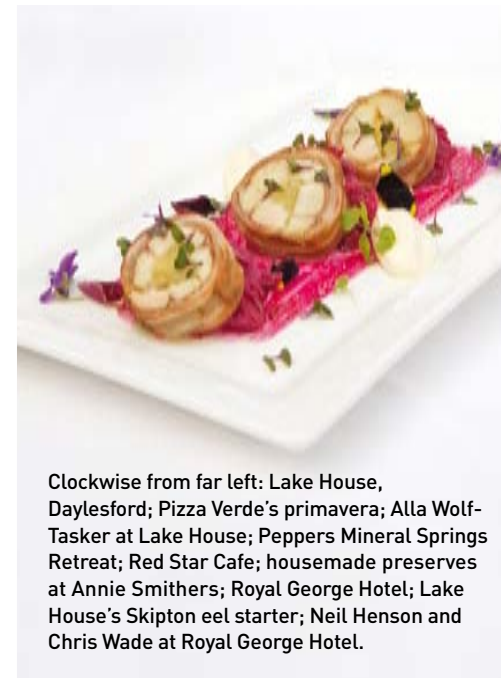
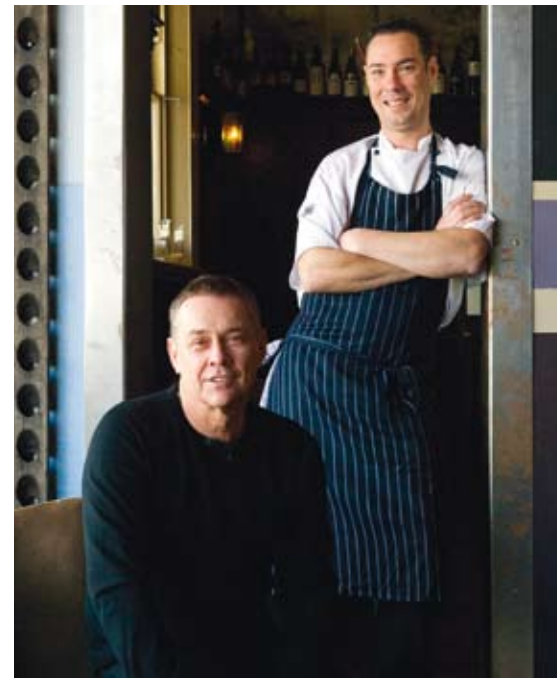


the guide.

# victoria's spa country



Clockwise from far left: Lake House, Daylesford; Pizza Verde's primavera; Alla Wolf-Tasker at Lake House; Peppers Mineral Springs Retreat; Red Star Cafe; housemade preserves at Annie Smithers; Royal George Hotel; Lake House's Skipton eel starter; Neil Henson and Chris Wade at Royal George Hotel.

With its mineral-rich natural springs, boutique wineries and dynamic dining scene, Victoria's spa country – just 90 minutes from Melbourne – is a must-visit region for passionate foodies.

WORDS SARAH MACDONALD PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN DENNIS

For centuries, people have been drawn to the idyllic area around Daylesford and Hepburn Springs. About 90 minutes north-west of Melbourne, Victoria's spa country is home to 80 per cent of Australia's mineral water; and it's these abundant springs that first brought Aborigines to the area. In the 1850s, Swiss-Italian miners came seeking gold and stayed on, giving the region a rich heritage that is still celebrated today.

More recently, it was Melbourne's European immigrants who came to "take the waters". Among them was a young Alla Wolf-Tasker, whose exclusive Lake House hotel and restaurant in Daylesford is regarded as the driving force behind the region's flourishing food scene.

Over the past few years, neighbouring Kyneton has become a popular dining destination in its own right. The charming,

cobblestoned Piper Street is dotted with hatted restaurants, award-winning casual joints, chic cafes and organic grocers, resulting in a foodie strip that punches well above its weight.

Team that with stellar wineries, boutique accommodation options, state-of-the-art spa facilities and myriad artisan producers, and you can begin to understand why the region's magical pull still exists today.

