

T A K E

Beechworth's historic streetscapes, alpine beauty and seasonal

T H E

fare make it a place to savour all year round. **Carrie Hutchinson**

H I G H

visits this food and wine mecca in Victoria's High Country.

R O A D



PHOTOGRAPHY BY
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(Clockwise from opposite left) Beechworth's bucolic bliss; Euro-style bistro the Ox and Hound; the old Bank of Victoria dates back to 1857; Ben Dahlenburg at Eldorado Road's cellar door



The old goldmining town's Ford Street is filled with National Trust-listed buildings, including the courthouse where bushranger Ned Kelly's trial took place

WHILE its charms are apparent in any season, Beechworth attracts a specific type of traveller in autumn. "They call them leafies," says chef Michael Ryan at Provenance, one of Victoria's most renowned regional restaurants. "They come here just to look at the autumn leaves." Here, in this beautifully preserved gold-rush town in north-eastern Victoria, English and Dutch elms – many of them planted some 150 years ago – line the town's main streets. As the mercury slowly begins dropping, the leaves on the trees change colour, turning every shade of red, gold and brown, before drifting to the ground. On Ford Street, past the courthouse where Ned Kelly stood trial for murder and the telegraph station where you can still send telegrams in morse code, children kick at the leaves and then carefully pick perfectly formed specimens from the ground. Picturesque, yes, but the reason for the autumnal spectacle is decidedly unromantic. Beechworth is located on a plateau. The granitic soil lacks many nutrients and puts plants under stress, which, while it sounds far from optimal, makes them work even harder as the temperature drops to produce those amazing colours. It's also one of the reasons Beechworth wines are of such a high standard; hardworking vines in a continental climate make for grapes that are full-flavoured with excellent sugar/acid balance. "We look after the grapes in the vineyard – the important bit – and try not to muck up the wines in the cellar," says Stephen Morris at Pennyweight Winery.

Here's how to best experience Beechworth over a couple of days.

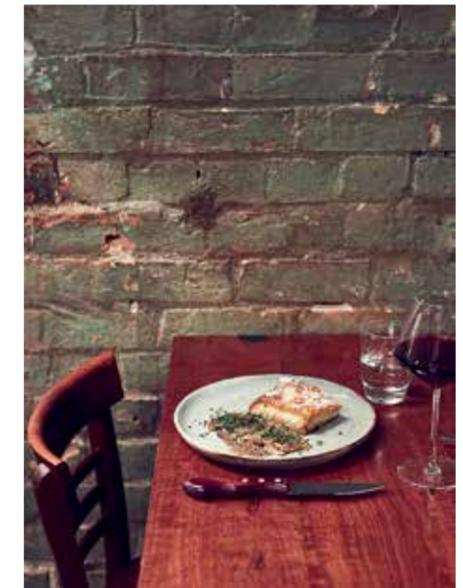
DRINK FINE WINE Although Beechworth and its surrounding districts are home to about 30 vineyards, only four have open cellar doors (14 are by appointment). Thankfully, three of those open cellar doors are close together, just west of town on the Beechworth-Wangaratta Road. Pennyweight (pennyweight.com.au) is a few minutes out of town then Amulet (amuletvineyard.com.au) and Indigo (indigovineyard.com.au) are about 10 kilometres further along.

At Pennyweight, sit under the Manchurian pear trees in the courtyard, enjoy a glass of wine with a picnic you've procured from one of the specialty food shops in town and look out over the stringybarks and apple box eucalypts (Stephen and Elizabeth Morris photographed them for their winery's label). Wines to try include riesling, gamay, pinot noir, durif and the flagship drop, Pennyweight Gold, a light dessert wine made mainly from riesling grapes.

Down the road at Amulet, pull up a seat on the sunny patio overlooking paddocks of sheep and taste Italian varietals (there's also



(From below left) Gnocchi, braised goat and white-wine ragù at the Ox and Hound Bistro; Pennyweight's Stephen and Elizabeth Morris; The Press Room Wine Bar's pork belly with caramelised fennel and crispy capers, and proprietors Mike and Heather Allen



lunch on the weekends). Across the road is Indigo, where you should book in advance to experience its "wine flight", accompanied by the French Le Nez du Vin wine-education kit. This hour-long interactive tasting encourages guests to think about the link between bouquet and flavour in the wines produced, including an excellent pinot noir.

In town, an off-site cellar door showcases the wines from Paul Dahlenburg and Lauretta Schulz's winery, Eldorado Road (eldoradoroad.com.au; open Friday-Sunday). Eldorado is an old goldmining town between Beechworth and Wangaratta but as it's a bit off the travellers' trail, the family decided to create a more central cellar door. Either Paul or Lauretta could be behind the counter during a visit or it might be Paul's son, Ben, who's taking after his old man in the winemaking stakes.

"We make small amounts of wine that we think are a bit different," explains Ben, pouring a glass of their Persévérance Old Vine Shiraz, made from vines brought from France in the 1890s. The family was one of the first in the region to plant nero d'Avola, a Sicilian grape. "The vines are ugly and grow quickly, a bit like weeds; 2013 was the first year we got enough grapes from them to make a single [not blended] wine."

INDULGE IN LOCAL PRODUCE At The Press Room Wine Bar (thepressroomwinebar.com.au), Mike and Heather Allen have created a cosy tapas bar, where dishes such as croquette "bombas" stuffed with chorizo, mushrooms in garlic butter and oloroso sherry, and succulent roast pork belly with caramelised fennel and crispy capers, are accompanied by a glass of local or Spanish wine.

