

westlife

Margaret River is synonymous with surf and wine, but the area's dining scene deserves just as much attention. Ahead of the Gourmet Escape festival, *Max Veenhuizen* pens a primer on Western Australia's most exciting regional food destination.

PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN LAURIE



PASTURES NEW

Wyadup Beach.
Opposite: Aaron Carr,
executive chef of
Vasse Felix, WA's top
regional restaurant.





For a long time the only folk who bothered making the trek to Margaret River were surfers and hippies. The bohos weren't the first to drop in – in 1659, the Dutch flutist *Elburgh* encountered the area's Nyungar people near Cape Leeuwin – but before the appearance of Busselton airport and the freeways connecting Perth with the south-west, time and a certain level of commitment were required of visitors. Tales accumulated of the hardships suffered by Britons lured to the region by the state's 1920s settlement scheme, of blue-sky thinkers doggedly turning a former army rifle range into a holiday resort, of Perth medicos driving 10 hours each weekend to tend vineyards.

Dirt tracks became paved roads, which became freeways, and these became opportunities for well-organised bon vivants to leave CBD offices early on Friday afternoon and drive south in time for dinner. Since the Perth to Lake Clifton Forrest Highway opened in 2009, the commute between city and coast has been whittled to three hours each way. During this temporary migration, Margaret River (which refers to both the town of 6500 and the region between Cape Leeuwin and Cape Naturaliste) swells with city folk eager to swap boardrooms for board shorts.



Weekends are busy year-round but it's in summer that Margaret River fulfils its multiple roles as family holiday destination, retreat for coastal and cellar-door therapy, surfing nirvana and rite of passage for schoolies. The post-exam escape usually begins in November, which last year coincided with a new rite of passage: the Margaret River Gourmet Escape.

For those who didn't make it to the party last year, here's a quick recap. A line-up of international chefs, including Noma's René Redzepi, Momofuku front-man David Chang and Brazilian rock star-turned-cook Alex Atala helped entertain 10,000 revellers who made merry at beachside barbecues, eased into long lunches and, at the end of the four-day festival, sat in one mother of a Sunday traffic jam as gourmet escapees returned to Perth.

Aaron Carr, the executive chef at Vasse Felix, is one of many locals keen to build on momentum generated by the event. "It's good that this festival is putting the food up front rather than the wine," he says. "Everyone knows Margaret River for its amazing wine, but its restaurants, farmers and produce are just as deserving of international attention."

My advice for those planning to join this month's Gourmet Escape? Extend that south-west getaway. As exciting as the prospect of bumping into Heston Blumenthal at the pub might be, Margaret River has enough attractions to merit a visit at any time of year. And if panoramas of white-sand beaches and towering canopies of karri aren't enough to convince you to visit, the area's latest crop of chefs, small-plot farmers and other edible attractions probably will.

CAPE NATURALISTE AND THE NORTH

Of the two major arteries in the region, inland Bussell Highway is the most direct path south from Perth to the town of Margaret River – it's about half an hour from the end of the Busselton Bypass to town – but coastal Caves Road is undoubtedly the more scenic.

Any right-hand turn is a rewarding one, particularly for those with a surfboard on the roof rack. Take, for example, Wyadup Beach, about 10 kilometres south-west of the surfing hamlet of Yallingup, where crashing waves turn rock fissures into natural spa pools. Even closer to the seaside village is Ngilgi Cave, one of a handful of caves scattered through the region.

While conventional wisdom says early birds get the warm bread, afternoons are when the bakers at Yallingup Woodfired Bread turn out the day's batch of sourdough loaves. Cooked in volcanic stone ovens and made with biodynamic flour, they're a chewy testament to the virtues of water, grain and patience. Follow the crude red stencilled signs dotted along Caves Road and, when you find the bakery, don't be surprised if there's no one behind the counter. Baking is time-consuming work and many purchases are made via an honesty box.

