

Valley's fruits of the vine and other blessings



**THE CURIOUS
COOK**

Rob Dunlop

THE Clare Valley is best known for its fabulous rieslings, but for me this beautiful South Australian wine-growing region, northeast of Adelaide, should be equally well regarded for its food.

I'm about to find this out on a day-long journey of eating that begins early for breakfast at the gourmet cafe **Swans at Mintaro** (343 Sevenhill-Mintaro Rd, Mintaro), where I'm unashamedly reminded I'm deep in wine country when an enthusiastic waiter greets me with the question: "Would you like a glass of riesling to start?" Well, it would be rude not to.

Sitting on the patio of this restored settler's cottage with the sun shining, the sky big and blue and the nearby undulating paddocks expansive in their beauty, the perfection of this bucolic scene is complete when a ute with two working dogs pulls up out front.

But this is a cultured place, too, for inside the cafe hang paintings by prize-winning artist Robert Hannaford. I drink it all in, including the wine, which goes surprisingly well with eggs benedict featuring plenty of bacon, spinach and a dousing of hollandaise sauce.

It's a hard place to leave, but I manage to extract myself to spend the morning burning off kilojoules by walking around nearby Martindale Hall, a misplaced but beautiful 19th-century Georgian mansion. I don't immediately recognise the building from the



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eerie movie *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, but when the local crows chorus from the trees the haunting soundtrack springs back to life.

Next, lunch at **Skillogalee Winery** (Trevarrick Road, Sevenhill), Clare Valley's first vineyard restaurant. Housed in an 1850s stone and slate cottage set among gardens and vines, Diana and Dave Palmer's vineyard oasis is a popular lunch spot for day-trippers and enjoys a national reputation for its

interesting fare. From a glorious veranda table I watch bees buzz in the garden and enjoy cabernet-soaked Turkish bread with roasted garlic and anchovy dip for a starter. And while I don't think I've earned the vine-pruners' lunch, which features rum-glazed local ham, vintage cheddar, pickles, chutney, bread and salad, I think I've done just enough walking to get away with the orecchiette pasta with famed Burra lamb. It's delicious.

Also dining on the veranda today is the angelic-looking John May, the Jesuit winemaker emeritus from nearby Sevenhill Cellars. Seeing him brings on a sudden attack of anxiety; not for the usual guilt-ridden reasons — I feel blessed that I have a designated driver when I taste Skillogalee's 2005 Riesling — but because his presence reminds me of all the things I still need to see and experience in these parts, including his famed cellar door, vineyard and church, and the 27km riesling trail that weaves past them. Plus there are all the other epicurean delights that have been recommended, including **Epic Food** (4/260 Main North Rd) in Clare, a providore selling fine local goods. I resolve not to panic, and kick back to enjoy the afternoon with the consolation that there's no way one can experience everything here in a single day. So, more wine, please.

When I wake from an afternoon slumber (sleeping can burn off kilojoules, you know), it's a race towards **Cygnets at Auburn** (20 Main Rd, Auburn), Clare Valley's first wine bar serving local drops by the glass. It also specialises in great coffee, tapas platters, gourmet produce and picnic hampers. I stock up on goodies for a hamper and head for Brooks lookout at Blyth. From atop the North Lofty Ranges, deep in gourmet produce, I offer a guilt-free toast to a region that offers some of life's simplest but greatest pleasures.

■ Long breakfasts, lunches, dinners and special foodie events will be highlights of the Clare Valley Gourmet Weekend, May 5-6. More: www.clarevalley.com.au; www.clarevalleycuisine.com.au.