## daylesford dining LAKE HOUSE

Few people have done more to shape the face of regional dining in Australia than Alla Wolf-Tasker. Over the past 20 years, the executive chef and co-owner of the acclaimed Lake House has lead the charge in a not-so-quiet foodie revolution, thanks to her passion for local, seasonal produce, and the establishment of a food-focused community. Many of the region's finest chefs have passed through her kitchen, and today the Lake House experience – which marries world-class dining with chic lodgings – is as finely tuned as ever.

In the restaurant, sink into a cushion-strewn banquette, then dine on smoked eel with beetroot remoulade; or a brik pastry cigar filled with silken game parfait and dipped in smoky tobacco salt. Mains might feature cassoulet with a puck of foie gras, followed by seared duck breast with a lentil, raisin and carrot salad. After dessert, retire to your lodge room or waterfront suite, then ease in to the following day with a sumptuous breakfast, followed by a massage at Salus day spa. From \$520 per double, including breakfast and dinner. **King St, Daylesford, (03) 5348 3329, lakehouse.com.au.**

## FARMERS ARMS HOTEL

Farmers Arms has long been synonymous with fabulous pub fare, and since new owners Susanne Devine and Claire Levine took over in June, the place hasn't skipped a beat. Chef Michael de Jong remains, turning out smart plates of grilled quail with chorizo and grapes; barramundi with a saffron, green olive and preserved lemon skordalia; and desserts of posh doughnuts with Pedro Ximénez custard and espresso syrup. Punters also settle in to the charming front bar for Moroccan lamb broth, or generous veal schnitzels. **1 East St, Daylesford, (03) 5348 2091.**

## the guide.

### PERFECT DROP WINE & FOOD LOUNGE

Slip into this cool candle-lit space and sip top Victorian drops from the comfort of a wingback chair (or chaise, if you prefer). Owner Devon Taylor draws mostly from a one-hour radius that takes in Heathcote, Bendigo and Ballarat to create an exciting regional wine list. Chef Andrew Dennis also keeps the food miles low, with a mezze menu that's inspired by the onsite kitchen garden, and may include fab cauliflower fritters, dolmades or chicken b'stilla with braised silverbeet. Once a month, a foodie swapmeet takes place in the yard, as locals gather to exchange surplus produce. **5 Howe St, Daylesford, (03) 5348 3373.**

### CLIFFY'S EMPORIUM

Pull up a seat at Cliffy's sun-drenched pavement tables, or weave your way past shelves of gourmet goods to the cosy den of a dining room, lined with antique mirrors and vintage lamps with shades made of old recipe clippings. The menus, handwritten on paper bags, might feature eggy bread with honey and rose syrup, or a baguette filled with Holy Goat fromage frais and Istra prosciutto, all made with ingredients that are for sale in the store. **30 Raglan St, Daylesford, (03) 5348 3279.**

### MERCATO

Across the laneway, Mercato, or 'market' in Italian, is all apron-clad waiters and sleek high-backed chairs. Richard Mee set up shop in this charming 1860s cottage five years back, and has been turning out snappy plates of modern fare ever since – think Tuki trout salad with avocado and kipflers; or butter-soft Angus eye fillet from Kyneton with potato rosti and a port jus. **32 Raglan St, Daylesford, (03) 5348 4488.**

### KOUKLA

This quirky fave draws crowds to its beaten leather couches, primary-bright chairs and communal tables for fine woodfired pizzas topped with chorizo, zucchini and ricotta; or pumpkin, feta, spinach and sage. The oven fires up for breakfast, too, pumping out pizzas of bacon and egg, or a banana, mascarpone and maple syrup version. **82 Vincent St, Daylesford, (03) 5348 2363.**

The same team is behind neighbouring restaurant **Frangos & Frangos** (82 Vincent St, Daylesford, (03) 5348 2363), a polished space of bentwood chairs and crisp white linen that's open from Thursday to Sunday. Catch up with friends over brunch, or come later for a Campari and plates of flash-fried school prawns or smoked almonds.

### daylesford shopping

Adorned with cherubs, stained-glass and mirrored walls, **Sweet Decadence at Locantro** (87 Vincent St, Daylesford, (03) 5348 3202) evokes the best kind of European coffee house. Squeeze past tiny tables and dark wood chairs to the curved glass counter beyond, then take your pick of handmade chocolates in flavours such as sticky fig or port-soaked plum.

