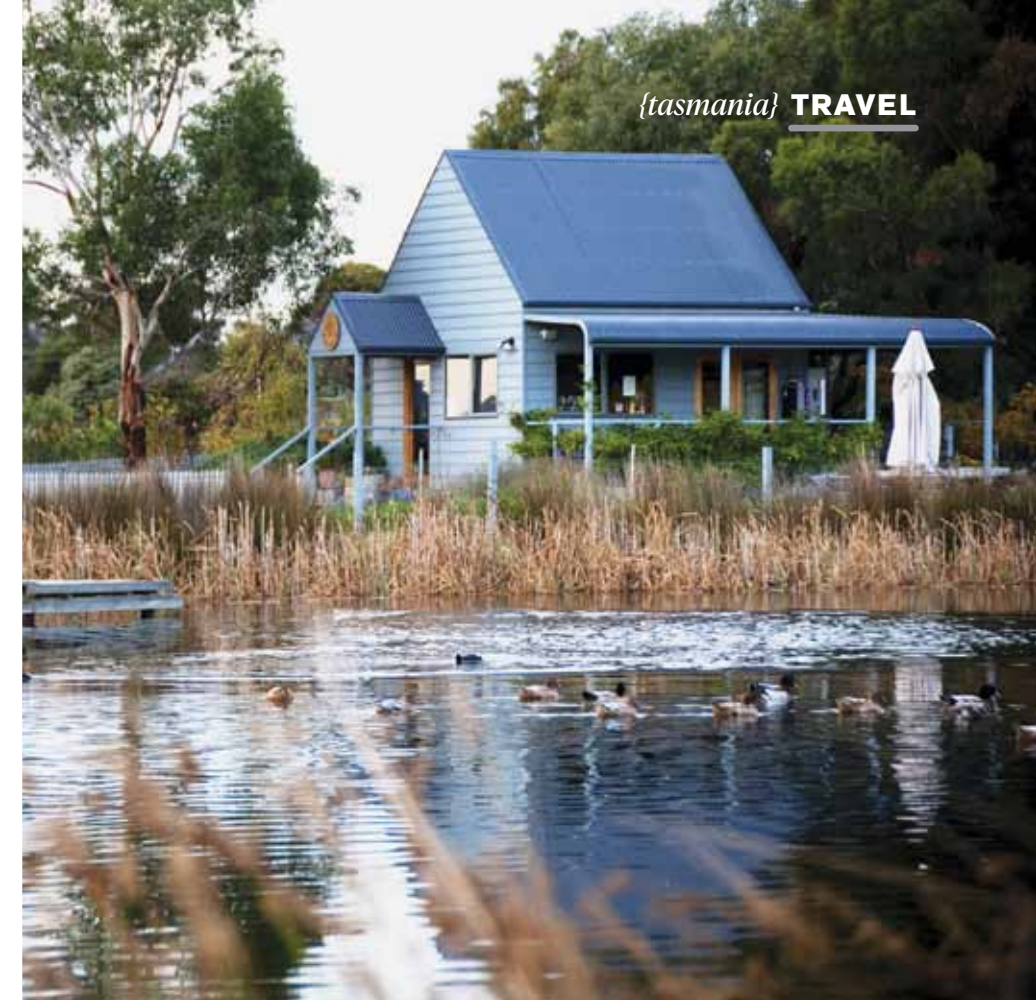




(clockwise from left) Lenny Williams selling his produce at Cygnet Market; looking over the Huon Trail; Puddleduck Vineyard; a Grandvewe lamb; an apple shop in Cygnet.



{tasmania} **TRAVEL**



THE APPLE OF MY ISLE

From organic cheeses to artisan ciders, Tasmania is fast emerging as Australia's hottest gourmet destination. What's best, you can taste it all right on Hobart's doorstep.

WORDS CARLA GROSSETTI
PHOTOGRAPHY CHRIS CRERAR

The wild and untouched beauty of Tasmania has drawn tourists for decades. And while campers, bushwalkers, birdwatchers and kayakers have long celebrated its pristine wilderness and out-of-the-way quietness, the state is now at the top of the travel wish list for hardcore gourmands, too.

Just 20 minutes drive north of the hum of Hobart, where the craggy peak of Mount Wellington is swathed in snow over winter, visitors will find Puddleduck Vineyard, made oh-so-pretty with its climbing roses, hills embroidered with vines and ducks that seem to quack on cue.

