

Top of the Mornington.

Weekend in Burgundy, anyone? OK, then, what about a viticultural Mecca a little closer to home...

J.R.R. Tolkien, between poring over Anglo-Saxon runes and dreaming up malevolent homunculi, decreed the phrase 'cellar door' to be the most aesthetically beautiful in the English language. Had he visited the modern-day Mornington Peninsula and sipped on its signature chardonnays and pinots, he may have held his pet phonetic bijou in even fonder, if hazier, regard.

A tiny limb of land jutting off the south-east of our vast island continent, the Peninsula is a relatively new pin-flag on the viticultural world

map. Attempts to cultivate it as a winemaking region in the Twenties and Fifties were thwarted, by impatience and bushfire respectively, but then came the mid-Seventies and the birth of backpacking. Just as the first Age of Exploration had spread European wine culture into far-flung continents, would-be vigneron were now returning from the Old World with a vision. Could France's Burgundy region be recreated at home? The cool-climate Peninsula was the perfect place to find out. >



Site for soirees: the patchwork vista from the vantage point of the Montalto vineyard, restaurant and olive grove.

It was never going to be easy. A perverse law governs winemaking — let's call it the Pinot Paradox — which dictates that the very factors that give wine diversity, subtlety and complexity also make grape cultivation a thorny business. The Peninsula offers these properties in abundance: cradled by Port Phillip Bay, Bass Strait and Western Port Bay, it has a maritime climate and a long, mild growing season that fussier grapes demand, but which also leaves vines prone to wind and rain, mould and mildew; its model-railway topography, with its erratic ascent inland, ensures a mélange of micro-climates and diverse soil types, and makes sun-capturing, drainage, wind-breaking and frost prevention an elusive science, but ultimately ensures nuance and character.

Blend in the challenges faced by all winemakers — the pressure to adhere to low crop yields, which make wine natural, well-rounded, pure and fruit-driven but also wreak havoc on the balance sheets, for example — and you have the tricky undertaking faced by the early Peninsula pioneers. Only a few had the passion and patience to negotiate the challenges and unveil the region's strengths for others to see, and their legacy is their greatest reward: today, writers and judges are draping laurels over the region's wines with the reverence of a wreath-layer at a cenotaph. "We are the last genuine boutique wine region in Australia," says Matthew Bisogni of Tuck's Ridge winery. "The chances are, the same person serving you behind the bar also crushes the grapes and prunes the vines, and we specialise in the two grapes — chardonnay and pinot — that are most often badly

"The person serving you also crushes the grapes and prunes the vines."

produced, yet you get varying beautiful nuances each time you enter a different driveway."

He has a point: chardonnays can fall anywhere between citrusy and peachy depending on a head-spinning number of factors; and compare the darker, heavier pinots of, say, Merricks Estate with the lighter, more fragrant splash from Main Ridge just 15km to the west.

Elsewhere, a surge in pinot's popularity has led to mass production. "You can bulk produce anything in a warm climate," says Bisogni, "whereas cool-climate grapes require long, slow processes to make the specific flavours run through the palate. Hot-climate wines are a drink, whereas cool-climate wines are an experience: full, rich, broad, with a rainbow of different flavours. Drink them quickly and you do a huge injustice to the wine, your palette and your wallet; drink them slowly, and each time you revisit the glass it'll be different." *continued on p 82 >*

Wine Misconception #1
Some are born with a more discerning palate than others. "The only bad palate is that which doesn't know what it likes," as Matthew Bisogni of Tuck's Ridge puts it.



> Stellar cellars. The Peninsula's must-visit wineries.

1 Phaedrus Estate

Phaedrus's husband-and-wife owners, Maitena Zantvoort and Ewan Campbell, both ditched jobs in large wineries in favour of autonomy. "Mass-produced pinot can be nice, but it's a bit of a contradiction in terms," says Campbell, "because it is the most reflective wine of exactly how and where it's grown." He adds that Phaedrus is competing quite comfortably with the big boys. "They've got huge economies of scale, but we don't need a marketing department, production manager and so on."

