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Ten ways to eat and drink the Mornington Peninsula

Don't be fooled into thinking Victoria's Mornington Peninsula is some kind of sleepy backwater. It may be a little off the beaten track, but it has a smokin' food and wine scene that's as much a drawcard as its ruggedly beautiful coastline and curvaceous countryside. Here are ten ways to eat and drink your way around the region.

Sunny Ridge Farm strawberries
You know you've plucked a winning strawberry when you can smell its perfume before you taste the fruit. At Sunny Ridge farm, owned by second-generation farmers Mick and Anne Gallace, Viva Patricia are one of the varieties on the vine and they're ambrosial in every way. They're picked daily when in season and careful plant hygiene and healthy soil ensure plump berries that look near-perfect on the plant. The paying public can pick their own berries by the punnet and enjoy a spectacular array of Sunny Ridge strawberry inspired desserts, including home-made ice cream, sorbet, and chocolate dipped berries, at the adjoining cafe. The farm started out as an apple and cherry orchard over 50 years ago, but morphed into a strawberry farm as the family chased a faster cash crop. It grows smaller volumes of blueberries, cherries, and blackberries.

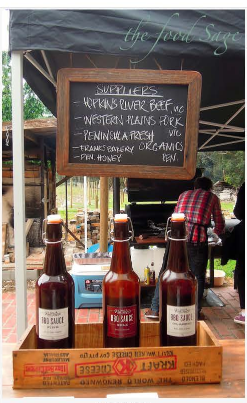
Strawberries from Sunny Ridge Farm

Cheeky Rascal Cider
Matt Gallace (son of Mick and Anne) and his wife Ruth psyched up their inner cheeky rascals to establish this boutique cider house that has an impressive range of berry ciders, using berries from Sunny Ridge Farm that are blended with apple and pears. Cheeky Rascal Cider produces seven varietals and a limited edition range, including passionfruit and pink lady, apple and pomegranate, and apple and ginger. A taste for experimentation and working with local producers has led to brews such as apple and honey cider, which is blended with Pure Peninsula Honey. The collection is made without concentrates, flavours, colours or additives, but they do include a substantial dose of cheeky imagination. They're also delightfully drinkable. Do you feel a cheeky rascal summer coming on?

Cheeky Rascal Cider – the line up

Rebello wines
If you thought the Gallace family had enough bases covered by dabbling in strawberry selling and cider making, think again. Led by senior winemaker Wayne Hewett, they're also a dab hand at making fruit wines, under the Rebello wines brand, including the signature Strawbellini — a blend of strawberry wine and moscato. This amber coloured nectar — it's not bright pink or red as you'd imagine, due to the fact that there are no additives or colourings included in the mix — has a number of accolades under its cork, including being awarded a double gold medal at a recent San Francisco International Wine Competition. There's also a strawberry liqueur that was first produced in 1996-97 and a strawberry port. A raspberry port, which was rescued from a forgotten barrel that was unearthed in a packing shed, is considered priceless, therefore not on the market. Which makes one wonder what other hidden gems there may be on the Rebello/Sunny Ridge properties.

Red Gum BBQ
More deep American south than country Victoria, Red Gum BBQ serves up southern-style barbecued meats and sauces sourced from free range or ethically farmed meats and organic and local produce. This itinerant food stand can be found at events and markets across Melbourne serving pulled pork, beef brisket and ribs that have been slowly smoked for up to 16 hours on its custom-made Texas Offset smoker — stoked with native Australian hardwoods — that leaves meat as moist as it is smokey. Home-made baked beans are just as splendid and a trifecta of BBQ sauces — dubbed Fire, Gold and Classic — contribute to a BBQ plate that packs quite a punch and will haunt you for days after with its gutsy authenticity.



Red Gum BBQ sauces

Flinders Hotel
The guest rooms at Flinders Hotel are immediately calming and soothing: as if they know you're there to relax, unwind, and be wined and dined. The hotel has all of this covered. Terminus fine dining restaurant has Algerian-born, French-trained chef Pierre Khodja at the helm — so you're in good hands. This one-hatted (in The Age Good Food Guide) restaurant gets booked out on weekends well in advance, so lock in a table early. If you're looking for something less formal during your stay, The Deck is the casual dining option. Flinders Hotel, established in 1889, has endured devastating fires and undergone several renovations — the most recent makeover was in late 2012 when 'Quarters', the 40-room boutique hotel, was born.

Red Hill Epicurean
Located in a former apple packing shed (the Mornington Peninsula was once an apple growing hotspot), Red Hill Epicurean is the region's latest gourmet destination and one-stop shop for local and interstate foodies alike. This trumped up cafe — it also boasts a wine tasting area, educational area, bakery and cheese larder and fromagerie — has got all the bases covered: including an atrium-style restaurant that is skylighted from its amazingly high roof and has crates of herbs and fruit trees growing at its centre; a huge wood-fired oven for pizzas and chocolate filled doughnuts and whatever takes the chefs' fancies; and wine dispensaries that allow customers to select their own wine by three different sized, and priced, glasses. Somebody cool chose the chilled out tunes, too. Just saying.