Part cellar door, part wine bar, **W.I.N.E. is a 4 Letter Word** (6 Howe St, Daylesford, (03) 5348 2333) is the perfect place to taste your way around regional wineries.

On the first Saturday of the month, the region's roaming **Farmers' Markets** set up shop at Daylesford Primary School (Vincent St, (03) 5664 0096, 9am-1pm). Expect a who's who of local producers, including Red Beard Bakery, Meredith Dairy and Wildings Provisions, plus everything from organic fruit and veg to live hens and pheasants. Feeling peckish? Stop by the Maldon Yabby Farm stall for a yabby pie.

If you like a dash of trash-and-treasure with your market amblings, head to the **Railway Markets** (Raglan St, Daylesford, (03) 5348 3503, Sundays, 8am-3pm). Among stands piled high with books and crockery, you'll find free-range eggs, homemade cakes and tubs of honey from Des O'Toole.

### daylesford food trail

The towns around Daylesford are filled with producers, so grab a hamper and head off on your own foodie treasure hunt. Start at **Spa Venison** (3/9 Howe St, Daylesford, (03) 5348 3551) for the osso bucco, shanks and tenderloins so prized by local chefs, plus goose, rabbit and Glenloth chicken.

Next, steer yourself south-east to **Istra Smallgoods** (36 Wheelers Hill Rd, Musk, (03) 5348 3382). Istra's another name that pops up on all the area's best menus – and

rightly so, as the prosciutto, pancetta and salami are divine – at once salty and sweet, with a depth of flavour that's all-too-often missing from mass-produced pork.

From here, continue to **Fernleigh Farms Produce** (1070 Trentham Rd, Bullarto, (03) 5348 5566), where Fiona Chambers breeds rare Wessex Saddleback pigs. You can buy fine ham, bacon and organic pork at the farmgate, as well as organic veg in season.

With greens and smallgoods loaded into your car, hightail it to **Red Beard Historic Bakery** (38a High St, Trentham, (03) 5424 1002) for top-notch organic sourdough, and focaccia with rosemary and onion.

Now the only thing missing from your progressive picnic is a bottle of wine, so set a course for the pretty town of Glenlyon, and **Ellender Estate** (260 Green Gully Rd, (03) 5348 7785). Here, Graham Ellender crafts silky pinot noir, elegant sparkling, and a Chablis-style chardonnay with only a whisper of oak. On weekends, Graham and Jenny spark up the woodfired oven, sharing fresh-baked bread, home-cured olives and mushroom and Taleggio pizza.

Post-lunch, head to **Chocolate Mill** (5451 Midland Hwy, Mt Franklin, (03) 5476 4208), where Jen Gregory, Chris Weippert and their team handcraft up to 12,000 chocolates a week using fine Belgian couverture.

Last stop should be **Tuki** (60 Stoney Rises Rd, Smeaton, (03) 5345 6233). Try your hand at catching a trout, then have it cooked onsite. Or, take the easy route and buy it fresh, smoked or in paté form.

### staying in daylesford

**Lake House** is the area's leading hotel (see Daylesford Dining), but if you're after self-contained options, **Daylesford Getaways** (tel: (03) 5348 4422, dayget.com.au) offers more than 150 great lodgings ranging from romantic cottages to luxe villas, including the centrally located Courthouse Villas.

On **lovebirds.com.au**, top picks include **The White House** (58 Albert St Daylesford, from \$280 per double), a restored two-bed miner's cottage decked out with gorgeous vintage collectables, library and separate studio. Or try the stylish **Harts Lane House** (2 Harts Ln, Daylesford, from \$330), with two bedrooms and gourmet kitchen.



Clockwise from above left: Slow Living; Sweet Decadence at Locantro; gingerbread and vanilla cream cheese tian at Royal George; Lake Daylesford; Fernleigh Farms' rare-breed pigs; Shizuka Ryokan.



