



# west gippsland

Head off the beaten gourmet track and explore this region of scenic countryside, fantastic produce and some of the country's best pinot.

WORDS **MATT PRESTON** PHOTOGRAPHY **MARK ROPER**

**F**ew regions in Victoria can boast a range of primary producers to match West Gippsland. Here is a region as famous for its beef, lamb and dairy industries as it is for the berries that spring from its hillsides in the north, the asparagus from Koo-wee-rup or the huge crops of potatoes around Thorpdale.

West Gippsland is, surprisingly, still largely underdeveloped when it comes to large-scale gourmet tourism, so you stand

the chance of discovering some really great tastes in the region – or should we say 'regions', as there's a distinct division between the south and north.

West Gippsland's natural beauty is also appealing. The steep and thickly wooded slopes of the north are within an hour's drive of Melbourne, while the wide surf coast of the south is within easy striking distance of two of Victoria's great natural attractions – the penguins at Phillip Island and the majesty of Wilsons Promontory.

## the guide.

Clockwise from right: Gippsland beef with local blueberries, roasted tomatoes and red wine at The Outpost Retreat; The Outpost Retreat's rustic dining room; sample the Courthouse Cafe's outstanding wine list; relax on the verandah at Janalli Bed & Breakfast.



### WHERE TO EAT

**The Outpost Retreat, 38 Loch Valley Rd, Noojee, tel: (03) 5628 9669.**

John Snelling brings the same understated simplicity he used at Café di Stasio to bear on the menu at this strange cluster of old farm buildings up in the hills. Main courses may range from locally farmed barramundi from Garfield's, or Mirboo North rabbit loin stuffed with Jindivick pork-and-bacon sausage. Or try the surprisingly successful pairing of local blueberries, roasted tomatoes and red wine in a perky, light and well-integrated sauce for a hunk of Gippsland beef. Regional produce is also to the fore at the extremities of the meal – whether it's local berries in an impeccable creamy berry mascarpone tart, or the soft Tarago River goat's cheese served with fat slices of tomato and a slew of sweet-and-sour caramelised onions. The dining room's reclaimed farm implements, hessian-curtained windows and bush cottage decor may seem a little at odds with all this modern food, but the look works perfectly a little way up the hill in their Toolshed Bar/Bistro. With an open fire, it's a great spot for early ales or a postprandial moment or two. There are river cabins for rent on-site as well.

**The Courthouse Cafe, 72 Smith St, Warragul, tel: (03) 5622 2442.**

Shaded by heritage-listed trees, this grand old building houses what is arguably Gippsland's best wine list. About 20 local drops are backed up by everything from Chablis premier cru to a dozen pinot noirs from New Zealand alone. They stock Grand Ridge beers, too. (The Cann brothers run a boutique-wine store next door, which helps bolster the list.) The menu ranges from pizza and pasta to beautifully cooked lamb, which may be rubbed with cinnamon and drizzled with salsa verde, or served with pea mash and mint jus.

**Koonwarra Food & Wine Store, S Gippsland Hwy, Koonwarra, tel: (03) 5664 2285.**

This old post office/food store/cafe is one of our favourite places to eat in country Victoria. It's an easy place to while away a morning over the papers, whether in the quaint flower garden or at one of the tables scattered around the central counter. The coffee's good and chef Maria Stuart makes beautiful almond-crust French toast. For lunch there are fat sarnies bulging with free-range chook or ham, and a Gippsland beef-and-burgundy pie for wintry days, plus a leek-and-Maffra-cheese tart served on rocket salad for when it's sunny.

**Cafe Gabriel's, 9 A'Beckett St, Inverloch, tel: (03) 5674 1188.**

They've obviously spent a bob or two on this slick and fashionable cafe. Owners Maria and Chris used to run one of the first cafes in Melbourne's Elwood, and now they're back in the fray. Chris' food is full of clean flavours, whether it's sumac-spiced lamb cutlets with Persian feta and eggplant, or homemade taramasalata. He's also not afraid of offering something as simply delicious as a plate of prosciutto, hazelnuts, grilled pears and gorgonzola. Local wines dominate the list – the Kouark pinot noir from Drouin South is a standout – alongside a handful of Italians.

