile chorizo served with black garlic and wild rosella, appearing alongside ham croquettes accented with jalapeños and wattleseed. Heartier options include pork belly with rescued fruit – revived by lactic fermentation, and creating a punchy foil to rich meat – and ingredients ranging from cured emu egg yolk (shaved over kangaroo tartare) to lemon myrtle from Park's mother-in-law's tree. Friday nights have recently opened for dinner, with a feed-me menu with matching cocktails; if you're more of a wine or beer fan, the range of Swan Valley drops will do nicely. And dining among the grapevines is always a swell time. oldyoungskitchen.com.au

NEW MOVES
Left: Old Young's Kitchen is shaking up the Swan Valley scene. Below: Prawns on brioche with crème fraîche, chives and bottarga from Bangalay Dining and its bonito with blood orange, red wattleseed and oyster emulsion.

10 THE WATERLOO, SWANSEA, TAS

Set in the unassuming brick surrounds of the Waterloo Inn, this seaside pub diner helmed by Zac Green (ex-Movida) and partner Alex Sumner elicits cheers for its elevated yet unfussy menu, rechalked often according to whatever produce excites them. “Our relationship with produce and producers is everything,” says Sumner. “I'm loath to say it, because it comes up so much, but the Waterloo is often described as a ‘vibe’ and we've worked really hard at finding what that is and how to keep that running.” Comforting with a masterful twist is the song sheet here, seen in the likes of crayfish vol-au-vents with tarragon, anchovy toast with taramasalata and fried rosemary, and garfish en papillote with paprika butter. Sundays see a set-menu lunch featuring, perhaps, house focaccia with hot honey and sobrasada sausage, mutton steaks with pommes Anna, and lemon posset with pineapple sage flower. Instant classics include crayfish spaghetti served in the shell: “We have to regularly break hearts and explain the seasonality of crayfish (and our whole menu),” says Sumner. Dessert might be cherry pie with fig leaf and cherry gelato, or a pleasing puddle of roast apricots (“from our garden”) dolloped with baked vanilla cream. Especially perfect for sea-breezy sweater weather, this is a place to bunker down and tuck into some of Tasmania's best no-faff cooking. Note: they're taking a break over winter, reopening in spring (check their Instagram for possible pop-ups). waterlooswansea.com



8 BANGALAY DINING, SHOALHAVEN, NSW

With its crystal-hued waters, quaint villages and increasingly sophisticated food scene, the South Coast's appeal continues to grow. Bangalay Dining, opened in 2019, enjoys must-do status, dishing up relaxed yet high-end home-grown flavours. Chef Simon Evans came on board in late 2020, combing the beachy-bush surrounds – Seven Mile Beach is a mere scramble over the dunes – for ingredients to furnish his menus (including a Saltbush Margarita, served poolside if you wish). Classic coastal simplicity is evident in South Coast Appellation rock oysters served with a finger-lime mignonette; a chicken-liver parfait gets the local treatment with a hit of pickled quandong, alongside the more traditional flavours of quince and fried shallot. Even the affogatos come with a nifty twist in the form of a wattleseed liqueur. Floor-to-ceiling bi-fold windows enhance the airy vibe and outdoor seating overlooks the stunning tree-framed pool and lawns (perfect for sundowners, or a pre-beach breakfast, or post-beach lunch). The fact the trip-worthy restaurant is attached to grown-up, coastal-chic lodgings – Bangalay Luxury Villas – allows diners the joy of a fabulous dinner and then tootling back along the wooden boardwalk to your room for the night, waves crashing in the distance. bangalayvillas.com.au



PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANICA ZUKS (OLD YOUNG'S), STEF POSTHUMA (BANGALAY) & FLIP KONIKOWSKI (COCKTAIL)