

Muse restaurant at
Hungerford Hill Winery.



WORDS SALLY FELDMAN / PHOTOGRAPHY SAM McADAM

Winter valley

It's long been on the map for wine lovers, but increasingly, its stellar, regionally focused restaurants are turning it into a foodie mecca, too. Designate your driver and hit the road.



David Hook Wines cellar door at Peppers Creek Village. Left: chef Robert Molines. Opposite: Cafe Enzo.

Many restaurants serve both lunch and dinner, so you can try the Hunter's best in one weekend.

and restaurateur Robert Molines – who’s played a vital role in the region’s restaurant culture over the past 40 years – and his wife, Sally, have now found their own (and our) slice of heaven. The drive here is part of the fun, a winding climb through – after an unusually rainy spring – undulating green hills punctuated by fanned rows of vines. Step out of the car and into a Mediterranean idyll, complete with a covered courtyard and verandah opening to those glorious views. The mostly French/Med-influenced menu echoes its surroundings, with local produce featuring strongly and herbs and vegies straight out of the Molines’s kitchen garden. Think ciabatta served with aioli made with local Olivo Mio olive oil, house-cured ocean trout gravlax with smoked eel,

where to eat

‘Spoiled for choice’ might be a fairly recent description of Hunter Valley dining, but it’s certainly the case – especially if you’ve only a weekend around which to build your foodie itinerary. Quite a few of the following spots offer lunch or dinner, so plan it right and you’ll get to sample the best the region has to offer. We just envy the locals...

Start with breakfast at **Cafe Enzo** in Peppers Creek Village (see *Where to Stay*, page 137). If the weather’s fine, sit out in the little ‘piazza’ under an umbrella; if not, the dining room

is just as photogenic. Keep it simple with sourdough and homemade kumquat marmalade or toasted banana and walnut bread with French butter, served up on a wooden board (or a second-hand Sesame Street annual – go figure). Or go the full monty with an Enzo big breakfast. The coffee is Campos, so what’s not to love?

Whatever else you do in the Hunter, do not miss lunch at the one-hatted **Bistro Molines** at Tallavera Grove vineyard (749 Mount View Rd, Mount View, (02) 4990 9553, bistromolines.com.au). Chef





local hero

You could just prop up the counter at the cellar door of **Margan** (1238 Milbrodale Rd, Broke, (02) 6579 1372, margan.com.au) stunning rammed-earth property to taste Andrew Margan's award-winning drops, but that would mean missing out on chef Ian Atkinson's fabulous menu (with Margan wines to match). Come here for lunch or dinner (or Sunday breakfast - perhaps buttermilk pancakes with honeycomb butter and maple syrup). Margan won the 2011 SMH Good Food Guide's regional wine list and sustainable restaurant of the year awards and it's clear this enterprise is a labour of love - from the filtered rainwater brought to the table, to the vegies grown in the massive garden presided over by Lisa Margan's beloved chickens: "We built them the most expensive shed on earth - we call it the Chook-Mahal!" Ian's CV includes time with Christine Manfield, and the punchy, layered flavours and textures of his food show it's stood him in good stead. On the summer menu, a seared pepper-crust kingfish with torched avocado and sauce gribiche with a 2009 Chardonnay was a highlight, as was a Hunter beef carpaccio with spiced beetroot salad paired with a 2010 Shiraz Saignée. That is, until we tried the rum and raisin marquise with the 2008 Botrytis Semillon...

a fine-dining menu that might include steamed crab and prawn with pea purée, or poached spatchcock with king brown mushrooms, baby leek, quinoa and tarragon sauce. The wine list also morphs into more than a vineyard catalogue, with selections from France, Chile, Spain, Austria, New Zealand and other Australian regions.

