

Swan Valley

The treasures of this renowned region don't end at the vineyards. Its people make it special, too, writes **Mal Chenu**.
Photography by Frances Andrijich.

JAMES IS reminiscing about his days as the coach of the Lithuanian women's hockey team as he pours me a shot of his Cold-Drip Coffee Vodka at Old Young's distillery. Down the road at food emporium Providore, the bloke overseeing tastings – a Sean Penn look-alike named Ollie – is enticing the “epicurious” with dukkahs, chutneys, balsamic vinegars, chocolate liqueurs, olive oils and barbecue beef marinades.

Western Australia's Swan Valley region is known foremost for its superb food and wine but its people, as I discover during a two-day visit, are just as appealing.

Colonial settlers planted the first vines here in 1829, making it Australia's second-oldest wine region after NSW's Hunter Valley. But it was Croatian and Italian immigrants who, from the 1920s onwards, transformed the region into a winegrowing centre.

Today, many of their descendants remain, players in a varied top-end epicurean destination. It's just a 30-minute drive from Perth and while the locals invade in huge numbers at the weekend, I find my midweek visit ideal for lingering and having a chat.

Most of the valley's treasures are centred on the 32-kilometre Food and Wine Trail, a delicious, enticing loop crowded with wineries, restaurants, cafés, breweries, distilleries, galleries and seasonal roadside stalls – and the passionate people who run them. Here's how to make the most of it.



Cellar doors

Visitors have more than 40 wineries to choose from. Due to the expertise of the European immigrants, the region originally specialised in fortified wines and while those drops remain an important drawcard, these days there's a rich and charismatic array of shiraz, cabernet sauvignon, chenin blanc, petit verdot and verdelho varieties to round out the experience.

Sandalford Estate

This premium producer is on all the tour bus itineraries and Mandarin-speaking staffer Canfield is very busy today. He pours me a tasty shiraz from a 43-year-old vine and tells me the Chinese tourists are most interested in tasting wines that go best with spicy food. When he rushes off to perform more linguistic feats, Caitlin takes over, explaining how well the Prendiville Reserve and Estate Reserve Shiraz go with beef and an open fire.

sandalford.com

Mandoon Estate

Mandoon is only two years old but its vines date back to 1840. Millions of dollars have been poured into this striking development, which includes the restoration of the vines and an impressive art gallery. Self-confessed “cellar rat” Rachael offers me a Portuguese-style verdelho, her favourite because of its mellow, easygoing nature. Mandoon's cabernet sauvignon is its most awarded variety and the 2012 Reserve is one of the smoothest I've tasted.

mandoonestate.com.au

Olive Farm Wines

The after-dinner fortified Stari (meaning “old” in Yugoslavian) is the star of the show at the heritage, family-owned Olive Farm Wines. Steve tells me each generation creates their own version and current winemaker Anthony Yurisch's Stari lingers in my mouth for a full 10 minutes. I also sample the fortified Pedro

Ximénez, sold only in beautiful five-litre American-oak barrels. Steve matches it with Spanish goat's milk cheese and the combination is sharp and warming. Olive Farm Wines is the second-oldest winery in Australia and, while space precludes raving about its two dozen reds and whites, it's an essential stop.

olivefarmwines.com

Talijancich Wines

Another heritage marvel and fortified specialist is just down the road from Olive Farm Wines. Chantelle jokes about the estate's “archenemy” and says Talijancich's fortifieds are better. I try the award-winning 30-year-old Rare Tawny, which has a base of 1959 shiraz and is as smooth as silk. Chantelle then breaks out the syrupy 2007 Pedro Ximénez Liqueur she thinks is one of the finest the estate has produced.

taliwine.com.au

Black Swan Winery & Restaurant

Barry Scrivener and Robyn Meloury bought this property 18 years ago to run a couple of horses and fell into winemaking, with their first attempts winning two gold medals. Among their offerings is cabernet franc – an unusual variety in the valley – produced as a standalone wine and included in their CSFM blend (cabernet sauvignon/cabernet franc/merlot). Meloury says they use French-oak *barriques* to generate more toffee and cherry characteristics in the wines.

blackswanwines.com.au

Where to eat

So many gourmet venues, so few meals you can eat in one day. Lunch options showcasing Western Australian produce are plentiful but many winery restaurants open only for dinner late in the week and at weekends.

Breakfast Taylors Art and Coffee House (taylorscafe.com.au) is a local favourite. The signature weekend breakfast dish, Eggs Fabulosa, with smoked salmon, wilted spinach and hollandaise sauce on a bagel, is superb.

