

## Big nature

The Grampians National Park dominates life and landscape in Victoria's west. It's a massive chunk of the state, covering 186,000 hectares. It's rugged, it's beautiful, it is recognised for its ecological diversity and it has great significance for both the traditional owners and those who came from other lands.

Halls Gap is the hub of the Grampians. Here in the valley between the Wonderland and Mount William Ranges you will find a wide range of accommodation choices, from camping grounds and caravan parks, self-contained cottages and guesthouses to luxury lodges. If you've come looking for adventure, Halls Gap is the place to start your holiday with adventure tour operators clustered along the main street.

The nearby Brambuk National Park and Cultural Centre ([www.brambuk.com.au](http://www.brambuk.com.au)) reveals the heart of the park. Through art, pictures, interactive displays and a myriad of tours and events, the Centre shows the central role that Gariwerd (the traditional name for the Grampians) has played in the life of the local indigenous people. Set aside time for Bunjil's Rock Art Tour and sample local fare at the Centre's Bushtucker Cafe.

The Grampians walking trails are famous. They range from easy strolls to the most challenging. Halls Gap is the starting point for the beautiful Boronia Peak, Chatauquak Peak and Clematis Falls walks.

In the northern Grampians, Hollow Mountain, Mount Stapylton and the Beehive Falls trails are open, while the Piccaninny and Mt Sturgeon trails are walks for those staying in Dunkeld.

There are many other ways to explore the glories of the Grampians - quad biking, rock climbing and horse riding are some, as well as the more gentle pursuits of kayaking and fishing. Just remember to stock up on local goodies for your picnic.

Each season brings a different delight to the Grampians but year round the calendar is brimming with events involving food, wine, art, adventure and nature - things the Grampians has in abundance.

For more information go to [visitgrampians.com.au](http://visitgrampians.com.au)



Brambuk National Park and Cultural Centre



# Glorious Grampians



IN THE FIFTH PART OF A SERIES EXPLORING THE FOOD AND WINE VILLAGES OF VICTORIA, WE DROP IN ON HALLS GAP AND DUNKELD IN THE GRAMPIANS.

The destination of Halls Gap is a great place to start your exploration of the abundance of fine food, fabulous wine and spectacular scenery that the Grampians National Park has to offer. From the time it was discovered by European settlers in 1856, the Grampians has drawn nature lovers, holidaymakers and adventure seekers. More recently, it has become a magnet for those who appreciate great wine and food.

The history of winemaking is long and distinguished in Western Victoria. Sparkling wine was pioneered here but the winemakers have expanded their repertoire considerably and have much to boast about these days. There's cool-climate, pepper-infused shiraz and cabernet sauvignon wines, some possessing outstanding ageing ability. There are whites that can surprise such as a fine, lightly floral riesling or a chardonnay that owes its personality to the minerals found in the soil, not the oak via a French barrel. There are varieties that are today counted as among the oldest on earth and, yes, there are expressive sparklings, including the one and only little Aussie wonder, sparkling shiraz.

The Pyrenees wine region takes its name from a ridge of blue hills outside the town of Avoca. Here you will find 44 vineyards and 30 wineries, most specialising in savoury shiraz and elegant cabernet sauvignon with support from a range of white wines and sparklings. The original vines were planted in the 1870s but the modern age of Pyrenees winemaking can be dated to the early 1960s with the establishment of Blue Pyrenees, eight kilometres from Avoca.

Blue Pyrenees ([www.bluepyrenees.com.au](http://www.bluepyrenees.com.au)) and Taltarni ([www.taltarni.com.au](http://www.taltarni.com.au)) are the biggest of the region's 44 wineries but by industry standards they are small producers. The smallness of scale is one of strengths of the region, according to winemaker John Harris of Mount Avoca ([www.mountavoca.com.au](http://www.mountavoca.com.au)). "The people you meet at the cellar door are likely to have been making the wines," he says.

The cellar doors of the region have a reputation for their friendliness and their food. This is very much the case at Warrenmang Vineyard ([www.warrenmang.com.au](http://www.warrenmang.com.au)), outside the tiny goldrush town of Moonambel, where you can eat

fine food, stay in stylish cottages and play in the resort-like facilities, as well as sample the well-regarded reds and Italian varieties created by the Bazzani family.

At 595 metres, Dalwhinnie ([www.dalwhinnie.com.au](http://www.dalwhinnie.com.au)) is one of the highest vineyards, a cool-climate site noted for wines that speak of the mineral-rich soil. Owner David Jones likes to keep the winemaking unfussed. "At the end of the day the site and the vineyard show through," he says.

Redbank ([www.sallyspaddock.com.au](http://www.sallyspaddock.com.au)) and Summerfield ([www.summerfieldwines.com](http://www.summerfieldwines.com)) are other notables in this formidable winemaking group. The strength and depth of the region is showcased in the bi-monthly Seduction by Tastebuds lunches, when a winery invites a top Australian chef to prepare a slow lunch matched with the host winery's top vintages.

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The Grampians also has a long history in wine. Out-of-work goldminers dug the famous underground cellars that now form part of the impressive Seppelt winery at Great Western ([www.greatwestern.com.au](http://www.greatwestern.com.au)). You can take an hour-long tour down into The Drives, as the cellars are known, from Monday to Saturday at 11am to 2pm. It was in this region that the first sparkling shiraz was made; a distinctly Australian wine said to have been inspired by the tastes of soldiers returned from World War I.