Long-standing favourite, **Majors Lane** (64 Majors Lane, Lovedale, (02) 4930 7832, majorslane.com), is a must-visit - again for lunch or dinner. Chef Ben Sales and his partner, Debbie Jenkins, both

originally from Maitland, are fervent advocates of local produce, right down to now tending their own Charolais/Angus cattle "in the paddock out the back". Ben's smart-casual menu features the likes of a tempura of sake-and-sugar-cured Nulkaba quail alongside a charcuterie plate of chicken and pistachio ballotine, duck and cognac pâté and smoked trout rémoulade - all made on the premises. A number of these are available in the little front annexe that houses Lovedale Smokehouse (whose housemade snags are among the best we've ever tasted). There's also a Paddock to Plate menu, compliments of the "happy beasts" in the aforementioned paddock, and the small wine list features only Hunter Valley drops.

Among the fine young chefs who've done time with Robert Molines is 26-year-old Troy Rhoades-Brown. Less than a year after launching **Muse** (1 Broke Rd, Pokolbin, (02) 4998 6777, musedining.com.au) at Hungerford Hill with his wife, Megan, who heads up the excellent front-of-house crew, they bagged a chef's hat in the 2011 SMH Good Food Guide. A steady flow of visitors lunch in the cafe section on dishes such as sautéed potato gnocchi with asparagus, prosciutto and confit garlic butter, and an already legendary frangipane tart. But come at night to watch Troy and his team really step it up a notch (pick the right table possie - the open kitchen adds to the theatre). The fine-dining menu, based on fantastic local and Australian regional produce - Hunter Valley white rabbit, Nulkaba spatchcock, Mandagery Creek venison - is refined, modern (with well-considered nods towards the chemistry lab) and flavour-packed. The dessert standout is the cheeky 'nitro' ice-cream concoction - when we visited it was honey-flavoured, with fresh banana, crumbled 'banana bread' and salted peanut brittle. This 'instant' ice-cream made with dry ice is brought to the table

wreathed in an *Adams Family*-esque flourish of icy smoke. Sensational.

Just as sensational is the fact that the Hunter has its first cocktail bar, **Goldfish** (*Tempus Two Winery, Cnr Broke and McDonald Rds, (02) 4998 7688, thegoldfish.com.au*). A smart tasting menu - betel leaves with a variety of fillings, for example - and cool venue offer a fresh alternative to all that serious wine-spitting.

Honourable mention for its pretty, slightly hippy-dippy setting and friendly staff goes to **Leaves & Fishes** (737 Lovedale Rd, Lovedale, (02) 4930 7400, leavesandfishes.com), for a pleasant lunch or casual dinner. Keep it simple with fish and chips or rhubarb crumble with apple gelato and caramelised ginger.



More and more Hunter restaurants keep it local when it comes to sourcing ingredients.



Margan tasting room. Above: entrance to the winery. Left: chef Andrew Clarke at Rock.

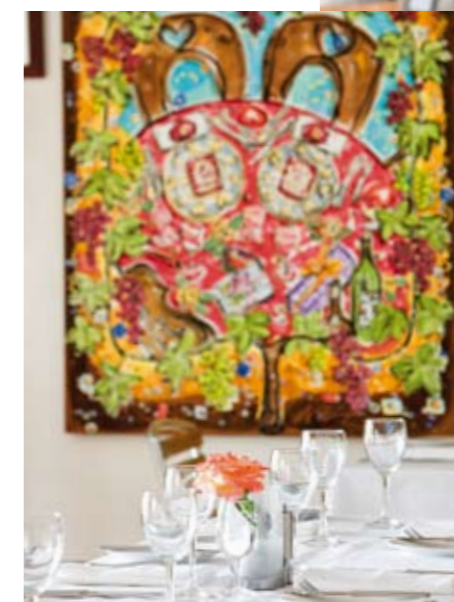
experiences - can be had at **Pooles Rock** vineyard (576 DeBeyers Rd, Pokolbin, (02) 4998 6968, rockrestaurant.com.au). Here, chef Andrew Clarke mixes it up with casual fare for lunch at Firestick Café - a wood-fired pizza topped with marinated prawns, salsa verde and lemon is light, flavoursome and perfectly crisp, and matched by maitre d' and sommelier Stéphane Pommier with a 2007 Pooles Rock Semillon. Dinner sees the dining room segue into the two-chef-hatted Rock, where Andrew shows off his impeccable technique with

pink witlof and tiny chervil leaves, and twice-roasted Hunter duckling with a peach glaze. For dessert, Robert's île flottante is the stuff of legend. And if you're lucky, Sally may still have a bottle of their 2009 Molines Et Fils Chardonnay for you to toast your good fortune.

