



Getaways



PORT *of* CALL

Often overlooked by road-trippers making a beeline for Brisbane or Sydney, Port Macquarie has more than enough reasons to lure gourmands away from the hum of the highway. Sample the best on offer with this two-day food-lover's itinerary.

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Port Macquarie has a certain air of modesty about it. It feels like an outpost, like you're in a flashback to an earlier episode about living on the coast in Australia. Initially conceived as Australia's third largest penal settlement, the town is liberated by a chain of beautiful beaches, stunning hinterland, waterfalls and views. It's that ruggedly handsome landscape that has seen a wave of entrepreneurs, sea-changers, artisans, brewers, vintners, baristas and farmers stay smitten with the place, reshaping the identity of the town one vineyard, bar, farm cafe, restaurant, food truck and brewery at a time.

DAY ONE: WAUCHOPE TO BAGO TO PORT MACQUARIE

You say tomato, I say Ricardoes. Or, more specifically, Ricardoes Tomatoes. Just over a decade ago, Ricardoes Tomatoes consisted of one little green honesty box rusted onto a roadside stall piled high with plump red tomatoes. Fast-forward and what exists today is far from a tin-pot operation: the award-winning tourist attraction run by brothers Anthony and Richard Sarks now has 30,000 strawberry plants, and more than 1 million tomatoes are handpicked each year.

"Eleven years ago, I was managing a tea tree farm up north and I put a two-line ad in the local paper to advertise my surplus home-grown tomatoes. I just wanted a bit of extra beer money, a bit of drinking silver, that's all. What I found was that once the word got out, people were willing to drive from as far as Kempsey and Taree simply to get a bag of tomatoes and we thought, 'We might be onto something here,'" says Anthony.

On any given day, visitors to the farm can be found plucking their own tomatoes and strawberries in the polytunnels, stocking up on jams and chutneys or choosing ingredient-driven dishes from the Cafe Red menu. Ricardoes's intensely flavoured fruit took out the Best Tomatoes gong at the 2014 Royal Easter Show for the fifth time in a row and Anthony's free farm tour and tasting allows the produce to do the talking.

Next stop is Bago Vineyards and Bago Maze, near Wauchope, which is surrounded by a tall eucalypt

forest that caters to the East Coast's largest koala population. The vineyard – one of five in the region – has a tenacious grip on the hillside, its healthy appearance belying the prodigal effort it takes to actually grow grapes in this region.

"If you can grow grapes here, you can grow grapes anywhere. The humidity is the biggest challenge and as a result my wines are light and fresh, low in alcohol and 100 per cent indicative of the area," says owner Jim Mobbs, who was born and bred in Port Macquarie and has been working the farm for 40 years. The 60-year-old is a second-generation farmer who planted a crop of chardonnay in 1985 and produced his first vintage in 1987. Bago is very much a family affair. Jim's 91-year-old father Jim ('Pop') still works the land, his landscape architect son, Ian, 32, designed the maze, his designer daughter, Kellie, 30, dreamt up the label for the bottles, and son Steven, 28, works as a winemaker.

Enjoy a glass of verdelho and a cheese platter while immersed in this idyllic scene, where children bounce happily around the maze's pruned pathways, boardwalks and bridges in the gardens, which have been outfitted for a wedding.

On the way back into town, quell your coffee cravings at The Living Room, a retro riot of polished concrete, low-lying lounges and crochet cushions →



Lamb shoulder at The Stunned Mullet (opposite).
Pick your own at Ricardoes Tomatoes (above).

With its weekly green market, cafe and yoga studio, the space is a haven for the local community.

housed in an old petrol station in Wauchope. With its weekly green market, cafe and yoga studio, the space is a haven for the local community and a home away from home for pierced, tattooed, dreadlocked and purple-haired people. Back in Port, The Grape & Petal also pumps up the boho vibe: it features Art Deco fixtures, kitsch object d'art and a load of bulls' horns. It's equal parts cafe, bar and restaurant, and is one of the best places in town to taste the Pacific Coast's most seductive offerings of food and wine. Oh, and the coffee is incredible. Having access to Hastings River's vegetable basket and fruit bowl hasn't hurt the Grape & Petal, says manager Nick Diaz who recommends the salad of roast asparagus, bocconcini, cherry tomatoes, Spanish onion and rocket, and the twice-cooked pork belly with green apple purée, candied balsamic glaze and a fresh apple and parsley garnish.

Chef Lindsey Schwab's travels around the world have also informed the frequently changing menu at Fusion 7. As did his stint with the father of fusion cuisine Peter Gordon, says the keen surfer, who returned to his hometown nine years ago to be close to family. Dinner is divine: deep-fried, soft-shelled crab with green papaya salad, peanuts, Thai basil and tamarind is just one of many dishes inspired by Lindsey's travels.