Lunch The sizzle as I enter Sittella (sittella.com.au) ensures that I order the rosemary-roasted rack of lamb with sheep's curd mash and baby carrots. Paired with Sittella Swan Valley Shiraz and followed by Cointreau ice-cream and passionfruit, this is the perfect lunch. Honourable mentions: Sandalford Estate Restaurant, Black Swan Winery & Restaurant and Fillaudeau's Cafe Restaurant.

Dinner Muscats Restaurant at Novotel's The Vines Resort & Country Club (vines.com.au) is open Tuesday to Saturday for dinner. The confit pork belly is highly recommended.



Fried egg and avocado on toast at Taylors Art and Coffee House (opposite); sample the Mandoon Estate Verdelho or do a private tasting in the winery's underground cellar (right)



Where to stay

Sure, you're close enough to Perth and could head back to the city. But why not stay a night or two? B&Bs are the main option if you want to stay in the valley. Or there's Crown Metropol, a luxuriously appointed hotel on the valley side of Perth.

Upper Reach Cottage This fully kitted two-bedroom vineyard accommodation in the valley offers the palpable silence and starry skies that city slickers have forgotten. Fire up the wood heater and relax with a glass of wine produced by Upper Reach (upperreach.com.au). Renee guides me through some of their finest before declaring: "We produce Barossa-style shiraz, although we prefer to say the Barossa produces Swan Valley-style shiraz."

The Vines Resort & Country Club The only hotel accommodation in the area, Novotel's The Vines (vines.com.au) is an upmarket experience complete with on-site eateries and bars. Ducks quack, magpies swoop and kangaroos graze right outside my room.

Swan Valley Oasis Resort For a mid-level apartment option, consider Swan Valley Oasis Resort (swanvalleyoasis.com) in Henley Brook.



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Things to do

You won't be bored between tastings in the Swan Valley. Sample the wares at Mondo Nougat, Morish Nuts and The House of Honey. Browse a gallery, bushwalk, take a picnic to Bells Rapids or engage the kids in The Amazing Valley Chase treasure hunt.

Cycling The valley's scenic and mostly flat terrain means great fun for pedal-heads of all ages. The Swan Valley Visitor Centre (swanvalley.com.au) in Guildford will give you a map and hook you up with bike hire. Three suggested routes suit various exertion levels, including the 10-kilometre Swan Valley Heritage Cycle Trail that showcases the area's history, nature and characters.

Caversham Wildlife Park Judging by the squeals of delight, this is a kiddies' nirvana. Perfect for overseas visitors, too, Caversham Wildlife Park (cavershamwildlife.com.au) offers close encounters with kangaroos, koalas, wallabies, possums, Tasmanian devils and wombats, as well as regular talks and interactive shows.

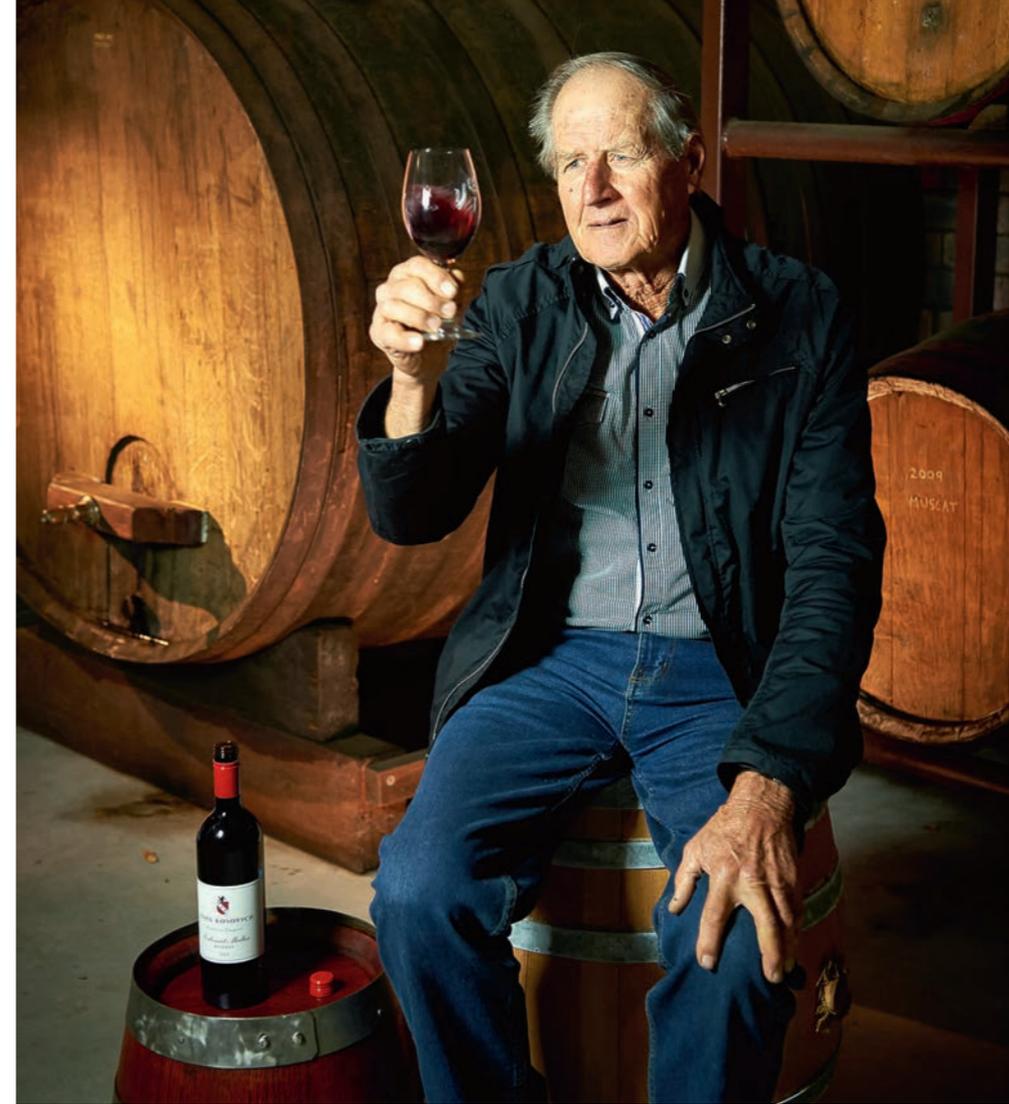
Maalinup Aboriginal Gallery Celebrating the First Australians of the South West region, Maalinup (maalinup.com.au), meaning "the place of the black swan", is an art gallery that's also renowned for its bush tucker. Check out the Bushtucker Garden, learn how to incorporate lemon myrtle, quandong and mountain pepperberry into your cooking or join an evening corroboree for full sensory immersion in song, dance, storytelling and supper.

