

CENTRE RED

Winsor Dobbin visits
one of our most
remote wine regions.

For a place that's a mere speck on the map midway between Adelaide and Melbourne, Coonawarra makes a big footprint in the world of wine.

A thin cigar-shaped strip of red soil that runs from the hamlet of Penola in the south along the Riddoch Highway to north of the tiny township of Coonawarra, produces some of Australia's very best red wines – all in a distance of just 24 kilometres.

Even the occasional wine drinker will be familiar with the big names: Wynns Coonawarra Estate, Bowen Estate, Hollick, Yalumba The Menzies and Brand's Laira.

Throw in family-owned operations such as Rymill, Zema Estate, Majella and Koonara, add great red producers such as Katnook Estate, Leconfield, Balnaves and Parker Coonawarra Estate, and any serious wine lover will be in his or her element.

The magnificent cabernets and shirazes – and some pretty decent white wines too – are the result of the region's unique terra rossa land, which has red-brown topsoil sitting on a white limestone base.

"This is the country and it is a small community, but there is a lot of wine heritage here, and a lot of people who really care about wine," says Wynns Coonawarra Estate chief winemaker Sue Hodder. "I'm here forever because I don't believe there is anywhere else to match the dirt and vines that we have here."

French-born Sandrine Gimon, the winemaker at Rymill, is equally enthusiastic. "I love living here because there is a real sense of community," she says. "The people who live here know each other and work together, while the people who visit really care about the wine – they haven't just come for a drink."

Dennis Vice from Highbank agrees. "We are all in competition, but we are not in opposition," he says. "Everyone tries to promote the region."

Coonawarra may be flat, and remote, but it remains

a magnet for wine lovers throughout the year thanks to a series of annual food and wine festivals that include the Coonawarra Vignerons Cup Race Day festival each January, After Dark each April, the Cellar Dwellers events in June and the Coonawarra Cabernet Celebrations every October.

Penola has a population of 1,200 and Coonawarra is home to just a couple of hundred people – but this is no sleepy backwater. There are almost 30 cellar doors – the latest, Raidis Estate, opened in November – and several spots to eat and drink, including the new Terra Rossa Producers' Club in Penola, which serves local wines and tapas and built a strong following in just a few weeks.

Just down the road is the Koonara Cellar Door, which also sells kitchen goods and homewares, as well as local produce. It doesn't get any more country than this.

Among the cellar doors that should be on any visitor's list are historic Katnook Estate, friendly Zema Estate, rustic Bowen Estate, slick Balnaves and Majella, relaxed and friendly Patrick, and family operations such as Redman, Kidman, Penley Estate, DiGiorgio and Rymill.