European-style The Ox and Hound Bistro (oxandhound.com.au), with its street views and pressed-metal detailing, makes the most of produce from the region in dishes such as chestnut soup with a swirl of Pennyweight Gold, handmade gnocchi with braised Nug Nug goat and Stanley apple tart.

Another chef who creates magic from local gems is Michael Ryan. Provenance (theprovenance.com.au), with its numerous awards and two hats, is an elegant space in the old Bank of Australasia building constructed in 1856. Ryan creates intricate dishes that combine classic technique with Japanese flavours and the six-course dégustation is the best way to experience them. Wine matches could include a local Schmölder & Brown rosé or a red-rice saké.

Autumn is one of Ryan's favourite times of the year, when some of the local produce is at its best. "We get the local wild mushrooms,



like pine and slippery jacks and, later, chiodini mushrooms, which have a long stem and are sometimes called chestnut mushrooms,” he says. “They have a very short season. In February and March we get the apples and pears and the tail end of the berries from Stanley.”

TRY A NEW BREW At Bridge Road Brewers (bridgeroadbrewers.com.au), you’ll find groups ensconced at large picnic tables or hunkered down inside by the fire, scoffing pretzels and pizzas and sipping on Ben Kraus’s award-winning beers. There are regular and seasonal brews – the outfit has grown spectacularly since its inception in 2005 in Ben’s dad’s shed and now produces more than 100,000 litres of beer a year – but one has a particularly autumnal flavour.

In its first iteration the Chestnut Pilsner was created from the fresh nuts Ben bought from growers in Beechworth and nearby Stanley. The beer was popular. Restricting it to one season? Less so. “The chestnuts are harvested in autumn,” explains front-of-house manager Jules Dight, “but the farmers now mill them so they’re available year-round.”

ENJOY SOME DOWNTIME At The Spa Beechworth (thespabeechworth.com.au), in the administration building of the former Mayday Hills Lunatic Asylum, therapists are dedicated to rejuvenating mind, spirit and body. Two hours of scrubs, mud wraps and massages and endless cups of herbal tea will have you floating. When you come back to earth, the grounds, with their heritage-listed trees, are just the place for a dreamy stroll.

At some point on this gastronomic romp you’ll need sleep and Beechworth has many gorgeous cottages. Belmont at Beechworth (luxuryselfcontainedaccommodationbeechworth.com.au) is a meticulously restored two-bedroom miner’s cottage, two blocks from Ford Street, that features fine linen, flat-screen TVs and fireplaces in every room. In the morning there’s freshly ground coffee, an espresso machine and provisions to whip up breakfast. Or you could just nip up the street to Blynzz Coffee Roasters café (coffeeroastersbeechworth.com.au) for the roast of the day and pancakes.

GO FOR A JOY RIDE It’s a downhill run from Beechworth to the region’s cellar doors and a fun way to travel is on a bike. River Tribe Adventures (rivertribeadventures.com.au) will supply the wheels and a picnic lunch (still-warm quiche from King Valley Fine Foods, green salad, sweet treats for groups of six or more from Renaissance Chocolates in nearby Rutherglen and a piccolo of Brown Brothers Prosecco). They’ll also pick you up for a lift back up the hill into Beechworth. ●



Charcoal-seared venison, pickled rose petals, watermelon and umeboshi, a dish created by Provenance chef Michael Ryan (below)



A BITE OF BRIGHT

Just south-east of Beechworth, at the base of the Australian Alps, is Bright, another town renowned for its autumnal beauty – and its food. Simones (simonesbright.com.au) is the jewel in Bright’s crown. Opened by George and Patrizia Simone in 1986, it quickly became known for exquisite Italian food inspired by Patrizia’s childhood in Perugia. Now the

next generation – son Anthony and his wife, Hope – have taken over but are continuing the tradition.

Japanese influences and local produce are on the menu at Tani Eat & Drink (tanieatdrink.com.au). Thirteen Steps (thirteensteps.com.au) is another gem. It’s housed in an atmospheric room with rustic brick walls, where diners sup on dishes such as steamed spanner crab and coconut

dumplings and slow-braised duck leg with pearl barley and quince.

Coral Lee (8 Barnard Street; 03 5755 5113) is a laid-back café. With retro styling, great coffee and unfussy dishes – buttermilk hotcakes and apple and peach Bircher muesli for breakfast; chicken, bacon and vegetable pie and rare roast beef salad for lunch – it’s great for a quick bite.

Bright is also sweet heaven. Simeon and Shannon Crawley opened Bright Chocolate

(brightchocolate.com.au) in 2013 and it’s one of the few cacao-bean-to-chocolate-bar establishments in Australia. Local chefs, including Anthony Simone and Michael Ryan, use their single-origin chocolate and Ryan Mack from Bright Brewery (brightbrewery.com.au) has used their roasted cocoa nibs and local coffee beans in his Stubborn Russian Imperial Stout. It’s one of the seasonal beers on tap at the crowd-

pleasing brewery door and restaurant.

At Bright Brewery there’s also made-on-the-premises lager, pale ale and witbier to try, plus excellent casual food, which, depending on the day, could include Angus burgers, porter pie and oven-baked Harrietteville trout. Locals and visitors flock here on crisp, sunny days and sit by the Ovens River amid the changing hues of the season.



The Belmont at Beechworth offers self-contained luxury near the centre of town (above); Bridge Road Brewers, where you can sample giant handmade pretzels and the craft brewery’s popular Chestnut Pilsner (below)



FLIGHT PATH

ABX

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