Just up the road is **Arigato Inverloch** (23 A'Beckett St, tel: (03) 5674 3339), which serves a short menu of hot, home-style Japanese dishes such as udon noodle soups, and crumbed pork fillet with pickles and rice.

If you'd like to break the journey on the way to or from South Gippsland, then **Caldermeade Farm Café/Dairy** (4385 S Gippsland Hwy, Caldermeade, tel: (03) 5997 5000) is the place. Still a high-production dairy, they also make a very good coffee and offer a range of smoothies made with their own milk. A limited menu includes homemade pies and quiches.



Clockwise from left: Breakfast on almond-crusted French toast at the Koonwarra Food & Wine Store; regional views over the Strzelecki ranges; the Koonwarra Food & Wine Store is one of the standout places to eat in country Victoria; head to Cannibal Creek Winery's cellar door for some fine pinot noir.



Other cafe options include **Orange Roughy in Fish Creek** (2 Old Waratah Rd, tel: (03) 5683 2207), and Foster's **Source Cafe** (36 Main St, tel: (03) 5682 2110). The former – a mildly retro-hippy spot that's very easy to hang out in – makes a fine burger alongside fancier stuff like steamed garfish in banana leaves. At Source, they use Jasper Coffee expertly and they also do a brisk trade in ribbon-winning jams and relishes.

The pick of the pubs on this side of Gippsland is **The Royal Mail Hotel** (89 Archies Creek Rd, Archies Creek, tel: (03) 5678 7344). This is a compact but bustling and friendly spot, whether for a meal of homemade pork terrine and pickles – and a decent local steak – or a beer surrounded by locals, ranging from bearded bushies to blokes in blazers.

**Mario's Bistro at the Oceanview Hotel** ('Killy Pub', Bass Hwy, Kilcunda, (03) 5678 7011) has great views over the coast from its deck. The basic, slightly retro menu has pastas, steaks and fish, but with prices that suggest more.

Further round the coast, Fish Creek's **Fishy Pub** (2 Old Waratah Rd, tel: (03) 5683 2404) – famous for the huge fish on its roof – and the **Exchange Hotel** (43 Main St, Foster, tel: (03) 5682 2377) in nearby Foster are worth a look.

### WHERE TO DRINK

Gippsland is prime pinot country – the cool climate is ideal for this sensitive grape. The country around Leongatha, in Gippsland's south, is home to one of Australia's heavy-hitters, both in price and quality. Phillip Jones' Bass Phillip pinots are almost Burgundian in style, as Jones focuses on low yields and rigorous fruit selection to maintain quality. There is no cellar door here, or at the other Leongatha winery that attracts media attention for its pinot and chardonnay, Caledonia Australis. You can, however, find Phillip Jones wines on sale at **Gippsland Food and Wine** (123 Princes Hwy, Yarragon, tel: (03) 5634 2451).

While appreciation of West Gippsland as a cool-climate wine region is growing, you'll still find that those wineries with open cellar doors are extremely rustic affairs. No flashy presentations here, just the chance to taste estate-grown wines where they were made, and often with the bloke that made them.

One cellar door not to miss is **Cannibal Creek** (260 Tynong North Rd, Tynong North, tel: (03) 5942 8380). Here Patrick Hardiker sells his earthy but elegant, and eminently cellarable, 2002 pinot noir; a firm chardonnay of the same vintage that combines good acidity

against some almost honeyed notes; and that rarity – a good Victorian sauvignon blanc.

The old homestead at **Ada River Vineyard** (2330 Main Rd, Neerim South, tel: (03) 5628 1661) is a slightly more salubrious cellar door. The winemaker, Peter Kelliher, does as much as possible by hand, whether it's pruning, picking or individually pressing small parcels of fruit. The best results can be seen in his 2000 pinot, which has both notes of cherry and plum along with good length. Their Heathcote vineyard has recently started yielding – if they have any of their 2001 Heathcote shiraz, try it. **Wild Dog Winery, Warragul-Korumburra Rd, Warragul, tel: (03) 5623 1117.**

John Farrington is a passionate champion of Gippsland wines, but then his family were early pioneers of the region's wine industry, first planting vines on their dairy property 25 years ago. While visiting, enjoy sweeping views down the valley from the cellar door's veranda with a bottle of their baby pink rosé or their cherry bomb of a pinot.