Golf The two 18-hole championship courses at Novotel's The Vines Resort & Country Club (vines.com.au) have hosted the Johnnie Walker Classic, the Heineken Classic and the LPGA Lexus Cup. Surrounded by pristine bushland replete with kangaroos and birdlife, the spectacular bentgrass greens incorporate deep bunkers and a challenging rough. Drive straight or make sure you bring plenty of golf balls. There's also a fun, hacker-friendly Supa Golf course next door to Maalinup Aboriginal Gallery.



Before you hit the city and explore Perth, see our City Guide at travelinsider.qantas.com.au.

The Oak Room at Sandalford Wines also hosts functions



The winemaker

John Kosovich, 78, second-generation winemaker at John Kosovich Wines and father of current winemaker Anthony.

It all started when... my parents emigrated from Croatia just before World War I and bought the land in 1922. I was born here on the property and started making wine at the age of 15. Times were tough and Dad had to go railway-sleeper cutting for three years to feed the family. It was four or five years before we got any money out of the winery. **Our philosophy is...** we're always trying to improve and superior

techniques and modern equipment have made that easier over time. We pick all the fruit by hand to ensure it's ready. The quality of the wine reflects the quality of the fruit.

Our signature wines... I'm happy with all of them, really. Our chardonnay has been the frontrunner for the past 25 years and our 1990 chardonnay won Best Western Australian Wine at the Perth Royal Show in 1995. The wine also won the Grand Gold Medal at an international wine show for Croatian winemakers in 1994. That was really something. The 1979 cabernet sauvignon is the best red I've ever made.

These days... I'm still actively involved but Anthony makes the wine. I'm up at seven o'clock every morning, ready to do whatever needs doing.

I love... the whole journey and wouldn't have missed it for quids.

The big challenge is... the hot weather here. Temperatures are up and rainfall has been down over the past 10 years. You just have to manage it.

In my cellar... I'm very impressed with the wines from the Great Southern region [of WA]. Some of the rieslings from Mount Barker are sensational, as is the Batista Estate Pinot Noir from Manjimup. ●

A FEW MORE DROPS

For quaffing

The 2010 John Kosovich Bottle Aged Chenin Blanc. Swan Valley chenins develop well in the bottle and after six years this honeyed drop is ready to go.

For cellaring

The 2014 Black Swan Shiraz, which has just been released. The winery owners expect it to cellar nicely.

For a celebration

The Jane Brook Sparkling Gold (Premium). For the connoisseur who has everything, this sparkling chardonnay has been produced using the traditional method and contains gold leaf.

Something stronger

Vodka and gin fanciers are in for a treat at Old Young's distillery, where they create unique spirits of complexity and depth. Try the 1829 Gin, Smoked Vodka and Pavlova Vodka.



GETTING THERE

QantasLink flies to Perth from eight regional destinations in Western Australia. qantas.com

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