Best's Great Western ([www.bestswines.com](http://www.bestswines.com)) is another historic name with vines going back more than 100 years. Shiraz is the star but many seek out Best's riesling and cabernet sauvignon too.

The reputation of the Grampians in food circles was enhanced when Dan Hunter took over Dunkeld's Royal Mail Hotel three and a half years ago. Since then, this lovely town, overlooked by Mount Sturgeon at the southern end of the Grampians, has become a destination for foodies. But, as they quickly discover, this historic community, while small, has plenty of charm and interest.

# Royal style, royal cuisine

The editors of *The Age Good Food Guide* did not hold back when naming Dunkeld's Royal Mail Hotel ([www.royalmailhotel.com.au](http://www.royalmailhotel.com.au)) as the 2011 Restaurant of the Year. "This is one of Australia's finest destination restaurants. Dan Hunter's kitchen operates with balletic precision, his dishes are deliciously brilliant," they enthused.

Hunter, the man whose skills in the kitchen have turned the nation's food critics into a personal cheer squad, has a somewhat more prosaic take on what he does. "The food we cook is quite simplistic," he says.

Yes, that's right it's simple, as simple as 10 courses can be.

"I'm not interested in doing food that is layers and layers of ingredients. I'm interested in pure ingredients, quality ingredients at the extreme end of quality." And this, he says, is the secret of the Royal Mail's success and the lengthy list of awards and accolades that have foodies willing to wait four months (on weekends) to secure a seat.

One of the great attractions of the tiny town of Dunkeld (pop 450) for Hunter, who could have walked into the kitchen in any big city restaurant, was being able to access the kind of

produce he believes is the beginning and end of all great meals.

Hunter begins every day in the Royal Mail's three kitchen gardens and what he finds determines what goes on the 10-course degustation menu served from Wednesday to Sunday (\$160 or vegetarian option \$130, matching wine \$115). Whenever possible, Hunter sources the other products he uses locally. Milk and yoghurt come from the Grampians Pure Sheep Dairy and Hunter is a big fan of the beef, lamb and pork from Greenvale Meats at Willaura. Owners, Anthony and Amanda Kumnick of Greenvale Meats return the compliment and believe his presence and encouragement bolster local food growers.

Since starting their business three years ago, the Kumnicks have noticed a surge in interest from the general public, as well as visitors to the region, about where produce is coming from. "It's happening in Canada, the US and Europe as people are now making informed choices as to what they eat," Amanda Kumnick says.

The Kumnicks' grass-fed beef and lamb and rare-breed pork that Hunter and other Melbourne chefs use come from the 1200-hectare property on the south-eastern edge of the Grampians, 34 kilometres from Ararat. Visit [www.greenvale-homestead.com.au](http://www.greenvale-homestead.com.au) to make your own purchase or perhaps stay on the exclusive Greenvale property.

Greenvale Meats is one of the newer food growers in the region; some of the oldest can be found in the northern Grampians, where Australia's first olive groves were planted in the 1950s. Mount Zero Olives is an award-winning brand that has been producing premium olives and oils since 1993.

The Mount Zero Produce Shop ([www.mtzeroolives.com](http://www.mtzeroolives.com)) is a showcase of local produce, such as chickpeas, capers and red and green lentils grown on the surrounding plains, as well as the extensive range of olives, verjuice and vinegar. It's open Wednesday to Sunday between 10am and 4pm.

Shelley and Allan Green of Green Eggs are another example of Grampians



Chef Dan Hunter roams his three kitchen gardens for "ingredients at the extreme end of quality."



Garden fresh at Royal Mail Hotel

producers passionate about their product. Each day, they harvest 29,000 free-range eggs at their farm at Great Western. "There's a great range of product in this area but we haven't shouted loudly enough about it," says Amanda Kumnick. Until now.

## DON'T MISS THESE

### Grampians Grape Escape

The 20th anniversary of the region's premier food and wine festival will be held at the Halls Gap oval on Saturday, April 30 and Sunday, May 1. There will be cooking demonstrations by celebrity chef Manu Feidel, a cupcake competition judged by Junior MasterChef finalist Siena Johnston and loads of entertainment.

[www.grampiansgrapeescape.com.au](http://www.grampiansgrapeescape.com.au)

### Pyrenees Festival of Racing and Tasting

Held over Easter, for those who love regional food and wine, a flutter on the fillies and camping under the stars. Various venues.

[www.pyreneestourism.com.au](http://www.pyreneestourism.com.au)

### Bush luxury

Dulc offers four beautiful eco-cabins deep in the bush but only five minutes from the Halls Gap Visitor Information Centre. One-bedroom cabins from \$250 a night.

[www.dulc.com.au](http://www.dulc.com.au)

### A little gem

Anyone for black olive and purple basil gnocchi? The Vines Cafe and Bar at 74 Barkly Street, Ararat, serves a sophisticated blend of fine food, produce and great local wine. **03 5352 1744**



## GETTING THERE

The Grampians is about three hours' drive from Melbourne. Follow the Western Freeway through Ballarat to Ararat and take the Ararat-Pomonal Road towards Halls Gap or continue on the Western Highway to Stawell and Horsham for the Pyrenees wine region. The Great Southern Touring Route along the Great Ocean Road leads to the Grampians.



Award-winners: Mount Zero Olives

NEXT: **CASTLEMAINE, GOLDFIELDS**