**Lyre Bird Hill Winery, 370 Inverloch Rd, Koonwarra, tel: (03) 5664 3204.**

Owen Schmidt is probably most comfortable amongst his barrels, although he reaches his most animated when discussing his silky



cool-climate shiraz, and becomes positively feisty when talking about his dessert wine. Both are well worth checking out, along with the excellent 2003 pinot noir, the riesling and a cabernet sauvignon that's well above the usual standard for the region.

**Bass Valley Estate, St Heliers Rd, Loch,**  
tel: (03) 5659 6321.

For a cold-climate shiraz with classic peppery characteristics, look no further than this cowshed tasting room. The shiraz that Roger Cutler makes not only smells of white pepper, it has a distinct taste of it, too. He also makes a well-balanced cab sav, which exhibits none of the green or capsicum traits you might see in other examples around Gippsland.

**Grand Ridge Brewery, Baromi Rd, Mirboo North,** tel: (03) 9778 6996.

There are plans for a major renovation, but currently the major drawcards of this award-winning microbrewery are the spectacular drive there through the Strzelecki Ranges, and the excellent beers. The coriander-scented wheat beer, Natural Blonde, and the simple pilsener are our favourites. Call ahead if you want to organise a tour of the brewery, and be sure to avoid the potent Moonshine and Supershine malt ales if you're driving!

#### WHERE TO EAT

1. The Outpost Retreat
7. The Courthouse Cafe
9. Caldermeade Farm Café/Dairy
11. Mario's Bistro, Oceanview Hotel
12. The Royal Mail Hotel
16. Arigato Inverloch
16. Cafe Gabriel's
17. Koonwarra Food & Wine Store
18. Orange Roughy
18. Fishy Pub
19. Exchange Hotel
19. Source Cafe

#### WHERE TO DRINK

2. Ada River Vineyard
4. Cannibal Creek
7. Wild Dog Winery
8. Gippsland Food and Wine
10. Bass Valley Estate
15. Grand Ridge Brewery
17. Lyre Bird Hill Winery

#### WHERE TO SHOP

1. Alpine Trout Farm
2. Neerim South Butcher
2. Swaffields Store
5. Garfield Meats
6. Drouin West Fruit & Berry Farm
6. Piano Hill Farmhouse Cheese
7. Radfords & Sons
7. Rhodes Butchers
7. The Grange Cafe and Deli
8. Gippsland Food and Wine
17. The Organic Fix
19. Aherns Fruit Market
19. Foster Seafoods

#### WHERE TO STAY

2. Janalli Bed & Breakfast
3. Serendipity Lavender Farm Bed & Breakfast
8. Yarragon Villas on Campbell
17. Koonwarra Cottages
17. Lyre Bird Hill Guesthouse



Clockwise from right: Pick peaches straight from the tree at Drouin West Fruit & Berry Farm; assemble a picnic hamper of goodies from Swaffields; Piano Hill Farmhouse Cheese's Ironstone cheddar gets the thumbs up; enjoy the views as you sip Wild Dog Winery's pinot noir.



the guide.

## WHERE TO SHOP

**Piano Hill Farmhouse Cheese, 760 Main Neerim Rd, Drouin West, tel: (03) 5628 5377.**

The Brown family farm is now the only place to try local cheese where it's actually made. While there are no tours on offer, it is worth visiting to taste the range of six cheeses made from their own milk. Our pick is the Ironstone, a rinded hard cheese that gets increasingly intense – developing an almost granular texture, like good parmesan – as it ages. They also make a very fine Greek-style yoghurt.

**Garfield Meats, 89 Main St, Garfield, tel: (03) 5629 2593.**

They say butcher John Preston will smoke anything, even chicken nuggets. His hams and smoked chook are the most popular products, although tourists are usually smitten by his smoked game meats such as venison and kangaroo.

**Neerim South Butcher, 141 Main Rd, Neerim South, tel: (03) 5628 1797.**

Now that Jindivick Smokehouse no longer sells direct, this is the best place to come for their smoked hams and sausages. They sell decent organic pork here, too.

For good sausages, see **Rhodes Butchers** in Warragul (43 Smith St, tel: (03) 5623 1265). For

Gippsland lamb and beef, head to **Radfords & Sons** (27 Smith St, tel: (03) 5623 2110).

