

THE RIGHT ALTITUDE

In Victoria's stunning north-east, some of the state's most enticing wine, food, scenery and heritage awaits. Long-time local Campbell Mattinson shares the inside scoop on this special part of the world.

Earlier this year I jumped on my bike and cycled via the safety of a dedicated bike path from Brighton to Wangaratta and then, on the road, over Tamsack Gap to the wineries near the 'heart' of Tamsack. I was knee-deep when I got there and had to be jacked up for the return trip, but even with modest bike fitness, I'd ridden from the heart of the Alpine Valleys wine

region through parts of the north, across the top end of the King Valley and into Glenrowan. Four distinct wine regions with only pedal power as a motor, all before lunch.

If I'd had any energy left – which I tried to gain via a couple of glasses of Baileys of Glenrowan Chateau – it would have taken less than two hours to take it over to Rutherglen. The point is that it's achievable, but it's not a super cycle. All these regions are deliciously close.

Better still, each region offers some thing distinctly different: hot flatlands, rocky outcrops, forested national parks, steep-sided valleys and high-alpine albedo. The vast differences in terrain mean that what's growing here are high-quality examples of everything from pristine sparkling wine to parkland whites to rich reds and the

luscious luscious that we hold an umbrella over and call fortified. Sweet, rich, dry, delicate. A spread will fit all overflowing here.

For diversity of wine style and proximity of various regions, the north-west of Victoria as a whole offers the best wine touring feast in Australia. If you can't find a wine you adore here – and food to match – then not only must you not really like wine, but I also don't think I want to know you.

A confession I like these regions so much that I bought the company – or the next best thing in late 2003, I visited the Alpine Valleys on a week's holiday and signed up for a house there and then the deal was sealed before I'd even gone home. I've since lived the life of a north-west Victorian. I'm a wine lover, food lover and lover of mountains and streams. I couldn't resist the place.

North-west Victoria has a grand, compelling theme – this is mountain country after all, with the Victorian snowfields dominating the landscape. So I can add another suspect in terms of the quality of food and wine on offer, the region is experiencing a historic high point. Wangaratta – arguably one of the world's best wine towns, but the reason comes to any exploration of the region's wines – is slowly re-emerging itself. As are other regional towns.

More importantly, there are more wineries and wine labels than ever before, of modern, delicious appeal

GLENROWAN AND BEYOND MUST-STOPs

Just 10 minutes out of Wangaratta lies Glenrowan, renowned for being where infamous bushranger Ned Kelly and his gang were caught, way back in 1880. Rich reds are generally the name of the game here.



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(above, left to right) Baileys of Glenrowan is the wine of South's Tamsack; Edorado Road, increasingly recognizable in Wangaratta; (below) Packed to Peddle also made offer a fun way to explore the region.

Baileys of Glenrowan

The vineyards are grown organically these days, but more importantly, the wines are in fact, modern, tip-top barn. The cellar door is a nice cafe, it serves good coffee, a fine wine are the it and history is all around, essential.

Booth's Tamsack

It's down a dirt road and the wines are rich, rustic, idiosyncratic, and often ridiculously well-priced. There are no ads or gates, but I can think of a single reason why you would want to visit.

Edorado Road

There's no cellar door, but the wines are terrific. All reds, all stylish, a legend in the Rutherglen, Glenrowan and – as the name suggests – Edorado a visit, the area just outside Wangaratta. A new producer, but with real it and soul all over it, keep your eye out for them.

Wangaratta

No one would have said this a few years ago, but Wangaratta is building a bustling food scene. Cafe Destrier near the station competes with Coffee Chateau. My friend for the best coffee in north-east Victoria and the food is of equal quality. Watermark on the river is good, the Pough Inn at Tanswerges goes out of town is excellent, the coffee at Georges Espresso on the river is above average and City's Kitchen shows an unexpected style for a rural setting.

Packed to Peddle

Routenewell across the region for anyone keen to have a go. Glenrowan is a great place to start. >>