DAY TWO: IN AND AROUND PORT MACQUARIE

Port itself is a compact town to walk around. After a leisurely breakfast at The Corner, and killer coffee at Crema Espresso, it's on to lunch at The Stunned Mullet. Located at the 'Paris' end of Port Macquarie, the town's only hatted restaurant looks out over the arc of sea and sand that is Town Beach. Start here to explore the flavours of the region with rockstar chefs David Henry

and Mitchell Brumfield. Their prowess is demonstrated with offerings such as parsnip purée with eggplant chutney, compressed apple and labneh, pappadum and watercress or Mandagery Creek venison marinated in black vinegar and white miso and served with taro crisp, beetroot relish, radish and marinated apple, charred to finish.

After a post-prandial stroll, it's onto the Black Duck Brewery for a cold one, where we meet Alistair and Kate Owen who have also realised the potential appeal of the city. Situated in the middle of a scattering of buildings in the town's industrial estate is where you will find this boutique brewery. Being part of the town's emerging scene is really exciting, says Alistair, a former civil engineer who relocated to the region in 2006 for a road project and never left. He poured his first pint in October 2012 and says he has been committed to safeguarding the quality of the craft operation ever since. His Phoenix Migration Stout won gold at the 2014 Sydney Royal Beer & Cider Show and the Irish Red took bronze in 2013. "The quality of our beers was good and now they are just getting better. We have 13 different varieties, which are all hugely popular and we try to keep the operation as local as possible," says Alistair, who produces Summer Swallow, Beach House Blonde and Sunday Pils.

RockWiz geeks will appreciate the fact that the Sunday Pils mentioned in Grinspoon's album *Thrills Kills + Sunday Pils* is a nod to the beer favoured by the band's frontman and local Phil Jamieson, who can often be found enjoying a Sunday session at the brewery. A Sunday here includes live music, with brewing equipment forming the backdrop and a pop-up food truck doling out beef kebabs and hot dogs. There are certainly worse ways to wind up a weekend in the town that the CSIRO says has the best climate in Australia. ■

THE DETAILS

Eat & Drink

Ricardoes Tomatoes

For incredibly flavoursome tomatoes worth travelling for. 221 Blackman's Point Rd, Port Macquarie; 02 6585 0663

Bago Vineyards and Maze

A tasty stop-off for cheese and wine. Milligans Rd, Wauchope; 02 6585 7099

Black Duck Brewery

Enjoy the local brew with live music on Sundays. 6B Acacia Ave,

Port Macquarie; 0407 874 474

The Living Room

Grab a coffee at this old petrol station cafe. 87 High St, Wauchope; 02 6586 0032

The Stunned Mullet

A hatted restaurant on beautiful Town Beach. 12 Williams St, Port Macquarie; 02 6584 7757

Fusion 7

Lindsey Schwab's Asian-inspired cuisine. 124 Horton St, Port Macquarie; 02 6584 1171

Grape & Petal

Head here for tasty

salads using local ingredients. 72 Clarence St, Port Macquarie; 02 6584 6880

The Milkbar

For great coffee overlooking Town Beach. 2/38 William St, Port Macquarie; 02 6583 2700

Crema Espresso Bar

Some of the best coffee to be had in the Port. Corner of Horton and Clarence Sts, Port Macquarie; 02 6583 9858

The Block Coffee + Chocolate Shop

The handcrafted

chocolates are delicious. 28 Hayward St, Port Macquarie; 02 6584 4141

Oasis by the River

Head just south of the Port for an eclectic Aussie menu. Laurieton, 613 Ocean Dr, North Haven; 02 6559 6918

Little Fish Cafe

A must for a glass of wine in a stunning setting. Innes Lake Vineyards, The Ruins Way, Port Macquarie; 02 6581 1332

The Big Oyster

The freshest seafood

served in a beautiful old boatshed. 315 Hastings River Dr, Port Macquarie; 02 6584 3803

Stay

Macquarie Waters Boutique Apartment Hotel Ocean views from the heart of the town. Corner Clarence St and Munster St, Port Macquarie; 02 6580 0290

The Observatory

Luxury accommodation right on the beach. Town Beach, 40 William St, Port Macquarie; 02 6586 8000



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Thai-inspired dish at Fusion 7 • Soft shell crab at Grape & Petal • Chef Joe Soliman at The Corner restaurant • Finely crafted beer at Black Duck Brewery.



ONE FOR THE CALENDAR

TASTINGS ON HASTINGS

VARIOUS VENUES IN PORT MACQUARIE, 6-8 NOVEMBER

The biggest celebration of food in the Hastings River region returns to Port Macquarie this November, with a series of delicious events around the theme 'Fire, Water, Harvest'. Celebrity chef Matt Moran will be cooking up a series of masterclasses using the freshest local produce, and there'll be a night-time 'Fire Water Festival' that will see the foreshore come alive with foodstalls and fire-breathing performers. tastingsonhastings.com.au

