

The new drop



on the block

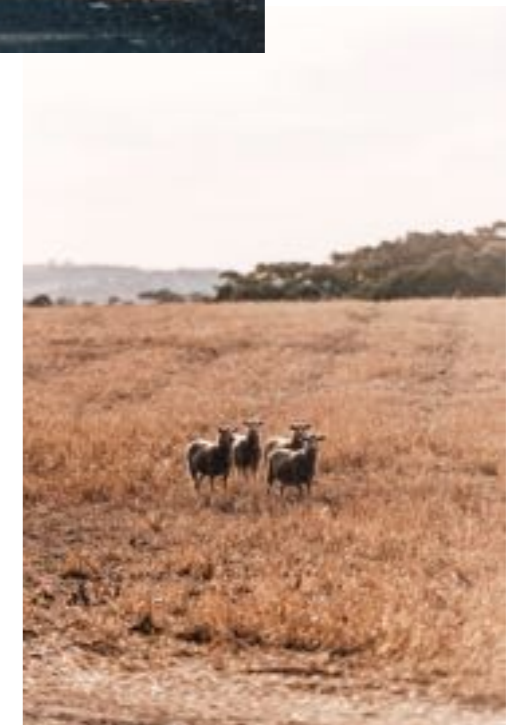


SEYMOUR

Victoria



Seymour and its surrounds are challenging the headline acts of Victoria's wine regions. **Alexis Buxton-Collins** follows the broad Goulburn River to this emerging destination and finds a place many never want to leave. Photography by Lauren Bamford.





“We pride ourselves on being like Grandma’s kitchen and Grandpa’s shed,” Ken Wallis tells me...

But my grandfather’s shed never had a 19th-century chemist’s kit or a jar of banded porcupine quills on the counter. A quick wander around his store of vintage curios, Seasonal Concepts, reveals a beautiful cicada-shaped vase, handmade dog collars, bouquets of fresh flowers and old hanging maps, among many other unique finds.

It’s not quite what I expected in Tallarook (population 736) but Ken is exactly where he belongs. After 25 years working in HR he needed to get out of Sydney. He was looking for a place that was peaceful but not remote, where creative types were welcome and people still got their hands dirty. He found that place in Victoria’s Tallarook. The surrounding countryside is home to storied horse studs and stately red gums that form a green ribbon along the meandering Goulburn River. Opposite his shop, a historic railway station sits in the shadow of steep golden hills near the southern end of the Great Dividing Range. It feels far from the city but you can travel to Melbourne using a Myki card.

Lately, savvy travellers have started to journey the other way, heading to Tallarook and the next stop on the line, Seymour, to find lifelong farmers, professionals and those who have come for a tree change, along with a group of passionate winemakers who are busily turning this area into the focal point of the Central Victoria wine region. The crowds have yet to arrive, which means visitors can still sample the local drops while chatting to the very person who made them. The region is easily explored over a weekend and here’s how to see – and taste – the best of it.



Day one

When The Brewer’s Table (thebrewerstable.com.au) first opened, Carmen Fifield had trouble finding a reliable source of eggs in Seymour. “Our local supplier had to buy more chickens,” she laughs. Now Rutherford Bros is a thriving business that provides her with 100 dozen each week and I tuck into two for breakfast with mushrooms and sausages from the nearby town of Avenel. Across the road from the train station, the café and restaurant bookends commuters’ workdays with coffee, craft beer and a wine list with a strong emphasis on small local operators.



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One of them is five minutes away, past steep hills that hide almost five hectares of vines wreathed in lush green leaves. Under the wide verandah of an old homestead, Nina Stocker swirls viognier around her glass and explains that the soils here are particularly suited to Rhône varietals. The ironstone gives her Brave Goose shiraz notes of spice, cinnamon and lavender (bravegoosevineyard.com.au) but she laughs that she can’t get too carried away with lofty descriptions. “No-one here spends too much time worrying about the depth and structure of the tannins,” she says before her husband, John, interjects: “Nah, they’re all farmers.”

I take the long way back, driving beside the Great Victorian Rail Trail (greatvictorianrailtrail.com.au), where cyclists pass cream-coloured cows growing fat on the lush former flood plain of the Goulburn. In Tallarook, Ken Wallis explains the appeal of the region with a grin that’s just visible beneath his fabulously bushy moustache. “The Daylesford experience of country is that the gumboots are all lined up at the back door and they’ve never been used,” he says. “Here, they’re kicked off at the back door and covered in mud. It’s real country.”

That means a strong sense of community and everywhere I go, I find business owners supporting other local initiatives. Sam Plunkett and Bron Dunwoodie have turned a mid-century Seymour dyeworks into a winery and cellar door and use the space to host community markets, jazz bands and art

(From far left) Seasonal Concepts and its proprietor, Ken Wallis; Brave Goose’s Nina Stocker; paddocks under vine



Sam Plunkett and Bron Dunwoodie of Wine x Sam, where visitors can tour the barrel room (above right)

exhibitions. Sam's father planted the first vines in the nearby Strathbogie Ranges and Wine x Sam (winebysam.com.au) sources grapes from that vineyard and across Central Victoria to make wines like Stardust & Muscle, a rich purple shiraz with a perfume of smoke and spice.

Central Victoria is a broad region that also includes the Goulburn Valley, Nagambie Lakes, Heathcote and Upper Goulburn appellations and all of them converge on Seymour. But it's not just grapes that grow well here.



