Photograph: Michelle Jarvie

Weekend getaways: Castlemaine and Kyneton

Let your creative juices flow in Castlemaine or whet your whistle with award-winning food and drink in Kyneton

By Time Out editors and Cassidy Knowlton Posted: Monday March 8 2021

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The coast gets all the glory, with its shining vistas and its glittering seascapes. But central Victoria should be your next weekend away destination, particularly the arty hub of Castlemaine and foodie destination Kyneton. In recent years, Castlemaine and its surrounding towns have developed a reputation for being home to artists, musicians, writers and makers. Castlemaine punches way above its weight when it comes to cultural festivals and activities – not to mention restaurants that are well worth the drive north.

Still want that shining sea feeling? Check out our guides to the Great Ocean Road and the Mornington Peninsula.

Photograph: Sarah Mitchell

See and do

Do you know how to have a goodie time? Sorry, sorry, no cheese puns here – the people at the Cheese School in Castlemaine take the dairy arts very seriously, as well they should. Not one but two experienced French cheesemakers, Ivan and Julie Larcher, have upped sticks from the French countryside to Castlemaine to open Australia's first 'university of cheese'. The school aims to teach cheesemakers and mongers traditional French techniques to create and sell the most delectable artisan cheeses in the Australian market. Although primarily aimed at industry professionals, the school also offers classes for laypeople to better appreciate cheeses (yes, there are tasting classes), as well as half-day or two-day intensive courses to hone cheesemaking.

Love cheese but happy to leave its creation to the professionals? The Cheese School is also connected to retail cheesemonger Long Paddock Cheese, which sells a variety of hard and soft hand-crafted cheeses, all made on site by the Larchers, along with dairy products like housemade yoghurt, butter, buttermilk and crème fraîche. The retail shop is a bespoke space inside the Mill Castlemaine complex (more on that in a moment), fitted out with reclaimed timber and red gum sleepers and a temperature-controlled cheese room behind glass.

Both are located in the Mill, an 1870 woollen mill given a new lease of life when it was taken over in 2015 by Castlemaine Art Museum and Gallery (CAMAG) and Mill Markets (Australia's largest manufacturing). The biggest draw-card is the giant Sunday Market, open seven days a week and packed full with grocery clothes and homewares. They're thought of everything as you browse the furniture markets and artist spaces, kids can be kept amused by the pinpricking and foosball tables, not to mention the Ice Cream Social's hole-in-the-wall good times. The Mill is also home to the cellar door of the Boomtown Winemakers Co-op, traditional Viennese coffeehouse Gia Kaffeehaus, and Pie Farmers, a haven of craft beer. Make sure you stop by Calrossa and Fine Chocolates on your visit to stock up on artisan chocolates that are as pretty as they are tasty.

In August 2017 an anonymous donor came forth to save the historic Castlemaine Art Museum from extinction. As well as supporting operating costs, the donation also allowed the museum – founded in 1913 – to abolish its $10 entrance fee. This Art Deco building holds significant works of artists from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in its galleries – including Russell Drysdale, John Brack and Arthur Streeton – but has also played host to touring exhibitions, such as Ben Quilty's After Afghanistan and a major retrospective of Indigenous artist Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, The Box of Colour. The museum also maintains a key antiquities from the gold rush era and items telling the stories of early Chinese Australians.

Inspired by the artisans of the area and want to try your hand? You can learn a variety of arts and crafts at Workshop Castlemaine, from pottery to jewellery making to glass fusing, and there are a variety of options for all skill levels. In the beginner glass fusing class, you'll be given a clear glass base for a platter and four smaller bases for coasters. Sifting through the pile of multicoloured glass is like looking for buried treasure as you find the perfect colours and shapes for your design. The staff at the Auction House will fire your pieces (no risk of kiln burns here!), and you can pick up your creations after they're ready.