Another lunch/dinner option - although both offering different



'Nitro' ice-cream at Muse. Clockwise from above: Goldfish bar; chef Troy Rhoades-Brown; dining room at Majors Lane.



PAINTING AT MAJORS LANE 'HUNTER WEDDING, LAVISH AND LUSH' BY DOROTHEE HEIBEL



From left: Icon Lounge at Small Winemakers Centre; produce on display at Hunter Valley Smelly Cheese Shop.

Tempus Two Winery (2144 Broke Rd, Pokolbin, (02) 4998 6713, huntervalleysmellycheeseshop.com.au) is a great one-stop shop. There's everything and more that your foodie heart could desire, from a fine Hunter Belle washed rind to housemade gelato. The folks here can also organise to mail-order local must-haves such as Binnorie Dairy Marinated Fetta or Labna if you don't make it to **Binnorie Dairy's** HQ at the Tuscany Wine Estate (Cnr Hermitage Rd and Mistletoe Lane, Pokolbin, (02) 4998 6660, binnorie.com.au).

And for those who feel their weekend wouldn't be complete without some hands-on cooking action (or even those who only like to watch), book in for one of Ben Sales's outdoor classes at Majors Lane (see *What to Eat*, page 134). The pretty restaurant terrace gets transformed into a classroom, where you'll get to try your hand at a choice of Asian-based cuisines, then sit down with a glass or two of something delicious with lunch.

Newest kid on the butcher's block is **Millfield Hall Cooking School** (42 Wollombi Rd, Millfield, (02) 9569 0418, millfieldhall.com.au), which food-and-wine-mad owners Kate Grant and Ewen Craig have restored as their family home with a cooking school on the side. At 'L'école des gourmands heureux' – the school of happy eaters', you can gather a group of friends or team-building corporate types to learn how to whip up pizzas in the wood-fired oven, master pie-making, or tackle a spot of regional Tuscan cooking, before tucking into the four-course lunch you've prepared. Guest chefs lined up to date include Shaun Presland, of Sake in Sydney and Brisbane. In the interests of transparency, we should note that Kate is *MasterChef Magazine's* marketing manager (she's been trialling her pies out on us in the office for months!), but if anyone can make cooking fun, she can.

a 2007 Audrey Wilkinson Lake Reserve Shiraz and a 2005 Thomas Museum Release Braemore Semillon. With fine views of the Brokenback Range, and perhaps a little cheese plate, you could settle in for a very pleasant couple of hours.

For a break from the wine trail, go for Broke. Just down the road from the village store, in a characterful cottage, you'll find **Pickled & Pitted** (67 Wollombi St, Broke, (02) 6579 1063, riverflatsstate.com.au), with a trove of olives and olive oils from River Flats Estate, as well as other local goodies. Out the back, the by-product of all this industriousness is turned into gorgeous aromatherapy skincare products under the banner of **Bare Nature's Kin** (barenatureskin.com.au). Buy little individual bars or long blocks of deliciously scented soaps – honey and spice, lemon myrtle, and blood orange and cedarwood are all favourites.

Whether it's stocking up your holiday digs or loading up for the homeward journey – the **Hunter Valley Smelly Cheese Shop** at

There's more than just wine-tasting to occupy your time; think cooking classes and shopping.

what to do

Wine tasting – obviously – and with plenty of information available from all quarters, we'll leave that to the experts. In fact, look out for our drinks writer Greg Duncan Powell's chatty, user-friendly regional wine guide (working title *The Glove Box Guide*) out in August. Almost all of the dining options mentioned in this story's Where to Eat section are based in excellent wineries, so you could always use them as a handy starting point.