Standout drop: 2005 Pinot Gris. A refreshingly un-meddled-with natural taste. "While a lot of winemakers are playing around with juice oxidation, wild yeast, barrel fermentation and so on, we're just trying to get the flavours of the grape into the bottle," says Campbell. 220 Mornington-Tyabb Road, Moorooduc (03 5978 8134; www.phaedrus.com.au).

2 Willow Creek

Willow Creek's high-altitude Windmill vineyard is the talk of the region. They use a method of winemaking called pigeage, or whole bunch maceration, where entire bunches of grapes with their stalks intact are placed in an open fermentation tank, then worked in with the feet and legs. Yes, foot-stomping. All hail the scope for euphemism proffered by the French language.

Standout drop: 2003 Tulum Cabernet Sauvignon. The owners' fanatical devotion to low cropping, combined with heaps of sun exposure during

ripening, produces powerful, intense fruit flavours with ripe dense tannins and therefore heavenly cab-sav. 166 Balnarring Road, Merricks North (03 5989 7448; www.willow-creek.com.au).

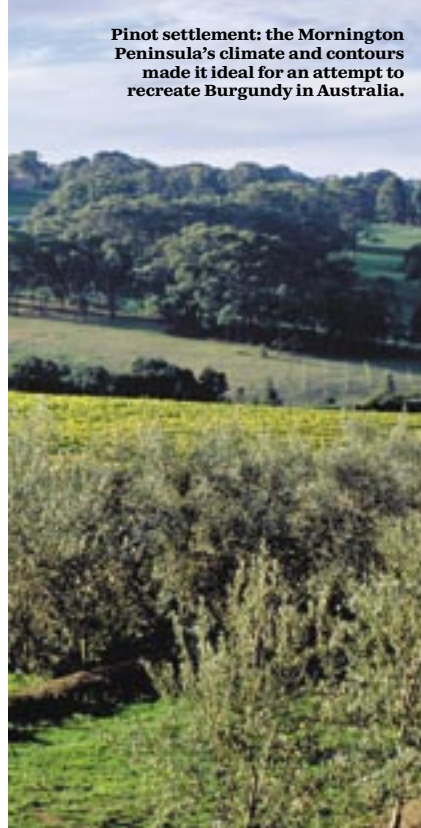
3 Hurley Vineyard

Hurley's owner, former judge Kevin Bell, names all of his vines, says goodnight to them, cries if they get sick and holds funeral services when they die. He describes his *raison d'être* as to make wine "with gentility and respect — pinot noir that expresses the same pure truth as the peel of a bell". Question his marble-count, if you like, but many have described something nearing a religious experience upon chewing one of his grapes. Sip it and see.

Standout drop: 2002 Pinot Noir. A sterling effort from a difficult harvest. If you ever tire of bromidic wine-speak, drink in Bell's description of this pinot's "smoky smells of the charcuterie, such as spicy sausage and sweet bacon fat". 101 Balnarring Road, Balnarring (03 5931 3000; www.hurleyvineyard.com.au).



Stonier Winery.



Pinot settlement: the Mornington Peninsula's climate and contours made it ideal for an attempt to recreate Burgundy in Australia.



4 Stonier Winery

The Mornington Peninsula is all about variables, and Stonier's multi-faceted appeal can be traced to several factors, including: the north-facing sites that are protected from the Antarctic-tinted gusts that befall the region, and also enjoy maximum exposure to the sun; their bugger-the-profits approach to vineyard design and vine density, meaning crop levels are limited to under three tonnes per acre for chardonnay and two tones for pinot noir; and Geraldine McFaul's fanatical respect for "site expression", which sees grapes from each patch vinified separately to maximise flexibility during blending. **Standout drop:** 2004 Reserve Pinot Noir. Intense, having being plucked lovingly from Stonier's oldest vineyards (20 years), with a French-oak bouquet. 362 Frankston-Flinders Road, Merricks (03 5989 8300; www.stoniers.com.au).