## the guide.

### hepburn springs

Housed in the **Peppers Springs Retreat & Spa** (124 Main Rd, Hepburn Springs, (03) 5348 2202, visit: [thesprings.com.au](http://thesprings.com.au)), **Deco Restaurant** is all candle-lit tables, gossamer curtains and grand 1930s-era fittings. Chef Clinton Camilleri adds a touch of theatre to the plate, too. Try pepper-crusting venison carpaccio with beetroot relish, or perfectly cooked snapper with caponata, calamari and a baccala fritter. For dessert, the honey pannacotta with date ice cream and custard-filled filo cigar is as decadent as it sounds. After dinner, bed down at **Peppers** in your choice of smart rooms in the main hotel, the four-bedroom Villa Parma, or plush two-bedroom spa villas, which are split over two levels and feature full kitchens, king-sized beds, fireplaces and grand spa baths. Plus, the day spa is one of Australia's finest. From \$260 per double per night.

Across the road, **Red Star Café** (115 Main Rd, Hepburn Springs, (03) 5348 2297) is a local fave for breakfasts of bacon and eggs and Bloody Marys. The cool retro space is filled with red bistro chairs, pot-bellied stoves and shelves brimming with books, toys and antique instruments. Behind the bar, owner Ed Banks has lined up more than 120 single-malt whiskeys – a perfect foil for those crisp spring evenings.

At **Hepburn General Store** (102 Main Rd, Hepburn Springs, (03) 5348 2764), find jars of humbugs and choc-coated berries, Janey Bee's moreish cookies and Country Cuisines chutneys, plus cheeses and fresh provisions for a picnic or homemade meal.

Surrounded by the lavender fields and stone buildings of Lavandula, **La Trattoria** (350 Hepburn-Newstead Rd, Shepherds Flat, (03) 5476 4393) echoes the region's Swiss-Italian heritage. Dine alfresco on lavender scones or an antipasto platter.

Since 1895, people have been taking to the waters at **Hepburn Bathhouse & Spa** (Mineral Springs Reserve Rd, Hepburn Springs, (03) 5321 6000). Now, the newly refurbished site is an indulgent blend of hot-spring pools, mineral baths and world-class spa treatments. Once suitably soaked and scrubbed, float in to **The Pavilion Café** (tel: (03) 5348 1900) for housemade pastries, Devonshire tea or pan-fried gnocchi.

Secluded and serene, **Shizuka Ryokan** (7 Lakeside Dr, Hepburn Springs, (03) 5348 2030, [shizuka.com.au](http://shizuka.com.au)) is an authentic Japanese retreat complete with tatami rooms and kaiseki (multi-course meals). From \$239 per double, including breakfast.

### where to eat & shop in kyneton

#### ANNIE SMITHERS' BISTROT

When Annie Smithers and Leanne Coates opened this Gallic gem in 2005, they kickstarted Kyneton's foodie renaissance. Today, Piper Street's finest continues to impress, thanks to Annie's bistro classics and Leanne's cracking wine list, which pits notable locals against French equivalents. Come at lunch for the duck-neck sausage with a jumble of orange and bitter leaves. Or settle in for steak tartare; snapper with a Pernod, mussel and saffron sauce; and buttery apple pancakes. To drink, try the Syrahmi Don from young-gun winemaker and Lake House sommelier Adam Foster. **72 Piper St, Kyneton, (03) 5422 2039.**

#### ROYAL GEORGE HOTEL

Frank Moylan and Melissa Macfarlane may have moved on (all eyes are on the milk bar they've leased down the road), but Royal George is still on top of its game, thanks to new owners Neil Henson and Jim Lekakis, and chef Chris Wade's modern menu. A clever take on salad niçoise teams seared yellowfin with curls of mojama (air-dried tuna), quail eggs, confit potato and broad beans for a starter that's as pretty as can be. For mains, try braised venison shank with spring vegetables and a petite venison pie, then finish with a rhubarb millefeuille. The hotel's pocket-sized bar offers top local drops by the glass, such as Pandalowie tempranillo and Williams Crossing pinot noir. **24 Piper St, Kyneton, (03) 5422 1390.**

#### PIZZA VERDE

When Damian and Bryanna Sandercoc opened Pizza Verde three years back, their aim was to create the kind of place their young family would like: great pizzas in a casual setting, complete with formica tables and 50s-style vinyl chairs. It's proved to be a winning formula, crowned *The Age Cheap*