Many of the region's high-end lodgings occupy prime coastal real estate in this neck of the karri woods. Postcard-perfect Bunker Bay is a leisurely stroll from the roomy, modern chalets at Pullman Resort Bunker Bay. This northern tip of Cape Naturaliste isn't exactly party central – the nearest centre, Dunsborough, is 15 minutes by car, and it's an hour's drive to Margaret River – but for those

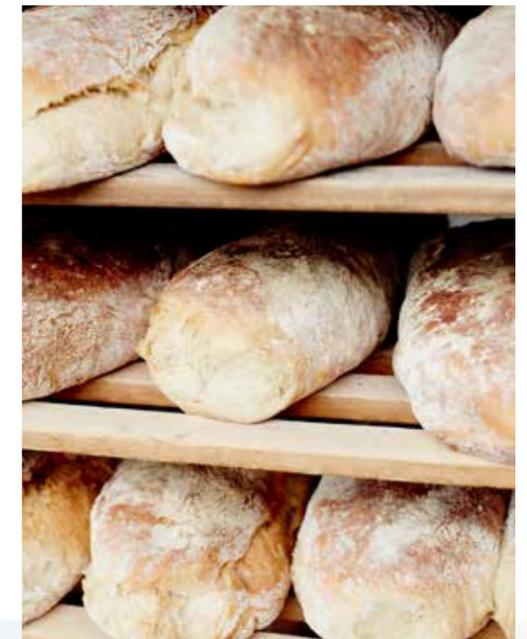
craving wildlife rather than nightlife, the Pullman's bush setting is hard to beat.

Further south, Smiths Beach Resort has airy terrazzo-floored apartments designed in Aussie beach-house chic style, down to barbecues on balconies (the gadget-filled kitchens are good, too). While the popular surf and swim beach for which the resort is named is a barefoot stroll away, its restaurant, Lamont's Smiths Beach, is closer still. Like the apartments, the restaurant's design is casual and coastal. The cooking follows suit, with tempura whiting, duck rillettes and roast chook typical of the kitchen's flavour-first mantra. The adjacent deli carries all you need for a luxe beach picnic, with a wine selection that includes Grange and grand cru Burgundies as well as Lamont's drops.

Heading south again on Caves Road, Cape Lodge doesn't offer the same sand-between-the-toes thrills as Smiths, but its high-end hospitality is unmatched in the region. Each of the estate's 22 rooms and suites are furnished in luxurious English country-manor style; the dining room is a study in timeless elegance. The inclusion of roast venison and butter-poached marron on daily-changing menus suggests Tony Howell is a chef who also prefers to comfort rather than confront. A similar ambition drives the floor team, a crack squad that takes its service and style cues from the old school.>

RISE AND SHINE

Below, clockwise, from left: Cape Lodge; Yallingup Woodfired Bread's sourdough; Smiths Beach. Opposite, (from left): Pullman Resort Bunker Bay; Santana Thorburn, head baker at Yallingup Woodfired Bread.





Voyager Estate's *manicured grounds* and ornate cellar door have their admirers, but it's the cooking of Nigel Harvey that convinces visitors to stay for more than a wine tasting.

WILYABRUP AND CAVES ROAD

The home of regional winemaking pioneers such as Cullen, Vasse Felix and Moss Wood is Wilyabrup, about 15 minutes' drive south of Yallingup. The region has equally rich pickings for diners, however, starting with Western Australia's finest regional restaurant, Vasse Felix. World-class wines and polished wait-staff are part of the charm, but the restaurant's most valuable asset is its kitchen crew. Aaron Carr has been at the helm for 18 years and continues to aim high.

While lamb shanks and barramundi lend familiarity to the menu, wild-gathered ingredients, precision plating and a new-found zest for pickled ingredients hint at a kitchen in tune with the zeitgeist. Take the meaty marron tail with foraged slippery jack mushrooms and pine sprigs, for example, or the Momofuku-inspired mantou buns served with tangles of kimchi and creamy lobes of lamb sweetbreads.

Ben Day, a Vasse Felix kitchen alumnus and now at Knee Deep in Margaret River, is among the names whose cooking is turning heads. With a brigade of equally ambitious go-getters behind him, he's charting a new course for the popular Wilyabrup restaurant, starting with its aesthetics. Many restaurants have gone casual; in contrast Knee Deep has elected to cover once-bare surfaces with linen. Dramatically set tables are an apt backdrop for tightly composed dishes such

as lamb backstrap and shoulder accessorised with smartly cooked vegetable trimmings.