5 Paringa Estate

Twenty-two years after they first set gumboot-clad foot in a derelict orchard and saw its quiescent potential, Lindsay and Margaret McCall's wines are continually lavished with medals and accolades, earning Lindsay a reputation as a pinot maker of almost iconic status (and one who also produces some of the most sought-after shiraz in Australia). The food — a perfect blend of heartiness and refinement — is another draw. **Standout drop:** 2004 Estate Shiraz. A colossal grog with a ripe, firm tannin structure that bagged six trophies at the 2006 Sydney Royal Wine Show. 44 Paringa Road, Red Hill South (03 5989 2669; www.paringaestate.com.au).

6 Foxeys Hangout

"You can make ordinary wine from good grapes, but you can't make good wine

from ordinary grapes," says Tony Lee, winemaker and co-founder (with his brother, Michael) of Foxeys. True to their word, these guys take meticulous personal care of the endless minutiae that lie between planting and bottling. The pair use a bottle-fermenting process pioneered in France's Champagne region to create their own blend of sparkling, and you can even get your own personalised bottle of fizz made up while Tony rustles up some fried quail for you in the open kitchen. **Standout drop:** 2004 Chardonnay. It's not one of their famous fizzies, but this peachy brew swept up Best White Wine at the 2006 Cool Climate Wine Show. 795 White Hill Road, Red Hill (03 5989 2022; www.foxseys-hangout.com.au).

7 Main Ridge Estate

Nat White is the Peninsula's leading pinot pioneer. "When we first planted here 31 years ago, pinot and chardonnay were not heard of in Australia," he says. "There was no other experience to draw on." But persevere he did, ironing out a pinot methodology via mistakes from which those after him would learn. Today, uniquely in Australia, his vines are as old as many of those that hug the misty contours of Burgundy half a world away. "Old vines make wine that's richer with a more solid texture," he says. **Standout drop:** 2004 Half-Acre Pinot >

Wine Misconception #2 Screwcaps are inferior. A cork opens with that satisfying 'pop', but a stopper's purpose is purely to lengthen the time a wine spends in a bottle maturing rather than corrupting. Whereas cork suffers from prolific taint issues, screwcaps are near-infallible.

Wine down.

Succumbed to the wrath of grapes? The Peninsula offers plenty more earthly delights.

11 Manyung Gallery

Poised at the Peninsula's gateway, Manyung is an ideal place to imbibe some culture between all the red-necking, packed with a rolling stock of contemporary Australian art and sculpture. Check out the giant Vincent van Gogh bust in the courtyard, an astonishing likeness with such iconic local status that thieves who somehow managed to haul it away took the trouble to return it when they learned of the community's dismay. 1408 Nepean Highway, Mount Eliza (03 9787 2953; www.manyunggallery.com.au).

12 Red Hill Cheese

Just as you'll see the red elixir in a different light after visiting the Peninsula's wineries, so this micro-business will alter the way you view the yellow stuff of dreams. Former food microbiologist Trevor Brandon and his wife, Jan, approach their handcrafted regional cheeses, designed to complement Mornington Peninsula wines, with the fastidiousness — so, bordering on autism — of a good pinot grower. If seduced, as we were, by the pastoral whimsy of the whole enterprise, ask about their home cheese-making workshops. 81 William Road, Red Hill (03 5989 2035; www.redhillcheese.com.au).

13 Peninsula Hot Springs

If you need somewhere to shake off that layer of vagrant musk that befalls severe hangover sufferers, Victoria's only naturally heated mineral springs offer a sybaritic option. Thermal pools, private baths, lavender milk and oil baths, facials, mudwraps, hot-stone and steam treatments: it all smacks of the hen-party highs that every metro-man needs to get his head around. Before hitting the bottle again, of course. 140 Springs Lane, Rye (03 5950 8777; www.peninsulahotsprings.com).

Where to stay.