*Eats Guide's* regional champs, and wooing renowned local chef Matt Fegan (ex-Royal George) to the pans. Come for the pizza primavera with broad beans, asparagus, ricotta and mint, or the gutsier prosciutto, gorgonzola and leek version. **62 Piper St, Kyneton, (03) 5422 7400.**

#### STAR ANISE BISTRO

This 24-seater is a favourite for chef Emma Chapple's smart menu, which might boast spiced duck with pickled cherries, or seared scallops on a fennel and mint salad. The fun, colour-coded desserts are the real stars. Try the Mr Orange – spiced orange salad, Campari jelly, orange granita and more. **29A Piper St, Kyneton, (03) 5422 2777.**

#### SLOW LIVING

With its comfy couches, solid wood tables, enamel water jugs and antique stove, this organic food store and cafe has the warmth and appeal of a friend's living room. From the blackboard menu, choose housemade pork and chicken terrine, or Fernleigh Farm bacon with scrambled eggs, then stock up on sourdough, dry goods, fruit and veg. **37C Piper St, Kyneton, (03) 5422 3818.**

#### LITTLE SWALLOW CAFE

It's no wonder folks are flocking to this petite newcomer. Expect cut-above cafe fare from Steven and Sarah Rogers, who are both trained chefs – think Turkish-spiced lamb with flatbread, or white chocolate, macadamia and raspberry cake. **58A Piper St, Kyneton, (03) 5422 6241.**

No trip to Kyneton is complete without a visit to **Life's Sweet** (59 Piper St, Kyneton, (03) 5422 6226). Karen Brooks handcrafts marvellously moist, rich cupcakes, adorned with buttercream flowers in flavours such as choc-cherry or rosewater and quince.

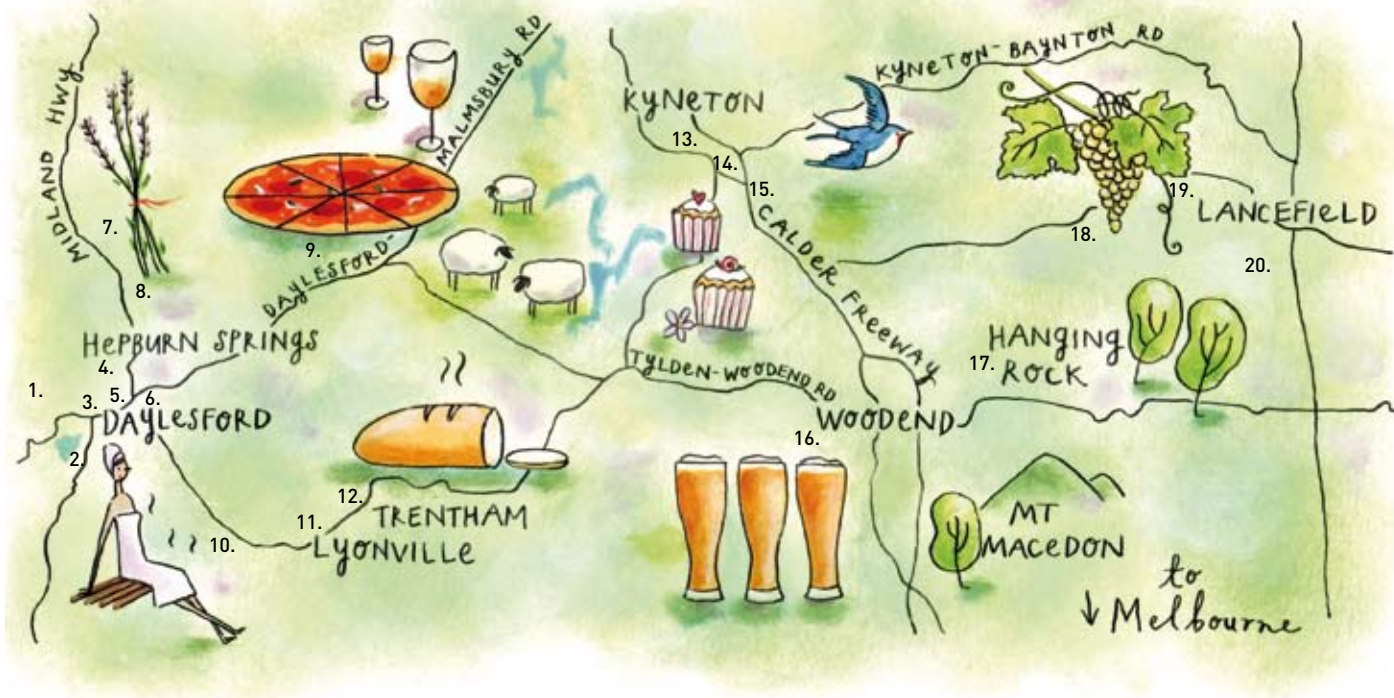
**Ladle Foodstore** (30 Piper St, Kyneton (03) 5422 2430) boasts communal tables and a lounge area by the fire, as well as lamb and mint pies, French and local Meredith and Calendar cheeses, Red Beard breads, and Bean Ground & Drunk coffee.

