

FROM RIGHT Lucy waits at yet another winery; interior of one of Tonic's suites; making the most of clear weather. MAIN PICTURE Tonic Hotel by night.



## HUNTER VALLEY SALLY FELDMAN

'Hi Sally, Stuart & Lucy – welcome to Tonic' is chalked on the long, narrow blackboard on the wall by our bed. The message has been embellished with hearts. It's a sweet welcome, and not the least bit mawkish, perhaps because the surrounds are so funky. Lucy, however, doesn't appreciate the significance of the greeting as much as we do. She can't read, for starters (god knows we've tried) and she's a dog with little appreciation for the niceties.

As a one-dog family, it can be difficult finding holiday accommodation that offers amenities more glamorous than dusty 'antique' furniture, crumbly kitchen drawers full of dubious utensils and gulag-style wire fencing. There's a handful of hotels that takes dogs, but they generally come with weight restrictions (less than 10 kilos). Our little darling weighs a hefty 30.

So Tonic is a revelation – a chic, contemporary, crumb-free zone where we can holiday *en famille*. A couple of years ago, owners

Nici and Tom Stanford built six one-bedroom and one two-bedroom suites on their sprawling Lovedale property in the Hunter Valley. Each is immaculately turned out in a different colour palette, with huge bathrooms and gorgeous Aesop products. Many of the (often quirky) furnishings and artworks are for sale. Our suite, number two, is predominantly white (amazingly, as this is the one set aside for guests with pets). It seems Nici is far more relaxed about her property's wellbeing than we are under the muddy circumstances.

We've arrived the weekend after the fiercest storms in more than 50 years have grounded the *Pasha Bulker* off Newcastle's Nobby's Beach and flooded much of the region, so the car's packed to the gunwhales with towels for mopping up after a chocolate labrador deeply enamoured of puddles.

After a slightly fraught drive from Sydney, we're finally sitting on the verandah with a glass of Hunter semillon,

admiring an unexpected sunset over the property's brimming dam, while Lucy stares anxiously out at her first mob of kangaroos, who stare right back.

Because of the frequent downpours that, um, dog this holiday, our days consist of getting Lucy out for big runs around Tonic's paddocks whenever the sky clears, then, after much towelling (for her) and shoe-changing (for us), family outings in the car to a winery or two.

Breakfasts at Tonic are so delicious that lunch is a struggle. The fridge is packed with such goodies as poached pears with porridge and brown-sugar syrup, smoked salmon, rocket, feta, eggs and pastries. But we do manage some great bar food at Hungerford Hill's Terroir. Hell, we're on holiday.

There's no way we're missing out on dinner either, even after a glass of wine and canapés with Nici and other guests in the lounge, so we make a rain-thrashed expedition to the very cool

Rock restaurant at Poole's Rock winery. We drive past it twice (its outdoor lights have been taken out by the storms) and arrive late, wet and frazzled. No matter – Jane Clarke, manager and wife of head chef Andrew Clarke, soothes us with a glass of Champagne in the lounge, which we follow with (I tell no lies) the best food in the Hunter, accompanied by a selection of Cockfighter's Ghost and Poole's Rock wines.

It's still pouring as we're leaving, and Lucy's curled up in the back of the car fast asleep. We know we've found nirvana when Jane insists on coming out to meet her, enquiring whether she needs some dinner, too. We decline, much to Lucy's chagrin. She's on normal rations – we're watching her weight.

**Tonic Hotel**, Talga Rd, Lovedale, NSW, (02) 4930 9999, [tonichotel.com.au](http://tonichotel.com.au). **Terroir Restaurant & Wine Bar**, Hungerford Hill Winery, 1 Broke Rd, Pokolbin, NSW, (02) 4990 0711. **Rock restaurant**, DeBeyers Rd, Pokolbin, NSW, (02) 4998 6968, [rockrestaurant.com.au](http://rockrestaurant.com.au).