Cynthia Lim and Nick Bray are former Melbourne residents who bought a weekend property and now run a blueberry farm and boutique accommodation at Blue Tongue Berries (see page 52). They join me for dinner at The Winery Kitchen (03 5792 2330), where chef Sam Vecchio, who moved here from Far North Queensland, draws a crowd with his fresh, Italian-inspired food. We're just in time to snag the last table.

The family-run restaurant takes low food miles seriously, a task made easier by onsite vegetable growers Somerset Heritage Produce (somerseitheritageproduce.com). Owner Chloe Fox supplies Melbourne restaurants such as MoVida, Supernormal and Cumulus Inc but Vecchio gets first pick.

A few years ago, Cynthia and Nick had an anniversary meal at Fitzroy's hip Cutler & Co and Fox's tomatoes were on the menu. "Everyone was going crazy about them but it's what we get every week," he tells me as I tuck into my slow-cooked lamb shoulder with lemon-roasted kipfler potatoes, braised leeks and charred cauliflower. Now, they no longer go to Melbourne for a special meal; they know there's one just down the road.



Tahbilk is one of the oldest wineries in Victoria; Avenel Meats' Scott Reid (left)



Day two

I begin the next day with a 15-minute drive to Samantha Lewis's Harvest Home (harvesthome.com.au) in Avenel. Another Melbourne exile, she runs a restaurant and boutique accommodation that serves breakfast on weekends. With its stained-glass windows and smoky-blue pressed-tin ceiling, the charming front bar is a delightful place to fuel up on plump Swiss brown mushrooms, creamy fetta, chopped roasted hazelnuts and poached eggs, all jostling for space on a slice of local sourdough.

By the time I make it across the road to Avenel Meats (03 5796 2491), owner Scott Reid

Early starts are the only way he can get work done. "Five am's not too bad," he says with a chuckle. "You can have a coffee, make some sausages: it's like meditation."

has been up for hours. He has such a steady stream of customers that early starts are the only way he can get work done. "Five am's not too bad," he says with a chuckle. "You can have a coffee, make some sausages: it's like meditation." He makes 400 kilograms of specialty snags a week and has shoppers coming from as far as Ringwood, ninety minutes away. Yet in the half-hour I spend getting up to speed on local gossip, there's only one customer Scott doesn't greet by name. "I don't know him yet," he tells me, "but I will soon."

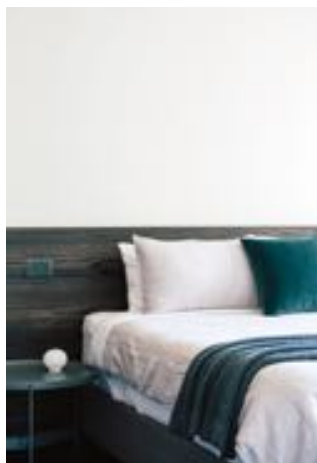
If the butcher is the heart of Avenel, its historic centre is W.B. Gadd (wbgadd.com). The shop opened in 1873, selling everything from ploughs to lingerie, but now it's stocked with antiques and woollen goods. Perhaps the most eye-catching item is a record cover on one wall, showing owner Graydon Johnston in a bright-pink suit singing back-up for Johnny O'Keefe. He admits the Wild One lived up to his reputation and "that night I was singing a lot of lead as well".

Ready to indulge in a little wine myself, I drive half an hour through rolling countryside to an avenue of shady plane trees and a cluster of white weatherboard buildings that hint at the French provinces. Tahbilk (tahbilk.com.au) was



established in 1860 on a sheltered bend in the river, the cellar door is a living, creaking museum of ironbark and river gum. About 650 original vines survive on a sandy knoll and the 1860 Vines shiraz retails for a cool \$350 a bottle. More affordable is the marsanne that thrives in rich alluvial soils with the river's cooling influence. The younger wines I try have bright citrus notes and a hint of honey. They develop a matching colour as they age; unusually for whites, some are made to be cellared for up to 50 years.

Further upstream, the famed Ashton Tower at Mitchelton looks like a steeped aircraft-control tower. From the observation deck I survey rows of vines that glow in the afternoon sun and tall gums trembling in the breeze. Screeching cockatoos alight from the branches and the cascading laugh of a kookaburra rings out as a cool current of air comes off the water. It's the kind of place I imagine a jolly swagman would enjoy setting up camp. With a glass of rich, peppery shiraz in hand, I'd be happy to stay a bit longer, too. After just a couple of days in the region, I'm beginning to understand why so many people have chosen to call it home. ●



(From top) Mitchelton Hotel's observation tower; the hotel offers a range of room options

+ Where to stay

Blue Tongue Berries

On a ridge overlooking Seymour, this eight-hectare blueberry farm and B&B with straw-bale house is entirely off-grid. All four rooms have commanding views over the hills and Goulburn River (as well as the highway) but owners Cynthia Lim and Nick Bray are the property's biggest assets. The couple also manage the monthly Tallarook Farmers Market and Cynthia's radio show champions local ethical food. They offer unrivalled insight into the local produce scene. Even if you're not planning to stay, it's worth checking if they're hosting one of their regular gigs or dinners and the dining room is open every day during blueberry season.

bluetongueberries.com.au

Mitchelton Hotel

A cluster of modernist buildings by Robin Boyd and Ted Ashton introduces visitors to Mitchelton winery but the most recent addition is more restrained. The hotel's minimalist design uses dark, earthy tones and natural materials. Each of the 58 rooms has a balcony that looks over the vineyards or the river and a heated 20-metre infinity pool and day spa offer an excuse to stay in. Sitting on Taungurung country, the hotel pays tribute to that heritage with an Indigenous art gallery in the enormous cellar. hotel.qantas.com.au/mitcheltonhotelnagambie