MARGARET RIVER AND SURROUNDS

While some restaurants add dinner services over summer, the region's best meal is lunch. If night-life is part of the wish list, then staying in town is the only option, although the accommodation here doesn't match the luxe offerings further afield. On the upside, three of the region's best after-dark venues are clustered on Bussell Highway and easily accessible from Margaret River's lodgings. At Settlers Tavern, tables of high-vis-clad labourers drain mid-afternoon jugs of beer, but friendly country-style hospitality and cooking await, complemented by a surprisingly serious wine list assembled by owners Rob and Karen Gough (he is a certified sommelier from the Court of Master Sommeliers). On the list are plenty of pinot noirs and local stars in waiting.

The second site in this Bussell Highway devil's triangle is Muster, the country cousin of long-running Perth wine bar, Must. Like its elder sibling, Muster's cellar is broad in reach and backed by a kitchen aiming for bistro comfort and simplicity. Travellers planning on painting the town red should note that Muster has rooms above the restaurant.

Trek a little further up the hill to the small, thoroughly on-trend bar Morries Anytime, where bare globes hang overhead and share plates of Japanese fried chicken and wagyu burgers are matched with classically inspired cocktails.

South of the town, Voyager Estate is another of Margaret River's showpiece restaurants. The manicured grounds and ornate Cape Dutch-style cellar door have their admirers, but it's the cooking of Nigel Harvey that convinces visitors to stay for more than just a wine tasting. A keen eye on global food trends is evident in dishes with the occasional micro-this and dab of that, but the bulk of the menu is anchored by proven flavours enriched by kitchen technique. Think crab cakes showered with garlic chips, and juicy duck atop green discs of coriander pancake. Whether you dine à la carte or order the new six-course "discovery" tasting menu, count on accomplished service coupled with lauded estate wines.

In a different league altogether is Spice Odyssey, the region's Indian food truck. Once a chef at Cullen in Wilyabrup, Sathish Kumar serves excellent curries from a white truck that travels through the south-west. Lunch is served from Tuesday to Saturday at Busselton Rotary Park; dinner locations alternate between the Margaret River Rotary Park (Wednesday and Friday) and the Old Dunsborough Boat Ramp (Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday).->



GO WEST

Above: Voyager Estate. Opposite, clockwise from top left: guinea fowl and boudin noir at Vasse Felix; Eagle Bay Brewing Co brewer Nick d'Espessis; Knee Deep; duck with coriander pancakes and duck fat roast potatoes with rosemary salt at Voyager Estate; Morries Anytime; Smiths Beach; Voyager Estate chef Nigel Harvey; Smiths Beach Resort; Bunker Bay (centre).



BAY WATCH

Clockwise, from top left: butter-poached marron at Cape Lodge; Pullman Resort Bunker Bay; winemakers Kate Morgan (Ipso Facto), Julian Scott (Attollo), Iwo Jakimowicz (Si Vintners), Jo Perry (Dormilona) and Sarah Morris (Ipso Facto); Eagle Bay Brewing Co. Opposite: Smiths Beach.

If you're lucky, Paul and Bree Iskov might be staging one of their Fervor Food pop-up dinners while you're in town. A former sous-chef at Perth's Restaurant Amusé and stagiaire at restaurants such as Noma and D.O.M., Paul makes a resounding argument for Australian flavours with smoked damper, meaty slices of raw pen shell and lamb breast enriched by fermented ribberries.

GRAPES, GRAIN AND GROWTH

The influx of new blood to Margaret River isn't limited to the food world. A growing number of winemakers in the region are vinifying beyond the region's traditional strong suits of cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay and sémillon-sauvignon blanc blend.

Happs winemaker Mark Warren, for example, bottles gamay and vermentino for his side project,

Marq. When he's not making wine at Flametree, Julian Scott produces an organic cabernet and a Portuguese red blend among others for his own label, Attollo. The natural wine movement is also gaining momentum, with staunch hands-off winemaking advocate Vanya Cullen its most vocal champion. Sarah Morris and Iwo Jakimowicz are also making natural wine for their label Si Vintners. The husband-and-wife team produce high-definition wines including a deeply oxidised vin jaune-style sémillon and gorgeously textured rosé. A winemaker at Fraser Gallop Estate by day, Kate Morgan spends her spare time producing head-turning, Vouvray-inspired chenin blanc under her own label, Ipso Facto.