On the outskirts of Castlemaine, furniture-maker Mark Anstey created a lively artspace of studios called Lot 19 – home to mosaicists, sculptors, painters, instrument makers, ceramicists and writers – that's open to the public. There's a contemporary art gallery that hosts rotating artists (and live music events), and even an open-access printmaking studio and ceramics studio. The vintage truck-bed stage plays host to the rowdy annual karaoke festival, Castlemaine Idyll, at which a generous proportion of Castlemaineans take to the stage with the outlandishly brilliant backing band. Community project Growing Abundance harvests and grows food to help Mama's Kitchen prepare.

The five-strong town behind the historic Theatre Royal – musicians Felicity Cripps and Tim Heath, filmmakers Andrea Dolefano and Campbell Hynam-Smith, and director/producer/restaurateur Jono Hill – Smartarters and Vino and Wide Open Road) – have pumped fresh blood into this business, making it a primary hang-out for locals and a massive drawcard for out-of-towners. The espresso bar in the foyer serves Market Lane coffee, and the bar has an impressive selection of local drops. The 1920s-era restored cinema and venue has a capacity of around 200 and attracts well-regarded local and international bands. In cinema mode, there are often three to four screenings a day from big-new releases to art-house flicks.

Photograph: Michelle Jarvie and Sarah Mitchell

Eat

Proving that bigger doesn't necessarily mean better is blink-and-you'll-miss it Sandwich Bar on Kyneton's main street. This Italian footnote is a pasta-lover's paradise, with everything made in house. The menu changes seasonally, but you'll find a few permanent fixtures, like the Nonna Rosa (a take on a classic Nonna Pia) – twisted rigatoni tossed with crab, garlic, tomato and chilli was outstanding, with the punch of chilli playing beautifully with the sweet crab meat. We can't guarantee that dish will be on the menu when you visit, but we can guarantee that whatever you opt for will be made with care and skill.

Austrian couple Edmund Schaerf and Elna Schaerf-Trauner worked with a set designer to create Viennese-style cafe Gia Kaffeehaus in the Mill, resplendent with a centrepiece chandelier and grand banquette seating. They'd already been impressing locals with their Coffee Basics roastery, now they offer a multi-page menu of caffeinated treats, including the alcoholic kind. Hungry visitors will find Kaiser rolls, cold cuts, baked spark soufflé, Austrian soups and salads, and a fat selection of sausages, as well as plenty of pastries.

Photograph: Michelle Jarvie/Time Out

In what used to be the ice-creamery of the Theatre Royal, you'll find Bistro Lola, a snug, two-tier restaurant with clusters of small tables and booths. With its low-lit charm and simple posies of flowers, it's perfect date material. Indeed, Bistro Lola goes above and beyond quick bites before the movie or concert starts next door – this menu's designed by head chef Sarah Curwen-Walker for destination dining. You might try an entrée of orange and coriander seed-cured Spanish mackerel, cucumber, currents and almonds, with green chilli oil, or a main such as Yapunyah chicken involtini with haricot beans, sage, porcini and speck.

Looking for a chill, feel-good place to enjoy a beer? One of the three owners of the Taproom is Doug Falconer of Hunters and Collectors, so there's plenty of music booked on Sundays and most Fridays (not to mention Falconer hosts the karaoke, which is hilarious, and there's no door charge). The Taproom has also branched out into Bricks in the Brewery, bringing in authors Robert Drewe, Alex Miller, Tim Winton and Peter Carey to talk about their books and writing. Bricks in the Brewery is available to rent for window and sample the Proudfoot Dry IPA, the Espresso lager, the Frothy pale ale and the Holy Grail cloudy ale – either on a tasting paddle or in their full glory (growlers and squealers are also available). Pizza is on the menu Thursday through Sunday, and there are bargarden and cheese platters throughout summer.