If you're in town on the second Saturday of the month, take a spin around **Kyneton Farmers' Market** (St Paul's Park, Piper St, Kyneton, (03) 5422 1863, 8am-1pm).



Clockwise from above left: Annie Smithers' Bistrot; award-winning local fave Pizza Verde; smart French fare at Annie Smithers' Bistrot; Villa Parma at Peppers Springs Retreat & Spa; Karen Brooks from Life's Sweet.

## the guide.



## staying in kyneton

**St Agnes Homestead** (30 Burton Ave, Kyneton, [saintagnes.com.au](http://saintagnes.com.au), (03) 5422 2639) is not your typical B&B. Instead, Traudi and David Bibby offer three smart lodgings at their sprawling 1870s manor house – with nary a hint of chintz in sight. Choose from the handsome, neutral-toned Grooms’ Retreat with open fireplace and clawfoot bath; the French Provincial-style Gallery Rooms with two beds and sunroom; or self-contained Flynn Apartment. From \$170 per night, including breakfast.

**Mollisons** (116 Mollisons St, Kyneton, 0419 001 518, [mollisons.net.au](http://mollisons.net.au)) is a sleek two-bed apartment, with white-on-white furnishings, full kitchen and a balcony, in the historic Bank of NSW building. Plans are underway to create a 10-room boutique hotel with a restaurant and day spa. From \$220 per double, with breakfast provisions.

## macedon wine trail

Australia’s coolest-climate wine region, the Macedon Ranges is home to world-class pinot noir, chardonnay and the classic confluence of the two: fine sparkling wines, as well as a handful of emerging varietals. Heading east from Kyneton, make your first stop **Cobaw Ridge** (31 Perc Boyers Ln, East Pastoria, (03) 5423 5227), where

Alan Cooper has excelled with lagrein, a little-known grape from Northern Italy. With sour cherry and chocolate notes, this food-friendly red works a treat with rich, gamey meats such as pork and venison.

Next, visit the unassuming cellar door at **Granite Hills** (1481 Burke and Wills Track, Baynton, (03) 5423 7273) to experience Llew Knight’s ethereal riesling (arguably one of Australia’s best) and the lusciously refined late-picked version. If you’re lucky, nab a bottle of the sensational vintage sparkling.

At acclaimed **Curly Flat** (263 Collivers Rd, Lancefield, (03) 5429 1956), Phillip Moraghan crafts pinot noir of exceptional depth and elegance (US wine writer Jancis Robinson named it the nation’s finest), as well as classy chardonnay and the very approachable Williams Crossing label.

Where Curly Flat focuses on just a few great drops, **Hanging Rock Winery** (88 Jim Rd, Newham, (03) 5427 0542) offers a more dizzying range. Zero in on John Ellis’ much lauded Macedon Sparkling and his stellar Heathcote Shiraz.

Finish up with a counter lunch and a cleansing ale at **Holgate Brewhouse** (79 High St, Woodend, (03) 5427 2510). Try the intensely hoppy ESB (Extra Special Bitter).

*Thanks to Tourism Victoria for assistance.*

*For more info, visit: [visitvictoria.com](http://visitvictoria.com). d.*

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