14 Morning Star Estate

It's a 19th-Century reformatory-turned-modern day paradise, so there's no wonder Australians feel so at home here. Marriage proposals, business clinchers, political dice-rolling — it all happens over the crisp-white linen of Morning Star's fabulous terrace, from which a 38-acre patchwork blanket of vineyards (planted by Franciscan monks) and rose gardens rolls out, with the distant silhouette of Melbourne peeping over its gentle contours to the north-east. It's more than a boutique hotel, with superb tasting rooms and an à la carte restaurant also making the guidebook-writers froth at the mouth. 1 Sunnyside Road, Mount Eliza (09 9787 7760; www.morningstarestate.com.au).

15 Woodman Estate

Modern in all the senses you want it to be, and yet so beautifully archaic you almost wish a headless apparition in a Victorian gown would float along the herbaceous borders. But with swimming, sailing, tennis, spas and fly-fishing in the private lake all on offer, and relentlessly attentive staff to answer your gastro-whims with the finest food and drink the region affords, you'll be paying little attention to the cornices and stained-glass windows. Trip planners, make this your first phone call. 136 Graydens Road, Moorooduc (03 5978 8455; www.woodmanestate.com.au).

"You can't mass produce wine on the Peninsula, with its diverse pockets and lack of uniformity," adds Nat White, who can be credited with christening the Peninsula as a wine region when he cultivated his Main Ridge Estate in the Seventies. "Every little block needs treating differently. What makes Burgundy special is that people can get to know all the various flavours of the different villages, and that's the opportunity down here. Wines should be a continuing discovery."

"Hot-climate wines are a drink. Cool-climate wines are an experience."

Wine in the Peninsula today is big business. In the last decade, with help from Victorian government bitumen-bullies, the route from Melbourne has been reduced to an hour, tractor-beaming affluent tourists by the 4x4-load and persuading city folk in search of a sea change to make their weekend digs permanent homes. The region's 920 hectares of vineyard — double the figure of 10 years ago — today provides \$50m worth of economy per annum. Industry big-boys have inevitably got a nose in (T'Gallant, one of the region's highest-profile wine producers, operates under the Foster's Group umbrella), but it's in the small, independent vineyards, where modern-day artisans tirelessly experiment with how best to exploit the gradients, soil types and rain patterns on their own bit of dirt, that the new Burgundy resembles its Old World mentor.

There's more here than just wine. Forests of pine and eucalyptus, sheltered beaches and a thriving local produce and restaurant scene also have tourists iron-filing into this magnetic little corner of the globe. But if it's a phenomenon in the making you're after, go viticulture. Go drink, eat and be merry with bacchanalian abandon. Go, and see if you can discuss pinot for more than 10 minutes without mentioning *Sideways*. Bugger. **GQ Enquiries:** www.visitmorningtonpeninsula.org

Wine Misconception #3 Wine and food must always be matched. In reality, a bad match is as rare as a perfect match. "If you like drinking this and you like eating that, and someone says they don't match, go ahead anyway," advises Bisogni of Tuck's Ridge. "Winemaking is 50,000 years old — if it was that complicated, it wouldn't have lasted. The Romans and Greeks were not patient, tolerant people."



Ten Minutes by Tractor.

Noir. Single-site wines are the ultimate evolution of an individual wine, White believes, and represent the future of Australia's viticultural reputation. This nectar, made from only the best vines within one site, goes one step further. 80 William Road, Red Hill (03 5989 2686; www.mre.com.au).

6 Ten Minutes By Tractor

"Although our three vineyards are just ten minutes by tractor apart, they have different micro-climates, aspects and therefore terroir," says Martin Spedding of his winery's kooky name. "We want to let the fruit do the talking, so we use non-interventionist techniques — wild yeast that's ambient in the vineyard, and so on." And talk his sauvignon blancs, pinots and chardonnays do, with a broad, complex vocabulary. **Standout drop:** 2002 Chardonnay. Twenty-eight well spent bucks' worth of concentrated aroma, notably lemons, cashews and oak. The wine equivalent, in fact, of a well-appointed biscuit. 111 Roberts Road, Main Ridge (03 5989 6455; www.tenminutesbytractor.com.au).

