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Vale's fine wines and vine views

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Angove, one of South Australia's oldest family-owned winemakers, is a relative newcomer in McLaren Vale with a conveniently situated cellar door.

Source: Supplied



Angove's tasting room features a long bar made from jarrah recycled from the company's century-old storage vats.

Source: Supplied



The Primo Estate winery boasts a slick and modern facade.

Source: Supplied



The McLaren Vale is home to about 70 cellar doors.

Source: Supplied

DURING the past decade, the nation's cellar door experience has become increasingly style savvy, and South Australia's McLaren Vale is no exception.

From the slick and modern piazzetta at Primo Estate on McMurtrie Road to the junk shop chic of idiosyncratic winemaker Justin Lane's Alpha Box & Dice, which occupies a barely restored barn, the cellar door is no longer just a place to taste wine.

One of South Australia's oldest family-owned winemakers, Angove, has set up shop next door to Lane in a newly built stone and glass pavilion overlooking the Warboys vineyard.

Less than an hour south from Adelaide, wedged between golden escarpment and deep blue sea, the spare Mediterranean beauty of the Vale is relatively new territory for the Angoves, who began life at Tea Tree Gully in the Adelaide foothills and are probably better known for their Riverland plantings (and, back in the swinging 60s, as inventors of the cask).

Established by medico William Thomas Angove in 1886, at a time when wine was deemed a tonic (wouldn't it be nice to return from the GP with a script for a rather cheeky merlot?), the company acquired the pretty Chalk Hill Road vineyard and its 80-year-old plantings in 2008.

And according to William's great-great-grandson Richard Angove, who's the company's global brand ambassador, the new, upscale cellar door represents the family's future.

Vines are organically grown (using some biodynamic principles), and several of the wines available for tasting are of single vineyard origin, so while you tinkle you can observe the vines in question.

Opened just after last Christmas, the bluestone and glass building (a homage to Angove's original cellar) features a long bar made from jarrah recycled from the company's century-old storage vats.

The wood's patina is especially rich. "When we machined the timbers the air was filled with the scent of old port," Richard says.

Everything about this cellar door points to a quality regional experience. The coffee is fair trade and organic, the cheeses are local, ditto the cakes and chocolates, and the olives are from next door.

Equipped with a handsome boardroom and private tasting room as well as a vine-lapped terrace set with cafe tables and chairs and an outdoor entertaining area with a large wood-fired oven, the cellar door is designed to cater small conferences, product launches and business retreats. And there are longer-term plans to establish a cafe or restaurant.

In the meantime, cheese platters are augmented by occasional weekend lunches and wine club events. On Sunday, April 22, celebrity chef Simon Bryant is the star turn for the release of Angove's 2009 The Medhyk Old Vine Shiraz, the company's flagship drop.

Angove's new cellar door is well placed for roving bon vivants touring the McLaren Vale; the popular d'Arrys Verandah restaurant is just over the hill and next door, at Alpha Box & Dice, you can lounge Fridays to Sundays on a vintage settee admiring the museum-worthy hand labelling machine while sipping on a glass of blood of jupiter or mistress (a rather racy encounter between touriga nacional, tinta negra mole and cabernet sauvignon).

"Justin [Lane] is working his way through the alphabet," says the cool young cellar door attendant, who might just as easily be mixing cocktails in a Melbourne bar. Look out for the Hercules McLaren Vale Shiraz, due soon.

Back at Angove, Anna Clappis is testing the wood-fired oven and handing around delicious locally grown marinated mushrooms in preparation for a spot of cellar door catering. Her husband, Andy, makes a locally famous bread (using organic flour, rainwater and Murray River salt) and they open their house to visitors every Sunday for some old-fashioned home cooking.

At Our Place @ Willunga Hill, Andy and Anna grow vegetables and herbs (mostly from cuttings), run goats, lamb and chickens, and, together with their extended family, cook up a storm.

Their family-style weekend lunches have become so popular they've spilled out of the house into a purpose-built space seating 150. There are no menus and bookings are essential.

Willunga's Saturday morning farmers' market is one of Australia's finest and evidence of the bounty of the region.

Depending on the season, look for plump olives, figs and almonds; grassy olive oils; squeaky-fresh greens; fish and squid; or ducks and rabbits.

It's a veritable boon for the region's restaurants, including Fino (in a whitewashed cottage next to the market) and the recently opened Elbow Room, where chef Nigel Rich (late of d'Arrys Verandah) dishes up sweet figs from his garden.

Set back off a gravel road amid the vines with long views to the hills, Elbow Room is housed in a pavilion designed by Max Pritchard (of Kangaroo Island's Southern Ocean Lodge fame), set around a sunny courtyard. Open for lunch Fridays and weekends, the small restaurant is located within the Producers of McLaren Vale HQ, which hosts workshops in cheese-making and, in season, olive oil pressing and winemaking.

On a late summer's day, beneath a sapphire sky embroidered with cottonwool clouds, diners are tucking into locally made chorizo and some of Andy's excellent bread while Nigel is teaming steamed baby squid with pickled radish and goat braised in coconut milk with lemon verbena.

The small wine list includes the Producers' own and selected local labels, plus ales and beers by Vale-based microbrewery Goodieson.

The McLaren Vale is home to about 70 cellar doors and a good map is needed to navigate narrow roads trimmed with wild olives and gum trees. The McMurtrie Mile is home to several famous brands -- including Wirra Wirra, Hugh Hamilton and the fashion-forward Primo Estate, where you can taste a flight of Joe and Dina Grilli's wines (and excellent Joseph olive oil), together with cheese and bread, while perched on red Philippe Starck stools.

From here the ideal tour would continue to the sea, with a picnic lunch on the cliff-cuffed sands of Port Willunga, or up Old Willunga Hill, focus for the most exciting stage of the January Tour Down Under pro cycling event.

Before you begin the torturous climb (a tad easier in a car), take a stroll along the pretty Willunga high street, lined with quaint 19th-century stone buildings and, on Saturdays, bustling with market activity.

Minko Wines, an in-conversion biodynamic winery located at Mt Compass, has a tiny cellar door in town. Almost next door is the charming Three Monkeys Fine Foods, serving light lunches and picnic fare. Try the local black Genoa figs stuffed with gorgonzola and wrapped in prosciutto.

A little tip if you are driving from Adelaide. Skip the more direct but uninspiring route through the city's southern suburbs and detour via the Mt Lofty ranges, wending your way cross-country from Stirling to Echunga and Meadows through Kangarilla. Golden hills and narrow valleys of elm and hawthorn, a glimpse of the sea and blankets of emerald vines will lead you steadily towards the beguiling Vale.

Checklist

Angove's new cellar door is open seven days. More: angove.com.au (<http://angove.com.au>) ; southaustralia.com (<http://southaustralia.com>)
