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AUSTRALIA'S Red Centre



Coonawarra is one of Australia's most remote, but rewarding, wine regions, **Winsor Dobbin** reports.

The hamlet of Coonawarra and neighbouring Penola are laidback places. There always seems to be time for a leisurely round of golf, or a yarn over a glass or two of the excellent, local wine.

Nothing much happens here, and if it does, it happens slowly. Which was why it was so surprising to see Coonawarra in the headlines a handful of times in recent weeks.

At the annual South Australian Restaurant and Catering Awards, Upstairs

at Hollick was named as the best restaurant in a winery, edging out rivals from regions including the Barossa Valley and McLaren Vale.

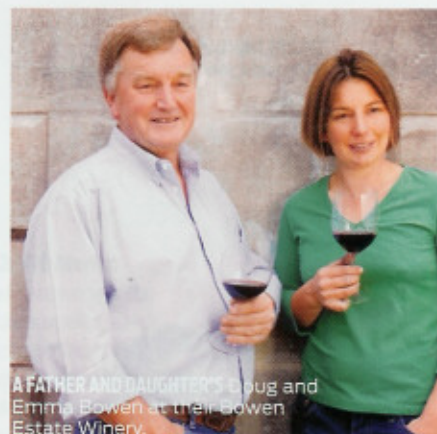
At the same awards, Pipers of Penola was named as the best regional restaurant in the state and The Barn in nearby Mount Gambier was named

best steakhouse in the state and won an award for its wine list.

Just a couple of weeks later, Wynns Coonawarra Estate opened its new Interpretive Centre that takes wine enthusiasts on an interactive and educational journey through the history of the region, viticulture and winemaking.



NEED NO INVITE Brand's Laira
Coonawarra entrance



A FATHER AND DAUGHTER'S Doug and
Emma Bowen at their Bowen
Estate Winery.

That's quite a lot of excitement for a place that's a mere speck on the map midway between Adelaide and Melbourne—but attracts visitors from around the globe for two reasons; the superb, local wines and the district's links with Australia's first saint, Mary MacKillop.

The magnificent cabernets and shirazes produced locally—and some pretty decent white wines too—are the result of the region's unique terra rossa land which has red-brown topsoil sitting on a white limestone base.

A region of a thin, cigar-shaped strip of red soil that runs from the hamlet of Penola in the south along the Riddoch Highway to the north of the tiny Coonawarra township—a distance of just 24 kilometres—produces some of Australia's very best reds, and the winemakers, grape growers and marketers are all immensely proud of their little strip of red dirt.

Even the occasional wine drinker will be familiar with the big names: Wynns Coonawarra Estate, Bowen Estate, Hollick, Yalumba's The Menzies and Brand's Laira.

Throw in family-owned operations like Rymill, Redman, Zema Estate, Majella, Patrick, and Koonara, add great red producers like Katnook Estate, Leconfield, Balnaves, Penley Estate and Parker Coonawarra Estate, and any serious wine lover

will be in their element in this quirky, friendly spot.

"This is the country and it is a small community, but there is a lot of wine heritage here, and a lot of people who really care about wine," says Wynns Coonawarra Estate chief winemaker Sue Hodder. "I'm here forever because I don't believe there is anywhere else to match the dirt and vines that we have here."

Sandrine Gimon, the French-born winemaker at Rymill, is equally enthusiastic. "I love living here because there is a real sense of community," she says. "The people who live here know each other and work together while the people who visit really care about the wine—they haven't just come for a drink."

Coonawarra may be flat, and remote, but it remains a magnet for wine lovers thanks to a series of annual food and wine festivals that include the Coonawarra Vignerons Race Day festival each January, After Dark each April, the Cellar Dwellers events in June and the Coonawarra Cabernet Celebrations every October.

There is also the par-72, 5884-metre Penola Golf Course, a well-wooded course with tight fairways amid natural bushland—and visitors are welcome.

Penola has a population of just 1,200 and Coonawarra is home to only a couple of hundred people—but this is no



WYNNING INGREDIENTS The
winemakers and their Barrel Series

sleepy backwater, even though the nearest airport is almost an hour away at Mount Gambier (home to a par-71, 6012-metre course that has several times been ranked among the top 100 in Australia).

There are close to 30 cellar doors in and around Coonawarra and Penola—and several attractive places to eat and drink.

