

Good oil on the Margaret River

There's much more to the region than fine wine and dining

ROB WOODBURN

I sense immediately I'm onto something special. Two rows of stately pepper gums make a majestic entrance to Vasse Virgin. The olive oil factory at the end of the drive is built of corrugated tin, white gum and recycled timber salvaged from the historic jetty at Busselton, 40km away.

Workers are busy processing a comprehensive range of extra virgin olive oil-based skin care products for display in the Vasse Virgin gift shop. Creams, soaps, lotions and potions can be sampled at a large table with built-in wash basins, which also serves to separate body care products from a display of extra virgin oils, exotic spices, mustards, salts, peppers and colourful tableware. Olay meets Jamie Oliver under one roof.

Vasse Virgin owner Louis Scherini has an unwavering belief in the boundless efficacy of olive oil. Years ago, he says, it helped cure his kids of eczema, and ongoing research into the beneficial properties of this "good oil" has created the business of today. Scherini confides that he and wife Edwina are both blessed with "the nose". Each year they travel to France to sniff out the latest trends among the perfumeries of Grasse, knowledge and skills they are eager to impart at their small, thriving Margaret River outlet in Western Australia.

The hallmark of this region is wine tourism, so the chance to dabble in the art of perfumery offers an intriguing olfactory alternative to "nosing" the particular merits of a chardonnay or cabernet sauvignon. Why not be equally seduced by the fragrance of delicate scents? In Edwina's one-hour workshops visitors may choose to make a lip balm using organic honey, beeswax and pure essential oil or learn how to blend a room aroma spray. Later this year she'll introduce a two-hour perfumery workshop in which participants will create a personal scent.

An abundance of take-home treats can supplement the region's principal tourism diet of wines and fine dining. At The Margaret River Chocolate Company, which boasts "the best brownies in the country", I peruse a Willy Wonka assortment of rich cakes, fondues and truffles, chocolate-smothered honeycomb and ginger. Boutique producer Gabriel Chocolate at Yallingup claims to be the first "bean to bar" chocolate maker in Western Australia. The staff dispense tasting morsels generously as they explain the winnowing, refining and conching required to transform a globally sourced range of cacao beans into small batches of dense, prized indulgence.

My foray into Margaret River temptations is conducted from the virtual cockpit of a new-generation Audi TT, in which the usual driver's fascia



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Bunker Bay, Margaret River, above; an Audi TT at Vasse Virgin, far left; the gift shop at Vasse Virgin, left

Swanning about

It's three to four hours by car from Perth to Margaret River, but also consider an easily accessible day's fine wine and food outing in the Swan Valley, 30 minutes north of the West Australian capital.

Sandalford Wines sees 200,000 visitors a year, offers a great winery tour and has a delightful cellar door garden where lunch is served under a canopy of gnarled old growth vines.

The estate is known also for outdoor concerts starring Australian and international artists. Neil Diamond is booked to play in November. More: sandalford.com.

Next door is relative newcomer Mandoon Estate, with a winery established in 2010. It's

since opened a cellar door and fine dining restaurant, a craft brewery with tapas bar and beer garden and there are plans for vineyard accommodation. More: mandoonestate.com.au.

If touring the area drop in at Yonga Boodjah, one of three Aboriginal Galleries in the Swan Valley. You'll likely meet owners Phil Narkle and Denis "Noongali" Kickett, be inspired by their paintings and, if lucky, also hear Phil play the didgeridoo. More: yongaboodjah.com.au.

Snacks for the road are readily available at Mondo Nougat and the local branch of Morish Nuts.

Yahava Koffeeworks is a popular "refueling" station with its daily menu of special brews and plethora of coffee-related products. More: yahava.com.au.

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is replaced by a wide-screen digital display integrating GPS map, speedo and rev counter. Using one finger like a pen I spell my next destination on a touch-sensitive pad and the route pops up on screen. It's an example of how this car's smart-tech is accessed via fingertip control and it defi-

nately adds a new dimension to touring. The last time I had such fun behind the wheel I was playing an arcade game.

I dial in Vasse Felix. It's the region's oldest wine estate, founded in the late 1960s and now owned by the Holmes a Court family. Several large sculptures grace the manicured gardens and rows of grape vines surround a glamorous cellar door outlet that includes a gallery of paintings from Janet Holmes a Court's private collection. Chef Aaron Carr has run the estate's restaurant for the past 20 years. Staying put, he says, has allowed him "the chance to surf morning and afternoon and then cook in between". With an early autumn sun warming the vines and a glass of the estate's new premium chardonnay to accompany a plate of Aaron's charcuterie, I'm easily seduced by his vision splendid.

The Margaret River region extends the length of the state's southwest coast, bookmarked north and south by the Cape Naturaliste and Cape Leeuwin lighthouses. In the 300km between Busselton and Albany lies an abundance of raw nature to delight the soul, be it wild coastline and untamed sands, nature reserve or national park, mysterious caves or the enchantment felt in magnificent karri forests. To this you can add world-class surfing, hiking and cycling trails, golf, water sports and seasonal whale-watching. "There's simply no other region like it," says Carr, with confidence. "Where else in Australia do you find this complete package?"

Vasse Felix's neighbour, Cullen Wines, is a seventh of the size production-wise but is a unique pocket of high-intensity, strictly biodynamic activity. As such, it's the perfect rebuttal to anyone jaded enough to posit that one winery visit is much like any other. Jaimie Orkon, who helps owner-winemaker Vanya Cullen optimise biodynamic procedures, gives me a quick 101 on the practice, which includes moon-phase planting and burying cow dung in cow horns to create a fabulous fertiliser (or at least I think that's how it works).

The results speak loud. Cullen's two flagship labels, Kevin John Chardonnay and Diana Madeline Cabernet Sauvignon, named after Vanya's parents, are among Australia's most celebrated wines. Impressive statistics lend this region its cachet. Although the Margaret River counts for just four per cent of Australian production, it produces 26-27 per cent of the country's top-rated wines and contributes five per cent of the international premium wine market.

But it's not only about grapes; craft brewing bubbles away merrily alongside the vines. There are now 10 small producers. The oldest, Bootleg Brewery in Wilyabrup, originally styled itself as "an oasis of beer in a desert of wine". Patently that's no longer the case. The newest is interstate upstart Young Henry's from Sydney's Newtown, now brewing small batches on a farm at Mettricum. At the family-run Eagle Bay Brewing I taste a flight of six beers and admire the restaurant's expansive view of Bunker Bay. My preferred beer is the crisp, amber Vienna lager.

There's not enough time to visit all the local brewers but the name of one, Cheeky Monkey, sums up the effervescent attitude I sense everywhere I go in this delightful corner of the country.

Rob Woodburn was a guest of Qantas, Audi and Accor.

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Checklist

Accor's Pullman Bunker Bay Resort & Spa, close by Cape Naturaliste lighthouse, has bungalow-style villas tucked amid dense bush only a few steps from a lovely beach. Notably, the restaurant menu includes a generous selection of gluten-free dishes. More: pullmanbunkerbayresort.com.au. Qantas flies newly refurbished A330 aircraft to Perth offering a Marc Newson-designed business class with fully flat beds. More: qantas.com.au.

- auditt.com.au
- vassevirgin.com.au
- chocolatefactory.com.au
- gabrielchocolate.com.au
- vassefelix.com.au
- cullenwines.com.au
- bootlegbrewery.com.au
- eaglebaybrewing.com.au