Lazy tipplers (or bored designated drivers) should stake out the **Small Winemakers Centre** (426 McDonalds Rd, Pokolbin, (02) 4998 7668, smallwinemakers.com.au). Here, some of the Hunter's boutique winemakers' best – Ian Little, Andrew Thomas, Andrew Margan and Keith Tulloch among them – are conveniently gathered for tasting and for sale. Upstairs, in the Icon Lounge, you can work your way through some of the region's legends by means of an Enomatic tasting system. Highlights include



where to stay

They've got it all going on at **Peppers Creek Village**. Here, winemaker David Hook has his handsome cellar door and Cafe Enzo makes like an inner-city eatery (see *Where to Eat*, page 132). Gather a group of friends and book one of three eccentrically furnished lakeside dwellings on the property – The Yacht Club, The Racquet Club and The Residence. Each has its own character, but our favourite is the sprawling, four-bedroom/four-bathroom Residence, with its central courtyard. Cnr Broke and Ekerts Rds, Pokolbin, (02) 4998 7406, pepperscreek.com.au. From \$1100 for two nights, including a breakfast hamper.

Over at Broke, **Cicada Country House** is a home away from home for up to 12 of your besties (or extended family). Sit out on the verandah and watch the kangaroos grazing in the paddocks below, or take a walk down to the creek (watch out for wombat holes). It makes a great base for exploring this quieter corner of the Hunter Valley. Best of all, you can stagger safely back from a long lunch or dinner at Margan (see *Where to Eat*, page 134), just down the road. 919 Milbrodale Rd, Broke, staysinthevines.com.au. From \$1260 for two-five adults; for six-eight adults, \$105 per adult per night; extra guests, \$90 per night. Kids 13 and under, \$60 per night.

On the edge of the Valley, **Cedar Creek Vineyard Cottages**,

splash out

You might be forgiven for thinking you've arrived on a film set (perhaps a remake of *The Stepford Wives*?) as you drive through the spick-and-span greenness of The Vintage. Set on this magnificent, Greg Norman-designed golf course (picturesquely adorned by mobs of kangaroos at dawn and dusk) is a collection of private homes and the **Château Élan** resort. This is the latest splurge option for Hunter Valley visitors, who can indulge at its excellent spa, play a round or laze by the fabulous pool, then stroll over to Legends Grill for

dinner (or stay put and order top-notch room service). The smart villas are extremely comfortable and well appointed for self-caterers, with broad verandahs overlooking the greens. Minibars include a savvy selection of local boutique wines, such as a David Hook pinot grigio and De luliis shiraz. For a smoochy weekend away, couples might prefer one of the Spa Suites. *Vintage Dr, Rothbury*, (02) 4998 2500, chateauelan.com.au. From \$329 per night for a Spa Villa including buffet breakfast; from \$349 per night for a Spa Suite.



Château Élan at The Vintage. Above left: its Destination Spa. Right: one of the Cedar Creek Vineyard Cottages.



From rustic cottages to modern resorts, there's accommodation to suit all tastes and budgets.

part of Stonehurst Wines, offers rustic, self-catering accommodation for families. From the wisteria-draped Farm Cottages, you can walk straight off the deck and into vines, but all are built on a ridge with fabulous views over the 220-hectare property, which also runs cattle and deer. The interiors are pretty basic but comfortable,

with personal touches such as vintage family photos and quirky memorabilia adding to their charm. 1840 Wollombi Rd, Cedar Creek, (02) 4998 1576, cedarcreekcottages.com.au. From \$199 per couple per night; kids \$30 extra per night. **With thanks to Tourism NSW for its assistance with this story. More information at visitnsw.com.**

ALL RATES ARE BASED ON WEEKENDS AT DOUBLE OCCUPANCY.