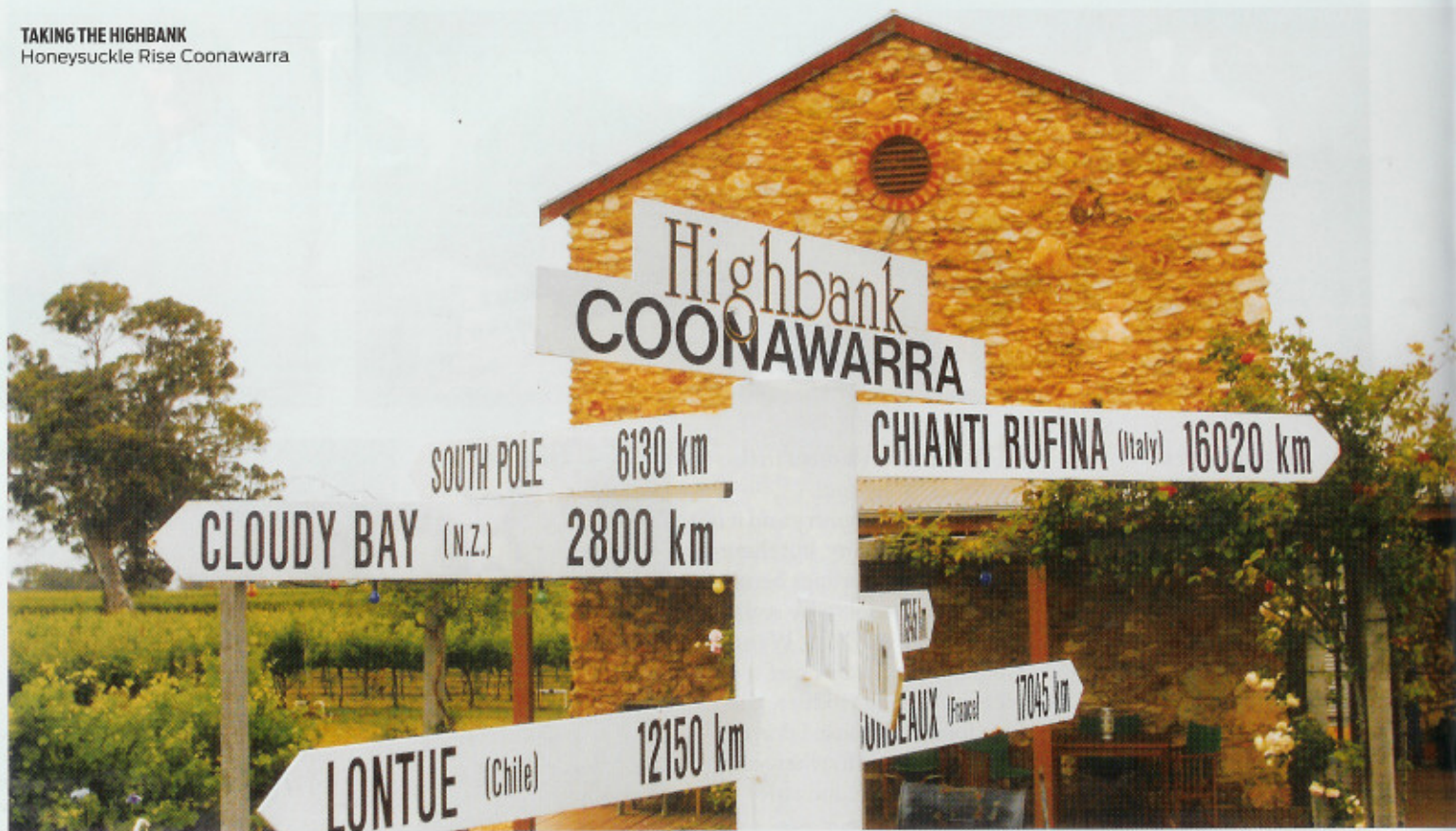
Pipers at Penola, where Simon Bowen (a member of one of the region's most famous winemaking families) is the chef, is a fine dining destination. Bowen and his wife Erika both formerly worked at the Lake House in Daylesford and serve dishes like wild rabbit and mushroom pithiviers with a shallot purée, and roasted duck breast with shitake mushrooms and truffle dressing.

Upstairs at Hollick has long been regarded as one of Australia's best winery restaurants—a reputation new chef Tim Foster has maintained. Here you can sample daily specials like crispy skinned, local pork belly and artichoke purée, which are accompanied by wines from a list of local and imported bottles. Diners can enjoy vineyard views or look in on the winery through a glass wall.

Fodder is run by former Rymill winemaker John Innes and his wife Melissa and is a relaxed spot with a wood-fired pizza oven and an extensive wine list, while the Terra Rossa Producers' Club in Penola specialises in tapas.