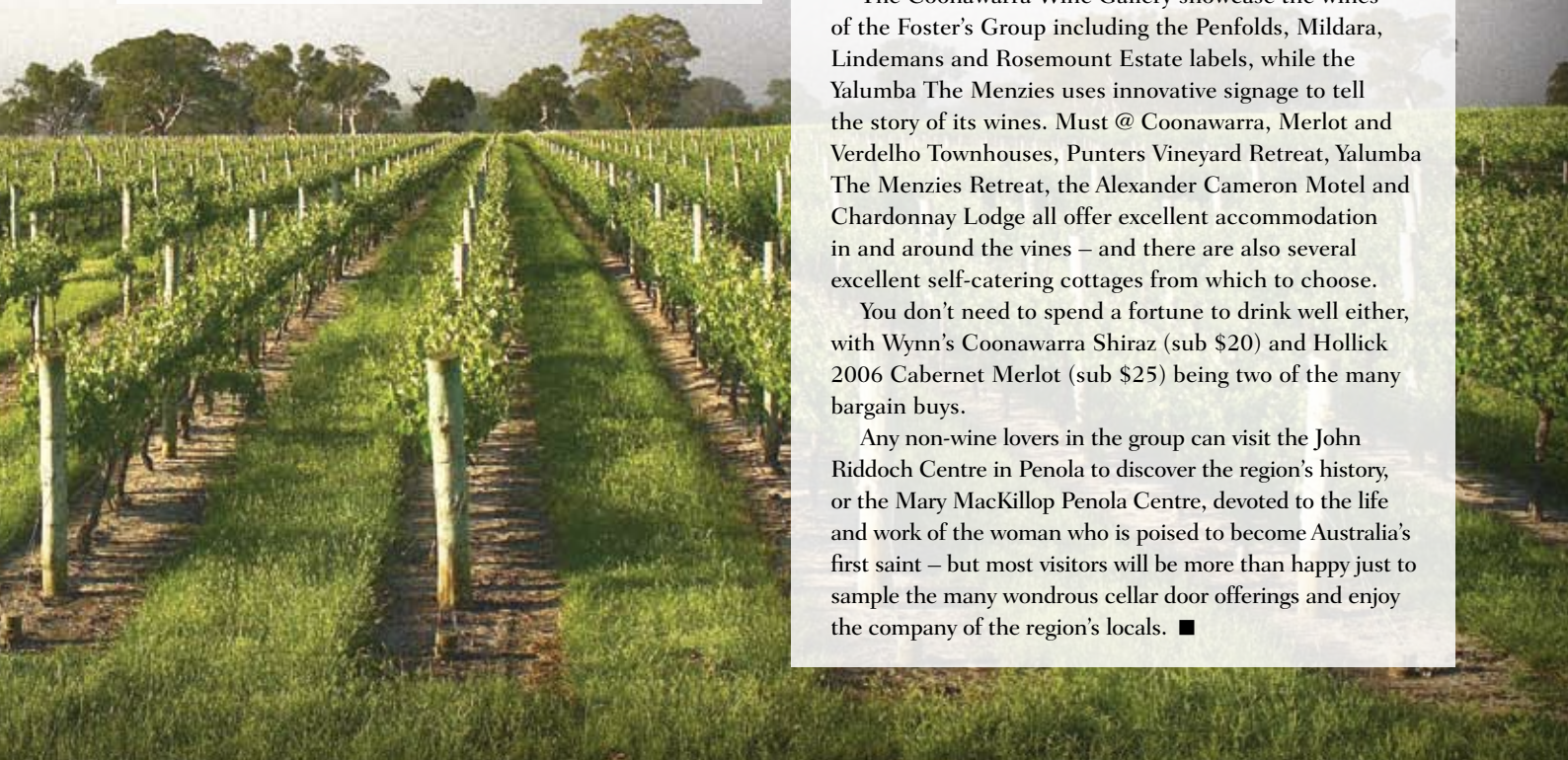
You need to make a booking to taste at Highbank, home to some outstanding Bordeaux-style blends, while the iconic Wynns Coonawarra Estate, where blending courses are available by prior appointment, is an absolute must on any itinerary. Kitchen @ The Poplars, meanwhile, offers both food and wine.

Grapes were first grown here in the 1890s and today cabernet sauvignon accounts for 58 per cent of the plantings in this cool-climate region (frost can be a concern until late October each year), followed by shiraz, merlot, chardonnay, riesling and sauvignon blanc, so there are plenty of tasting options – and many of the cellar doors are manned by winemakers such as Greg Clayfield at Zema Estate, or members of the family.

The Coonawarra Wine Gallery showcase the wines of the Foster's Group including the Penfolds, Mildara, Lindemans and Rosemount Estate labels, while the Yalumba The Menzies uses innovative signage to tell the story of its wines. Must @ Coonawarra, Merlot and Verdelho Townhouses, Punters Vineyard Retreat, Yalumba The Menzies Retreat, the Alexander Cameron Motel and Chardonnay Lodge all offer excellent accommodation in and around the vines – and there are also several excellent self-catering cottages from which to choose.

You don't need to spend a fortune to drink well either, with Wynn's Coonawarra Shiraz (sub \$20) and Hollick 2006 Cabernet Merlot (sub \$25) being two of the many bargain buys.

Any non-wine lovers in the group can visit the John Riddoch Centre in Penola to discover the region's history, or the Mary MacKillop Penola Centre, devoted to the life and work of the woman who is poised to become Australia's first saint – but most visitors will be more than happy just to sample the many wondrous cellar door offerings and enjoy the company of the region's locals. ■



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6 OF THE BEST



Rymill

2009 The Yearling Sauvignon Blanc

French winemaker Sandrine Gimon is producing some outstanding wines for family-owned Rymill and this has a vibrant, herbaceous nose leading to a fresh and fruity palate. **Pair with freshly shucked oysters. \$15.**



Penley Estate

2008 Aradia Chardonnay

The Coonawarra region may be best known for its reds, but there are several attractive whites, including this deliciously lively and attractive chardonnay that has the length and oak to mature well. An elegant wine with nice varietal character. **Try it with pork cutlets. \$20.**



