

Wine

AUSTRALIA



When only the west will do

Scenery, food and wine combine in an ultimate sensory experience, writes **Daniel Scott**.

Bounded on three sides by the ocean, visiting the Margaret River region can seem like navigating your way through a sea of wineries.

Rising and dipping along a ridge that reaches for 136 kilometres between two Capes, Leeuwin to the south and Naturaliste in the north, this region has more than 200 vineyards producing some of Australia's finest wine.

With its maritime influences, gravely and loamy soil base, some of the planet's freshest, cleanest air breezing across it all the way from Antarctica and Bordeaux-like climate, Margaret River is a region that might have been created in the image of Bacchus, the Roman god of wine.

It produces 80 per cent of Australia's premium wine from three per cent of the nation's vines. Faced by so much libations choice, it can be hard work deciding which, among the many fine wineries, to visit.

So, on this trip, I've decided upon a "less is more" tactic, taking in two of the region's pioneering wineries, Vasse Felix and Leeuwin Estate, and giving them both the time they merit.

I've been helped in this approach by a Tourism Australia backed campaign calling itself Ultimate Winery Experiences.

It's an alliance of top wineries from across the country that, according to its mission statement, promises "quality winery experiences based around world class wines, warm and knowledgeable hospitality and culinary excellence".

THESEAN KOTZ



Best of the west: (Clockwise from main) a vineyard at the Leeuwin Estate in Margaret River, Western Australia; Vasse Felix barrel room;

I begin, on a sun-ravished autumn morning at Vasse Felix, Margaret River's founding estate, developed by Dr John Cullity, a Perth cardiologist, whose dedication to producing the perfect cabernet sauvignon suggests that he knew that wine is good for the heart, as well as the soul.

After sourcing the region's most promising land, Cullity set about creating his first vintage, which arrived with little pomp, in 1972.

The cellar where he made that wine is the first stop, following a welcoming glass of fizz, on the behind-the-scenes Epicurean Tour



of Vasse Felix. I'm not that fascinated by the wine-making process, glazing over when being shown barrels and other equipment, but I do like the fervour of the people behind it. At Vasse Felix, that passion comes in the form of chief winemaker Virginia Wilcock.

"We hand pick very early in the morning to maintain the freshness and vibrancy of the fruit," Wilcock says. "This is a very large winery with a boutique ethos," she adds, "the complete process, including bottling, is within our control."

Vasse Felix was purchased in 1987 by the wealthy Holmes a



Court family, and Perth-born matriarch, Janet, now in her 70s, has personal input into the winery by curating the art at the on-site gallery, with exhibitions changing three times a year.

A tasting and explanation of the Vasse Felix wine collection follows the tour and then it's time to sit out on the restaurant verandah for a lunch provided by 2015 WA chef-of-the-year, Aaron Carr.

Carr has been at Vasse Felix for 20 years, evolving his Japanese fusion style of cooking, and he beams when he describes Margaret River's abundance of gourmet produce.

What he does with it makes me smile, especially the entree of local marron presented with shitake mushrooms and shaved radish. By the end of this lunch, I'm convinced this is the best way to experience Margaret River's wineries, rather than haring around in a mini-bus necking every wine in reach.

My second Ultimate Winery Experience, at Leeuwin Estate, the following day, confirms this opinion. It begins with a glass of brut in the impressive downstairs gallery, which displays art from remote Indigenous communities in Cape York and includes works by Sidney Nolan and by John Olsen, whose paintings adorn the winery's "Art Series" labels.

Then we're into the serious business of tasting, here described as a "flight" of 5 wines, matched with entrees. The pairings include Coral Bay oysters set against a lemony riesling and Esperance scallops with sauvignon blanc.

Lunch, overlooking the region's largest karri forest on private land, follows. Conjured by executive chef Danny Angrove, it includes a sublime grilled red emperor fish accompanied by a powerful but elegant Art Series chardonnay and venison along with a cabernet sauvignon.

Leaving Leeuwin for the drive back to Perth, having avoided bacchanalian excess, these two winery tours have made me a decidedly happy sampler. **T**

TRIP NOTES

GETTING THERE

Qantas and Virgin fly regularly to Perth from Melbourne and Sydney, from where Margaret River is a three-hour drive. See qantas.com, virginaustralia.com

MORE INFORMATION
westernaustralia.com
australiassouthwest.com

EATING AND STAYING THERE

Vasse Felix's Epicurean Tour costs \$240. Leeuwin Estates Degustation tour costs \$249. See ultimatewineryexperiences.com.au

Cape Lodge is the region's premium accommodation, set amid its own vineyard. It has two-night

Luxury Retreat packages from \$525, including six-course tasting menu. See capelodge.com.au

Daniel Scott was a guest of Tourism WA, Vasse Felix and Leeuwin Estate.