Just down the road is the Koonara Cellar Door, which also sells kitchen goods and

TAKING THE Highbank
Honeysuckle Rise Coonawarra



homewares, as well as local produce. It doesn't get any more country than this.

Among the cellar doors that should be on any visitor's list are historic Katnook Estate, friendly Zema Estate, rustic Bowen Estate, slick Balnaves and relaxed and friendly Majella.

You need to make a booking to taste at Highbank, home to some outstanding Bordeaux-style blends, while the iconic Wynns Coonawarra Estate, where blending courses are available by prior appointment, is an absolute must on any itinerary.

Grapes were first grown here in the 1890s and today cabernet sauvignon accounts for 58 percent of the plantings in this cool-climate region (frost can be a concern until late October each year), followed by shiraz, merlot, chardonnay, riesling and sauvignon blanc, so there are plenty of tasting options – and many of the cellar doors are manned by winemakers, such as Greg Clayfield at Zema

Estate, or members of the family whose name is on the label.

Must @ Coonawarra, Merlot and Verdelho Townhouses, Punters Vineyard Retreat, Yalumba The Menzies Retreat and the Alexander Cameron Motel all offer excellent accommodation in and around the vines—and there are also several excellent self-catering cottages from which to choose, including Georgie's Cottage, Girraween House, Koonara Cottage and two options at Honeysuckle Rise on the Highbank vineyard property.

There are plenty of other attractions in the Limestone Coast region to merit a longer stay, including the seaside resort of Robe, where the 14-fairway layout is played as 18-holes. The course is situated in amid the beautiful landscape of sand dunes and natural flora and fauna. ■

FOR MORE INFORMATION
Visit www.coonawarra.org



MEATS THE EYE Pipers of Penola wagyu beef

WINSOR'S CHOICE



Rymill 2011 The Yearling Sauvignon Blanc

French winemaker Sandrine Gimon is producing some outstanding wines for family-owned Rymill and this has a vibrant, herbaceous nose leading to a fresh and fruity palate. It's a zesty and zingy wine for enjoying in its youth—with much more tropical fruit characters than its herbaceous Kiwi siblings. Pair with freshly shucked oysters. **\$16.**



Katnook Founder's Block 2008 Merlot

Katnook winemaker Wayne Stehbens is one of the few Australians who has a handle on merlot, which can be a capricious grape in warm conditions. This is a ripe and concentrated wine with plenty of generous berry fruit flavours and impressive firm tannins that is very food friendly. A step up in quality from most budget merlots. **\$20.**



Majella 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon

From one of Coonawarra's best producers, this has plenty of ripe, juicy berry fruit characters and is beautifully knitted together, combining complexity and elegance. Despite being a young wine it has some very attractive softness on the long, lingering palate with French oak very much in the background. It's a bargain for the price. **\$36.**



TAKING THE HIGHBANK A view from Honeysuckle Rise, Coonawarra.



Balnaves 2009 Cabernet Merlot

I can't recall ever having seen a bad wine from Balnaves winemaker Pete Bissell. Most, like this 72-28 blend of cabernet sauvignon and merlot, are downright outstanding. It's quite an intense wine with violet aromas and a palate of traditional cassis and eucalypt/mint characters. A complex, nicely textured wine. **\$26.**



Yalumba 2007 The Menzies Cabernet Sauvignon

Winemaker Peter Gambetta has crafted an exceptional wine from intensely flavoured but only moderately alcoholic fruit, using new French oak to add complexity and style. This is a supremely stylish wine with classic mint, cassis and chocolate notes along with great structure that will doubtless ensure it develops for a decade or more. **\$48.**

Hollick 2010 Savagnin

Formerly believed to be albarino, the savagnin grape has proved to be a white variety that works well in Australia. Winemaker Matt Caldersmith has made an aromatic, crisp, clean and fresh white wine with zingy green apple and pear notes. A wine for enjoying in its youth, it has good acid and nice length and should be served well chilled. **\$21.**



Wynns Coonawarra Estate 2008 Michael Shiraz

One of the undoubted stars of the new-release Wynns wines; this is a wine of immense quality and can potentially be cellared for a couple of decades. Made in French oak, 60 percent of it new—it is a big, dark, inky wine with a panoply of flavours. It's an Arnold Schwarzenegger wine in its youth; muscular and menacing, and needs time. **\$90.**



Koonara 2010 Sofiel's Gift Riesling

Koonara is one of the newer labels from Coonawarra. This crisp, refreshing white features fruit from nearby Mount Gambier—a very cool grape growing region. It has some lovely bright acid, minerality and zingy sherbert/citrus flavour and would be an excellent partner for spicy Asian dishes. **\$18**