

THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN APRIL 21-22 2007

10 INDULGENCE

TABLES

JUST SWANNING AROUND



Off the riesling trail: The charming setting is a drawcard at rustic Swans at Mintaro

Picture: Rob Dunlop

A tiny new venue in South Australia's Clare Valley is picture perfect, writes **Christine McCabe**

I'VE just flicked off the telly after watching a disturbing report revealing swans may not be the faithful creatures we thought, with the female of the species sneaking out after dark for various avian assignations. What, you may ask, has this to do with fine dining? Well, for some time I have been hearing good things about a tiny cafe in South Australia's Clare Valley, Swans at Mintaro, and its enthusiastic Scottish founder Marjorie Gosse.

But when I finally turn up for lunch one fine autumn day, I discover Gosse has decamped to her latest venture, Cygnets at nearby Auburn, a smart-looking restaurant and wine bar set more firmly on the Clare tourist trail. Fortunately her chicken pie recipe has been faithfully memorised by kitchen staff and remains on the cafe's small menu.

Swans lies on the outskirts of Mintaro, an impossibly picturesque village that feels as if it may have fallen from the Tuscan sky. There's not much going on,

but what there is, is quite striking: the name of the pub, for starters (the Maggie and Stump), the tiny antiques store where South American-born Luis curates an eccentric collection of Dutch and German bits and bobs, and the grand but lonely Martindale Hall (forever etched in the memories of those who first saw *Picnic at Hanging Rock* as impressionable adolescents).

It's hardly surprising then that a derelict settler's cottage might be converted into a rather smart cafe by a Scottish former restaurateur and chef who arrived in South Australia's mid-north several years ago, after marrying a local landowner.

Set in a paddock with a small fringe of garden, Swans is pretty as a picture. The new kitchen opens off the old, now all sunshine and clear country light with doors opening out to stone terraces, food magazines scattered about on old dressers and pistachio-green walls and striking works of art by Robert Hannaford

contributing to a contemporary vibe. Two small dining rooms occupy the original cottage, where rough-hewn plaster walls are hung with gilt mirrors and the ash-stained hearth is scattered with empty wine bottles and candle stubs. Tables are set with duck egg-blue pepper grinders and pots of white roses.

It's the first day of the school holidays so I have my young, perennially "I'm staaaarving, Mum!" sons in tow. The proffering of a one-page menu with barely a dozen dishes expedites proceedings nicely, although there is the complication of specials, of which there are four: penne with a spicy chorizo sauce, baked flathead, roasted pumpkin soup and a Thai green chicken curry.

Gosse's mantra, both at Swans and Cygnets, is to keep things simple, favouring hearty, home-cooked fare using local produce. Sadly, the Clare Valley lamb has not yet been delivered so the seared lamb back straps on a ratatouille bed (\$27.50) are out. I opt instead for the signature chicken pie (\$20).

Bread is not offered so we get down to starters: a compact list consisting of pate, antipasto, soup, vegetarian tart and lemony garlic chilli prawns (\$12.50), a simple dish that is what it says. My sons opt for the blue cheese and prosciutto tart (\$11.50), which comes with a tangy, walnut-sprinkled salad.

My chicken, leek and broccoli pie arrives not in a crust but a ramekin, finished with a parmesan crust. It's scrumptious but I fear far from low-cal. Son No. 1 tucks into a steak sandwich topped with great mounds of caramelised onion and horseradish cream and served with excellent, fat-cut chips (\$20), while son No. 2 tries the Thai green chicken curry special (\$24), which is accorded a resounding "delicious".

The wine list is small and almost exclusively local, featuring some of the

region's finest: Mount Horrocks Cordon Cut Riesling 2005 (\$40), Grosset Cabernet Sauvignon 2001 (\$38), Pikes Cabernet 2004 (\$28), with a handful of wines by the glass (from \$4.50).

Dessert at lunchtime is generally confined to home-baked cakes and tarts but I can't get past that seriously filling chicken pie.

As we leave, tourists with maps and wine guides stuffed in bumbags are taking their place on the terrace, preparing to spend the afternoon with a bottle of chilled riesling. Their timing is perfect.

Whether for reasons of rural remoteness or because Gosse is busy at the larger Cygnets (also base for a small produce larder and headquarters for a Clare Valley cheese and wine trail), Swans is open for lunch only on Friday and Sunday and for dinner on Friday and Saturday. (Cygnets at Auburn serves light lunches seven days and dinner on Friday and Saturday.)

There's something curiously satisfying about such disregard for our 24/7 urban lifestyles. And something beguiling about the mild eccentricity of this place.

All *Tables* visits are unannounced and meals paid for.

Checklist

Swans at Mintaro
Kingston Street, Mintaro, South Australia. (08) 8843 9111;
www.cygnetsataubum.com.au
Open: For brunch Sunday, lunch Friday and Sunday (as well as long weekend Mondays and public holidays) and dinner Friday and Saturday.
Cost: About \$100-\$120 for two, for three courses including wine.
Reason to return: Because it is the perfect spot for a leisurely lunch after exploring Clare's magical riesling trail.