**Alpine Trout Farm, 115 Mt Baw Baw Tourist Rd, Noojee, tel: (03) 5628 9584.**

In a secluded valley up in the hills sits this network of 58 ponds that supply the trout for the farm's Tommy Finn's brand of smoked trout and dips. You can buy these here, or wet a line and catch your own fish. If you visit in the late afternoon, look out for the pair of sea eagles that swoop in to steal their dinner.

**Swaffields Store, 203 Main Rd, Neerim South, tel: (03) 5628 1667.**

Whether you want goodies for your picnic basket or just need a carton of milk, this quaint little deli is perfect. There's Tarago River cheese in the cold cabinet, local vegies in the baskets by the door, and a few select funky grocery items on the shelves, such as local Redback chilli products or Italian peach paste for making Bellini cocktails.

**The Grange Cafe and Deli, 15 Palmerston St, Warragul, tel: (03) 5623 6698.**

A good spot to find rather nice pickled Warragul asparagus, plump Terrane olives and many of the local cheeses. They also stock a wide range of Garfield smoked meats, and will make up lunch hampers for you.

The Grange is also a good spot for coffee, a bowl of their own crunchy granola or a light lunch – their sandwiches are a good choice.

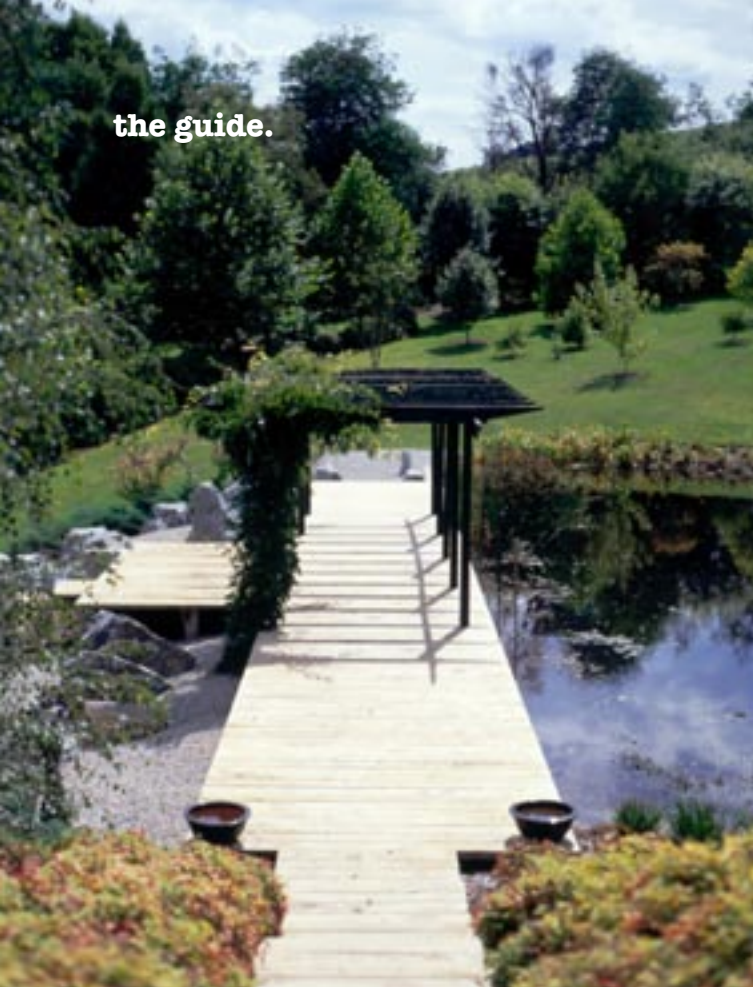
**Gippsland Food and Wine, 123 Princes Hwy, Yarragon, tel: (03) 5634 2451.**

Ignore the slightly twee tearooms and pinny-wearing staff aimed at bus tourists, and concentrate on the racks of local wines, shelves of homemade preserves (including some from Mountain Berries) and local cheeses from Top Paddock, Tarago River and Maffra.

