

## THE LOCALS

Forget chicken schnitties and meat raffles – these reinvigorated country pubs are putting a laid-back spin on destination dining.

If there's one dish that sums up The Scenic Hotel (thescenic.hotel.com.au) in Norton Summit, South Australia, it's the steak tartare. Bright-red flank steak is salted and minced with pickles, shallots and capers then dressed with an emulsion of confit garlic, mustard and anchovy, its preparation an exercise in classicism. But the presentation – on a mound of crinkle-cut chips in a torn foil Smith's packet – is altogether less conventional.

For venue manager James Roden, it's typical of the menu he calls “more fun than a wine bar but more serious than a pub”. And with an all-organic wine list focused on small local producers that East Coast bars are falling over themselves to get their hands on, it's fitting that Roden refers to his workplace as a “wine pub”.

Just 25 minutes from the centre of Adelaide (or a little longer for the cyclists who tackle the steep, winding road), The Scenic sits at the centre of a small community hemmed in by dense greenery. In the three years since the current ownership team took the reins, it's become a destination for city diners drawn by the elevated food offering and warm country hospitality. There's a strong focus on sustainability at the hotel, from the use of old milking cows for the steak tartare to biodegradable cling wrap made from potatoes. Most of the greens come from an organic, biodynamic farm deep in the Adelaide Hills but the food miles will drop further when the property across the road is transformed into a terraced garden.

The Waterloo in Swansea, Tasmania



Anna Critchley



For Alex Sumner-Green, co-owner of The Waterloo (waterloo swansea.com), in Swansea on Tasmania’s Freycinet Coast, updating a regional pub wasn’t entirely altruistic. “We just wanted to open the kind of restaurant we would eat at,” says the Melbourne transplant. “That means food that’s simple, fresh and most importantly, fun.”

Sumner-Green and her husband, chef Zac, regularly add pub-grub classics to a blackboard menu that’s so fluid it can get updated mid-service but “sometimes the pendulum has to swing back to fun things that we feel like doing”. In practice, that might mean a choice between Russian lobster salad, nettle and ricotta tortellini and roast lamb with dauphinoise potatoes, while the drinks list marries natural wines with local pinot and a Boags Draught tap.

Since taking over in December 2021, the enterprising couple has worked to build relationships with local producers. They’ve done such a good job that a handful of regular customers now bring in vegetables from their home gardens. This communal approach to sourcing produce ties in nicely with The Waterloo’s shared dining philosophy, which Sumner-Green admits took some locals a little getting used to. “A few of our customers were a bit confused by the concept of share plates at the start but one of the most heartwarming things has been seeing them return and explain to their friends how it works.”

She puts that down to creating an environment where everybody feels welcome. “At the end of the day, there’s nothing better than sitting in a 1980s brick interior listening to bogan rock while having a natural wine and a delicious snack – and still being in bed by 10pm.”



Try these...

Watervale, SA  
Watervale Hotel

Not many pub chefs can claim a garden salad as their signature dish but this is no ordinary pub (watervalehotel.com.au). The Penobscot Farm Salad is billed as “a daily expression of our farm” and the symphony of green arrives fresh from the owners’ organic, biodynamic property each morning. Add a farm tour to the dégustation and you can pick your own ingredients, such as beetroot, blood orange and broad beans. Then watch chef Nicola Palmer transform them into a dazzling feast, accompanied by a wine list that represents vineyards in the surrounding Clare Valley and that culminates in an

unforgettable dessert of watermelon served five ways.

Jugiong, NSW  
The Sir George

This stately old pub (sirgeorge.com.au) in the Hilltops region has been serving thirsty patrons travelling between Melbourne and Sydney since the 1850s but a recent upgrade means that guests can now choose to sit at the classic front bar or in the sumptuous Whisky Lounge. An on-site bakery does a mean line in slow-fermented sourdough, while the kitchen serves up dishes highlighting Riverina produce, including Goulburn River trout with preserved lemon and herbs.

Ballarat, Vic  
Craig’s Royal Hotel

There’s plenty of history at this gold-rush-era jewel (craigroyal.com.au) in central Ballarat – Mark Twain and Prince Albert both stayed here and Dame Nellie Melba once sang from the balcony. The plush carpets and lofty ceilings are right on theme, as is the classics-leaning menu at The Atrium restaurant. Marble-topped tables and a glass roof set the scene for elegant but unfussy dishes, such as vodka and beetroot cured salmon with avocado and caper salad.

Mapleton, Qld  
Mapleton Public House

In one of the Sunshine Coast Hinterland’s “three Ms” (along with Maleny and Montville), the owners of The Falls Farm have shaped this pastel-pink watering hole (mapleton.pub) in their own image since taking over

in mid-2022. Their regenerative farm provides ingredients for dishes such as roasted baby beets in a puddle of molasses yoghurt and black sesame mousse. The airy deck gazing out towards the coast below is the ideal spot to sample a local craft beer.

Daylesford, Vic  
The Farmers Arms

Country charm and urban sophistication combine at this ivy-covered red-brick hotel (farmersarmsdaylesford.com.au) in Daylesford. The à la carte menu features small plates, such as watermelon carpaccio with fried capers and dill, alongside heftier mains, but the real treat is the private six-course long lunch in the Farmer’s Kitchen that features a who’s who of local producers. Visit in the cooler months to celebrate truffle season in style.

Albany, WA  
Liberté

Blurring the lines between pub and restaurant, this acclaimed spot in the historic London Hotel (libertealbany.com.au) put Albany on the gourmet map. There’s a distinct Parisian flair to the dining room, which is decorated with gilt mirrors and chandeliers. The opulence runs through a menu that makes room for owner and chef Amy Hamilton’s classical French training in combination with plenty of Vietnamese flourishes. Try rich onion dip spiked with pho stock and dangerously addictive profiteroles stuffed with Vietnamese coffee ice-cream and a topping of chocolate ganache.

Avoca, Vic  
The Avoca Hotel

Locals and visitors alike flock to this beloved establishment (theavocahotel.com.au) in the Victorian Pyrenees for the sharp two-hander offering. The bar menu features the usual pub-grub suspects with snacks from the more sophisticated dining room, which pairs local produce and international flavours in dishes such as venison tataki with ponzu dressing and braised miso eggplant. Add in a wine list that comes from the Pyrenees, Grampians and Ballarat regions and you’re onto a winner.

Swansea, Tas  
The Waterloo

Don’t let the brick walls, timber panelling and burgundy carpet fool you; this charming former motel (waterlooswansea.com) is like a little patch of Melbourne on Tasmania’s sleepy east coast. Chef Zac Green takes good food seriously but isn’t afraid to play around (potato cakes and caviar, anyone?) and the share plates are interesting and approachable, as is the selection of natty wine.

Norton Summit, SA  
The Scenic Hotel

With a wraparound balcony that looks out to the sparkling Gulf St Vincent, this Adelaide Hills spot (thescenichotel.com.au) lives up to its name, especially in the golden hour before sunset. Free-flowing natural wine and dishes like the signature steak tartare ensure the good times continue long after dark, while regular events bring in farmers, winemakers and musicians from across the region. ●



(Clockwise from opposite) Mapleton Public House; The Farmers Arms; honey toasted pumpkin, farm salad, feta and pumpkin seeds at the Watervale Hotel (below).



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