Majella

2007 Cabernet Sauvignon

One of the region's most reliable labels, Bruce Gregory produces stunning cabernets vintage after vintage. Heady aromas are backed up by rich, ripe plum and black olive characters on the palate in an outstanding cellar-worthy red. **Great with a rump steak. \$35.**



Balnaves

2007 The Blend

There can be few better buys around than this delicious blend of merlot and cabernet that has spent 16 months in oak. You'll find yummy dark blackberry and cassis notes and forward vanillin oak in an elegant package with firm tannins. **Try it with a beef and vegetable casserole. \$19.**



Zema Estate

2005 Cluny

The wines made by Zema Estate are so beautifully balanced that they are generally a pleasure to drink. This blend of cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc and malbec has 15% alcohol but handles it well. Rich and complex with some lovely softness, it is disturbingly drinkable. **Match it with lamb shanks. \$25.**



Lindemans

2006 Pyrus

This is a star from the very good 2006 Coonawarra vintage; a classic Bordeaux blend of cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc and merlot that offers an appealing melange of dark berry, mint and tobacco leaf characters with superb texture and intensity on the palate, but also an innate softness. **Try it with coq au vin. \$55.**

FACT FILE

**GETTING THERE**

Regional Express (Rex) offers regular services to Mount Gambier, a 40-minute drive from Penola.

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www.rex.com.au

Rental cars are available at Mount Gambier airport.

WHERE TO STAY

Georgie's Cottage is a lovely rustic cottage for two that dates back to the 1860s. Air-conditioned and boasting a fully equipped kitchen, it is within walking distance of Penola's cafés and restaurants. A queen-sized bed, wood fire and two-person spa bath make this a perfect couple's getaway. A country breakfast basket, bottle of wine and chocolates are included in the tariff. 08 8737 3540.

www.georgiescottage.com

Girraween House in Coonawarra township is ideal for a large family or group and is owned by Majella winemaker Bruce Gregory and his wife. It has three bedrooms, private

enclosed gardens and an outdoor entertaining area with barbecue. There's a well-equipped kitchen, laundry facilities and secure undercover parking. 08 8736 3220 or email jemb@internode.net.au.

Honeysuckle Rise, on the Highbank Wines property and surrounded by grape vines, offers two different accommodation options: the spacious Cottage or the two-level Villa, which has a spacious upstairs apartment and picturesque views. The owners built both properties from recycled timber and with limestone recovered from their vineyards. The Villa has a commercial kitchen, making it popular with visiting chefs and would-be gourmet cooks. 08 8736 3311 www.highbank.com.au

WHERE TO EAT

Looking for fine dining in a small rural town can often be a thankless task, but not in Penola, where **Pipers of Penola** is run by chef Simon Bowen, a member of one of Coonawarra's most famous

winemaking families, and his wife, Erika. Both formerly worked at the Lake House in Daylesford and have created one of the best restaurants in regional Australia. Wild rabbit and mushroom pithiviers served with shallot purée are a triumph, as is roasted duck breast with shitake mushrooms and truffle dressing. Exciting dining. 08 8737 3999 www.pipersofpenola.com.au

Fodder – Food With Thought

is Coonawarra's newest eatery and is run by former Rymill winemaker John Innes and his wife, Melissa. This relaxed spot has a wood-fired pizza oven and an extensive wine list. There are daily specials and an excellent range of pizzas with the option of adding extras such as anchovies, fresh chilli, Spanish onions or capers. 08 8736 3170

Upstairs At Hollick has long been regarded as one of Australia's best winery restaurants – a reputation new chef Tim Foster is striving hard to maintain. Try dishes featuring local produce, including daily specials, such as crispy skinned local pork belly and artichoke purée, which are accompanied by

wines from a list of local and imported bottles. Diners can enjoy vineyard views or look in on the winery through a glass wall. 08 8737 2752 www.hollick.com/upstairs

WHERE TO GO

Raidis Estate is the newest wine producer in Coonawarra and recently opened a cute cellar door just outside Penola. Steven Raidis, whose family have long been grape growers, produces a cabernet, a riesling and a sauvignon blanc for less than \$20 – but has plans for a much larger range. "We want to eventually make around 10,000 cases but we also want to maintain a relationship with our customers," he says. "Visitors come here for wine and food – it's not about busloads of people out for a booze up." Raidis, a former Glenelg second-grade footballer who says he knew at 15 he wanted to be a winemaker, has built a massive wood-fired oven that will be used to roast goats and other delicacies during Coonawarra's many festivals.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit www.coonawarra.org or call the Penola Coonawarra Visitor Information Centre on 08 8737 2392.