**Drouin West Fruit & Berry Farm, 315 Fisher Rd, Drouin West, tel: (03) 5628 7627.**

About 60,000 visitors come each year to pick fruit and berries from the 180 varieties on offer; buy estate-grown produce ranging from jams and pickles to preserved lemons and pomegranate molasses; or just enjoy the tin-roofed wooden hut that houses the cafe. Here you'll find Monte Coffee, berry shakes and a compact menu of simple dishes that use local produce, whether it's a venison burger, rabbit pie or a cheese platter served with the farm's own fruit pastes. Local wines are available by the glass, including the great East Gippsland Narkoojee chardonnay and their fruity pinot noir. They also have two on-site cottages for hire.

## the guide.



Clockwise from far left: the beautiful garden at Janalli Bed & Breakfast; you'll find lavender in the jams, scones – and the decor – at the Serendipity Lavender Farm B&B; Yarragon's self-contained villas are each decorated in a different style; Janalli's sprawling homestead.



For fresh fruit and veg, it's best to head to the weekend **Farmers' Markets** – in Kongwak (Sundays), Koonwarra (first Saturday of the month) and Drouin (third Saturday). Carolyn Johns' **The Organic Fix** is a regular at local farmers' markets. She sources organic produce from her family farm, as well as others around the area. Otherwise try her veggie shack (7 Koala Dr, Koonwarra, tel: (03) 5664 2490).

Foster has a good produce and health food shop in **Aherns Fruit Market** (29 Toora Rd, tel: (03) 5682 2095), and you'll find decent fish, such as dory and leatherjacket, at **Foster Seafoods** (35 Main St, tel: (03) 5682 2815).

Other local products to try include: Hope Farm Bakery sourdough bread; hard cheese from Maffra; Top Paddock brie; Tarago River's Washed Rind and crumbly Strzelecki Blue; Jindi Brie and Triple Cream Cheese; Flavourite hydroponic tomatoes from Warragul; frozen berries and jams from Mountain River berries; blueberries from Mal Deveson's Moondarra property; Tarnuk Bush Food's spices and their pesto made from Warragul greens; Krowera Hills olive oil; Marshall Green venison; Moore's free-range eggs; Strzelecki Heritage apples; and Mornings Light organic muesli.

## WHERE TO STAY

**Serendipity Lavender Farm Bed & Breakfast, 80 Croft Rd, Nar Nar Goon North, tel: (03) 5942 9164**

This B&B stands at the gateway to Gippsland, with magnificent views from its ridge-top position – this aspect can also be enjoyed from the spa on the verandah. The rooms start at \$190 a night per double and are smart and neat. Mother-and-daughter owners Jane Metcalfe and Sally Heeps were pioneers in Victorian lavender cultivation, and the working farm now also boasts a cafe – their huge lavender scones served with Gippsland cream and homemade raspberry and lavender jam are especially fine – and a shop with a dizzying selection of lavender products.

**Janalli Bed & Breakfast, 285 Wagners Rd, Neerim South, tel: (03) 5628 1476.**

Alan and Phillipa Beeson's home really is one of Victoria's most enchanting places to stay. The sprawling luxury homestead has three comfy rooms with ensuites, and separate sitting rooms for guests, but best of all is the surrounding four hectares of beautiful gardens. Wander around them and the pace of design slips from formal Italianate to rambling cottage garden, to manicured Japanese-style,

and finally a picturesque glade. Phillipa's design makes great use of water and the natural fold on the country in which Janalli lies. A gem. From \$170 per double.

**Yarragon Villas on Campbell, 16 Campbell St, Yarragon, tel: (03) 5634 2623.**

Spas with a view of both the open fire and the TV, and decor that ranges from over-the-top 'shabby chic' to cool modern-Asian are highlights. Joanne Kingwill has done a fine job designing these four self-contained villas that have great linen and burst with personality. From \$125 a night.

**Koonwarra Cottages, 80 Stockdales Rd, Koonwarra, tel: (03) 5664 2488.**

These spick-and-span, two-bed bush cottages with their simple decor are perfect for a family stopover, and come well equipped with a wood-fire stove, bathroom with spa, and TV/VCR. From \$110 per double.

**Lyre Bird Hill Guesthouse, 370 Inverloch Rd, Koonwarra, tel: (03) 5664 3204.**

Owen Schmidt's wife Robyn also offers three rooms for bed and breakfast from \$150 per double in an environment she describes as "social, not romantic", even though it's surrounded by a colourful cottage garden. A self-contained cottage is also available. **d.**