9 Red Hill Estate

Resembling a viticulture museum in a cavernous barn, the healthily curious will make a special journey to this educational winery. "A lot of people come down from warm climates and aren't used to the subtlety we get down here," says cellar door manager Gary Menzies-Browne, alluding to the Peninsula's more refined, character-rich chardonnays, pinot noirs and pinot grigios. Outside, Western Port Bay, in the middle distance, seems to beg for

gratitude for its part in the maritime, mild climate that makes it all possible. **Standout drop:** Classic Release 2001 Pinot Noir. Big, rich, abundant in cherry, sweet spice and plum aromas, with a soupcon of smoky oak. 53 Shoreham Road, Red Hill South (03 5989 2838; www.redhillestate.com.au).

10 Tuck's Ridge

To men, chardonnay is a hairdresser's potion; to some women, it's a headache in a bottle. Whatever your obstacle, cellar door manager Matthew Bisogni will cure you of your chardy-phobia. His four-glass crash course route-maps the complexities of this enticing grape, signposting the subtle differences afforded by oaking, ageing and secondary fermentation. Bisogni is equally passionate about pinot, which he says grows up to be "beautiful, rich, volcanic and flavoursome" in the Mornington. **Standout drop:** 1991 Chardonnay. Its 15 years on the shelf produces a rich, deep creamy apple pie and honey flavour. 37 Shoreham Road, Red Hill South (03 5989 8660; www.tucksridge.com.au).

Where to eat.

16 Montalto

Pick up some glossy tourism bump on the Mornington, and chances are the vista on its cover is that seen from Montalto's angular glass-and-timber edifice. Vineyards, olive groves, streams and farmlands make up a landscape punctuated by sculptures, while the provincial cuisine could help customers find God. Private picnic spots with gourmet hampers can be booked as well. Montalto's more than just food, however, having been named 2006 Best Victorian Winery Destination at the International Best of Wine Tourism Awards. 33 Shoreham Road, Red Hill South (03 5989 8412; www.montalto.com.au).

17 Salix at Willow Creek

The focus at Salix is on local produce with a refined touch: think Western Port whiting, Red Hill quinces, hand-picked berries, Peninsula beef and Flinders mussels. Quaff-factor? You're spoilt for choice: as if being affiliated with one of the region's most gushed-over wineries isn't enough, the drinks list also has an extensive Grand Cru Burgundy range. 166 Balnarring Road, Merricks North (03 5989 7448; www.willow-creek.com.au).

Glossary.

Visiting Mornington is all about the tongue as well as the tastebuds, so stock up your verbal armoury if you want to wax lyrical with the locals.

Terroir The key, soil-obsessed word to understanding the Mornington Peninsula philosophy refers, literally translated from French, to a wine's 'sense of place'. For maximum one-upmanship over peers, consider using the Aboriginal equivalent, 'pangkarrá'.

Trellising Tying of the new vine shoots to wire supports or posts.

Fermentation The process where grapes' two sugars — glucose and fructose — are converted to alcohol (ethanol) by the action yeast.

Secondary fermentation A bacterial process that makes tart malic acid into the softer lactic acids, like those found in cream and milk. Also called malolactic fermentation.

Tannins The stuff from grape skins and stems that gives wine texture and structure. It smooths out with age, but it can cause the sensation of cat's tongue when drinking a too-young red wine.

Plateau Describes a wine being at optimum maturity, where 'peak' would imply a limited window of excellence.

Brickiness The colour effect of ageing on red. Compare with 'strawiness' for white. Generally speaking, a white wine gains complexity over time while a red wine simplifies and smoothes itself out.

Oxidation Tainting chemical reactions that occur when wine is over-exposed to air. In Heaven, all wine will come in serving-sized bottles.

Across/through the palate As a rough thumb rule, Europeans make wines that are long through the palate, as detected through acid levels, while Australian makers will steer towards wines that are protected by their alcohol levels and therefore are broad across the palate.

Chardied out Litching for a nice, heady pinot.

Cane pruning A sophisticated, time-consuming and ultimately uneconomical method of vine upkeep, the advantages of which include frost protection and evenly-spaced shoots, allowing sunlight through the leaves for premium grape-growing. A great example of diligence over dollars.