Red Hill Epicurean

Dromana Bay Mussels
Farmed about a kilometre off Safety Beach, Dromana Bay Mussels are harvested daily, when in season, from a lease on four hectares of water on the eastern side of Port Phillip Bay. The farm uses the long line method where considerable lengths of rope run horizontally east and west with lots of droppers, or smaller ropes, hanging off them. Australian Blue Mussels cling to these droppers in their thousands. This outfit is about as hands-on as it gets. Mussels are winched up, and the rinsing, sorting — broken shells and small mussels are returned to the sea — and packing all happens on deck. This aquatic loot doesn't make its way far beyond the peninsula, as its mostly snapped up by local customers as soon as it hits shore. They're plump and amazingly good — the mussels, that is.

BoatShed Cheese
If there is a goddess of cheese, it's Tamara Newing. A relative newcomer to the industry, Newing found solace in cheese making after the tragic death of her teenage son, Reagan, in 2010. A former chef, she established BoatShed Cheese 15 months ago which is run from her Mount Martha home and cheese kitchen from where she also conducts cheese making classes. The BoatShed collection consists of 10 French-style cheeses made from local Friesian, Jersey and goats milk. Accolades include the 2013 Dairy Industry Association of Australia award for Best Victorian Goat Cheese for the striking — and seriously creamy — Black Pearl, which Newing dusts with ash. It's a seriously good stash, and one Victoria should be proud of.

BoatShed Cheese plate

Stillwater at Crittenden Estate
What's not to love about a restaurant that's situated lakeside, on a vineyard, with a kitchen garden that supplies about 25 percent of its fruit, vegetables and herbs? The view of the placid lake and lush gardens from the Stillwater restaurant is as comforting as Zac Poulier's cooking. He recently imported a Josper charcoal-fired oven from Spain — which is one of about only six in the country — so the menu is scattered with Josper progenies, such as half a charcoal roasted chicken with Jamaican jerk-spice rub with creamed corn and pineapple, coriander and cucumber salsa; char-grilled calamari stuffed with chorizo on a salad of quinoa, tatsoi, radish and broad beans topped with crumbed feta; and mussels roasted in a sealed pot with shallots, garlic, pancetta and cider. A long lunch here is a must-do and you can stock up on Zac and Jac's (Zac's wife is called Jacqui) gourmet product range as you leave.

Pure Peninsula Honey
Apiarist John Winkels has established a shrine to all things honey at Pure Peninsula Honey where a working hive (behind glass), honey tastings (think umpteen, suspended, up-turned squeezy bottles), and pyramids of honey jars of every varietal imaginable provide a one-stop shop for honey enthusiasts. In what could be considered a symbiotic relationship, Winkels provided the honey that was blended in Cheeky Rascal Cider's honey apple blend, and Pure Peninsula Honey makes strawberry honey using Sunny Ridge berries. Winkels is a walking encyclopaedia on all things bee-related and happily answers questions thrown at him and always with a smile on his face. Such is his sweet life.

The Food Sage travelled as a guest of Rebello wines.

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12 Responses to *Ten ways to eat and drink the Mornington Peninsula*

Deanna
November 10, 2013 at 6:37 pm

You forgot the best – mocks orchard in red hill. Cider to die for and a quaint cider house to enjoy it in!

Reply

thefoodsage
November 10, 2013 at 7:01 pm

Note to self: get back to the Mornington Peninsula soon and try Mocks Orchard! Thanks for the tip, Deanna.

Reply

Maureen | Orgasmic Chef
November 10, 2013 at 6:55 pm

John and I did a romantic drive around several years ago and you're right – heaps of good food. No Southern BBQ when I was there. I'll have to get my inner rebel on and get back down there.

Reply

thefoodsage
November 10, 2013 at 7:02 pm

Inner rebels – love them to bits. Get it on, Maureen, and get back down there!

Reply

Melissa
November 10, 2013 at 9:08 pm

Maureen – I'm Melissa from Red Gum BBQ! We're newbies to the area and just getting ourselves around. Hope to get you to sample our food someday. Follow us on fb: http://www.facebook.com/redgumbbq and find us when you're next inner rebel channeling. 😃

PS – amazing article by The Food Sage – sounds like an incredible couple of days!

Reply

thefoodsage
November 10, 2013 at 9:21 pm

Inner rebel channeling … love it. Great work Melissa & best of luck – though i don't think you need it. Your work on the BBQ will take care of everything.

lambsearsandhoney
November 10, 2013 at 7:10 pm

Well done on getting this up so quickly Rachel! A great roundup of an area that was completely new to me too!

Reply

thefoodsage
November 10, 2013 at 7:13 pm

Thanks – busy week ahead and off to India at the weekend, so had to put pen to paper, or fingers to keyboard quickly. Was sipping a glass of Pink Lady and Passionfruit cider as i wrote it … what an awesome trip. Hope you enjoyed the rest of your weekend in Melbourne. Was lovely to see you again. Hope we cross paths again, soon.

Reply

Wayne Hewett
November 10, 2013 at 7:57 pm

Glad you enjoyed the visit Rachel
Wayne Hewett

Reply

thefoodsage
November 10, 2013 at 7:59 pm

Thanks, Wayne. I wrote the post while enjoying a bottle of the Pink Lady and Passionfruit. Haven't dared sample my own brew, yet. I think – after all the tastings – i was probably kidding myself it was any good! Will let you know what i think of it …

Reply

e / dig in
November 11, 2013 at 10:51 am

this would be a fantastic list for anyone travelling thru that region. i can imagine people getting out of their cars with your printout, FS, ticking off destinations as they go along!

Reply

thefoodsage
November 11, 2013 at 11:05 am

Might have to become a gastronomic food tour operator!

Reply

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