As one of the region's growing number of moonlighting winemakers, Morgan believes the wine industry can accommodate traditional and progressive

Grape juice isn't the area's only liquid asset; *craft beers* are steadily growing in popularity.

thinking. "The advantage of being a relatively new wine region is our ability to be dynamic and try new things, be they varieties, styles and techniques," she says.

"We're lucky there are equally adventurous sommeliers, retailers and drinkers out there allowing us to do this. That being said, we have tried-and-true varieties that have been shown to work well in our region and have played, and will continue to play, an important part in the industry."

As well as a regional badge of honour, wine is big business in Margies. Each year, the region's 5000 hectares of vines contribute a quarter of a billion dollars to the local economy. But grape juice isn't the area's only liquid asset: craft beers are steadily growing in popularity. Nick d'Espessis, the brewer at family-owned Eagle Bay Brewing Co, formerly of 4 Pines in Manly, sees synergies between wine and beer, although he believes the latter is more accessible for consumers.

"Fine dining seems to attach itself to wine, whereas breweries tend to have a more family-friendly atmosphere," says d'Espessis. "Places like ours, Cheeky Monkey and Duckstein have plenty of space for the kids, and eating here isn't going to cost a lot of money, so it's something families can do once or twice over a long weekend."

Developments aren't limited to a booming brew scene. New galleries and artists' studios have appeared, and two boutique bean-to-bar chocolatiers have taken up residence. While wine and surf remain the main attractions, the region's dining diversification is good news for travellers and locals. The only bad news? The secret is out. Sandgropers, including me, will have to learn to share their beloved holiday destination with the rest of the world. **CT**

THE FINE PRINT

GETTING THERE

Qantas operates daily services to Perth from all state capital cities. **Virgin Australia** operates daily services to Perth from all state capital cities except Canberra and Hobart, and three direct return services a week from Perth to Busselton. Margaret River is a three-hour drive from Perth.

SEE

Margaret River Gourmet Escape Following the lead of last year's inaugural event, the rollcall at this year's

festival is similarly star-studded, with The Fat Duck's Heston Blumenthal, seafood know-it-all Rick Stein and WA-chef-done-good Shane Osborn among the headliners. The program of ticketed events includes beach barbecues at Smiths Beach, marquee lunches and dinners, and the two-day Gourmet Village at Leeuwin Estate filled with restaurants, wineries and providores. 22-24 November, 13 28 49, gourmetescape.com.au

STAY

Cape Lodge Garden view rooms from \$349. 3341 Caves Rd, Yallingup, (08) 9755 6311, capelodge.com.au
Smiths Beach Resort Beach shacks from \$225. Smiths Beach Rd,

Yallingup, (08) 9750 1200, smithsbeachresort.com.au
Pullman Resort Bunker Bay Studio villas from \$215. Bunker Bay Rd, Bunker Bay, (08) 9756 9100, pullmanhotels.com

EAT AND DRINK

Cape Lodge 3341 Caves Rd, Yallingup, (08) 9755 6311, capelodge.com.au
Eagle Bay Brewing Co 236 Eagle Bay Rd, Naturaliste, (08) 9755 3554, eaglebaybrewing.com.au
Fervor Food 0450 973 813, fervorfood@gmail.com
Gabriel Chocolate cnr Caves & Quininup rds, Yallingup, (08) 9756 6689, gabrielchocolate.com.au
Knee Deep in Margaret River 160 Johnson Rd, Wilyabrup, (08) 9755 6776, kneedeepwines.com.au

Morries Anytime

2/149 Bussell Hwy, Margaret River, (08) 9758 8280, morries.com.au
Muster 107 Bussell Hwy, Margaret River, (08) 9758 8877, musterm.com.au

Settlers Tavern

114 Bussell Hwy, Margaret River, (08) 9757 2398, settlerstavern.com

Spice Odyssey  0448 392 509

Vasse Felix cnr Tom Cullity Dr & Caves Rd, Cowaramup, (08) 9756 5050, vassefelix.com.au

Voyager Estate

Stevens Rd, Margaret River, (08) 9757 6354, voyagerestate.com.au

Yallingup Woodfired Bread

cnr Biddle Rd & Balmoral Dr, Dunsborough, (08) 9756 6306