Photograph: Sarah Mitchell

Drink

Did you know Kyneton has quite the reputation as a centre for boutique gin distillation? The biggest in the area is Animus Distillery, which makes three core gins plus a limited-release Davidson plum infusion (if you can get your hands on it, you absolutely should, because it is divine). Each of Animus's gins comes in a distinctive square bottle with a single colour was used. There's the blue Macedon Dry; an Australian take on a London Dry gin, the herbaceous and peppery Wattle Dry; and the sweet-and-spicy Native Orange and white Spirit, a combination of pink lemon and native finger lime. Animus also has a cellar door on Piper Street in Kyneton, as well as sampling an ever-changing cocktail menu. The light and comfortable space is a gin lover's paradise, and there are also plenty of other spirits on offer for those who eschew juniper. Animus is on the verge of releasing its first whisky, which has been maturing, and if the gin is anything to go by it should be a very special spirit indeed.

Big Tree Distillery

Photograph: Lucie Haworth

If you put Big Tree Distillery into your GPS and follow the electronic instructions, you'll feel several times that you are going the wrong way. But persevere, because at the end of several winding, sunny dirt roads is the small-batch distillery and tasting room, overlooking pastoral scenes of rolling hills and contentedly grazing cows. Big Tree makes a constantly changing roster of gins, but among the staples are the award-winning Claude Navy Strength, London dry-style (and also award-winning) Elegant Dry and Australian Native, with its pronounced pepper lime zinger and pleasing astringency. Take a seat on the comfortable couch by the huge picture window, and you'll see a herd of lucky pets, the very chuffed-that-flavours-the-gin. The bar is open Saturday-Monday on a first-come, first-served basis, and during the week tastings can be arranged.

From field to forest, Mountain Distilling is making a different kind of gin, with foraged botanicals of pine needles, mountain raspberries and lemon myrtle. Mountain has a whimsical approach to distilling, and if you get chatting to the bartenders you might learn about various tinctures and infusions they are whipping up and experimenting with.

Mountain Distilling is co-located with Mount Towrong winery, which is nestled in the treetops and feels otherworldly in its calm. The range here is small but perfectly formed, with an emphasis on Italian varietals like fiano, vermentino and nebbiolo. Upstairs from the cellar door is a small restaurant, which offers gorgeous views over the trees and a carefully considered menu of meats and snacks, all made on the premises.

Another family-owned winery in the area is Hanging Rock Winery, a considerably larger operation than Mount Towrong but with the same commitment to quality. Hanging Rock was founded in the 1970s by husband-and-wife team John Ellis and Ann Tyrrell (yes, of Rose Tyrrell). Sourcing the best fruit from the Macedon region and the Heathcote region, Hanging Rock Winery focuses on making wines that complement the area's topography and climate. The winery also mounts a yearly sculpture exhibition, which you can enjoy on a leisurely stroll through the vines, glass of wine in hand.

Photograph: Claire Haworth

Stay

If you're looking for complete peace and tranquillity, look for Fallcroft Farmstay. And keep looking, because it's a bit out of the way. But that is exactly the point. There are two private cottages on the Fallcroft property, Iron and Kingfisher. While Kingfisher is decorated in greys, greens and neutral tones, Weiro is done up in soft blush and white.

Fallcroft Farmstay

Photograph: Supplied

Both include antique furniture and quirky touches, and both have deep, inviting spa baths with views over nearby paddocks. Everything is of the highest quality, and host Veronica will make sure you want for absolutely nothing. Use Fallcroft as your base of operations to explore the area, or make it your own private retreat, with nothing on the itinerary but bubble baths and glasses of wine on the deck.

Those who do not stay at the Empire Hotel stand outside and take photos. The Empire was built in the late 1800s and is an exemplar of gold-rush architecture with its lace balconies and stained-glass windows. This boutique hotel offers a full breakfast and has its own luxurious bar. There are its gardens to explore, but it's also mere metres away from Castlemaine's loveliest sights, such as the Theatre Royal of the same era. There's off-street parking, too. It's luxe, but you have to treat yourself now and again, no?