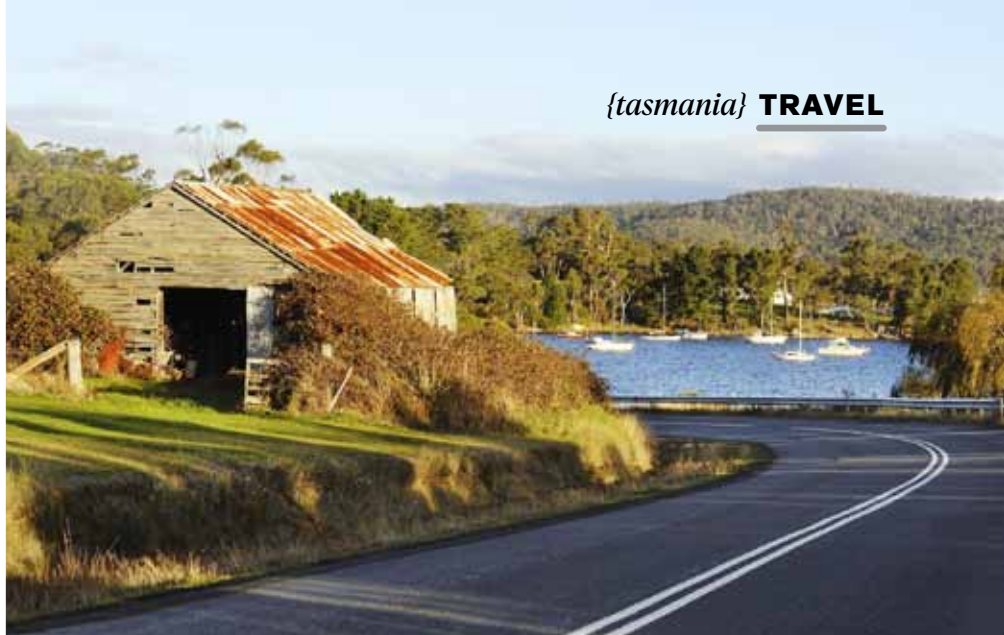
This is one of those boutique vineyards that all wine enthusiasts dream of visiting. Expect the von Trapp family to appear over the surrounding hills as you join winemaker Darren Brown and his wife Jackie for a sit-down tasting to learn all about their current releases, including their signature Bubbleduck sparkling blend.

"When we bought the property 17 years ago, there was a house in a paddock with no water, no fencing, no vineyard and no buildings. We built everything from scratch. Our first planting was in 1997, we produced our first wine in 2003, and the cellar door opened in 2005," says Darren.

"We only produce about 1500 cases of wine each year and we sell every single bottle on site. What we are about is keeping the business small and doing what we do really well," says Darren, who has honed his craft working in Tasmanian vineyards since he left school at the age of 15 in 1983.

There are now modest plans underway to expand operations in order to cater to the increasing number of tourists wanting to sample Puddleduck's medal-winning wines and also to celebrate its recent partnership with Lost Pippin Cider.

In keeping with Coal River Valley hospitality, cider-maker Mark Robertson, of Lost Pippin Cider, has moved his



(clockwise from above left) The view at Grandveve; an apple shed by the Huon River; Willie Smiths Organic Apple Cider orchard; Ryan Hartshorn of Grandveve Cheeses.



one-man show to Puddleduck, where he recently set up a cider-door experience. As president of Cider Tasmania, Robertson says his dream is to push the boundaries of cider-making and educate the consumer by delivering a more refined product.

"It doesn't matter what alcoholic beverage you are looking at — be it cider, beer or wine — the balance between alcohol and character, and acid and sugar, is the most important thing," says Robertson.

"A lot of Australian cider is too sweet, fizzy or obscure. I want to bring balance and finesse back into cider-making," he says.

The Lost Pippin product range includes four styles: Heritage, Still, Perry and Sparkling, which Robertson says are designed with all the complexity and depth of an off-dry glass of wine or bubbles.

"My cider is 100 per cent real fruit. It also supports the state's apple industry. It's my hope that Tassie will once again become the Apple Isle — for cider," he says.

In the past 12 months, nine new cider brands have entered the market, including the standout Pagan Cider, made without adding sugar at any stage of production.

Willie Smiths Organic Apple Cider, which takes its cues from French cider-making techniques, is also worth noting.

Australia's first organic cider orchard from the Huon Valley, Willie Smiths is one of many highlights along the Huon Trail, a region that takes in the D'Entrecasteaux Channel, Bruny Island and the Far South.

people to come here to taste the cheese, but also to interact with us, to have contact with the lambs and to participate in the milking, to gain an insight into what life is like on a working farm," says Gilliver.

Out the back of the rambling rustic farmhouse and restaurant, which overlooks paddocks dotted with contented sheep and

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Those with a zest for additional artisan experiences in the Huon Valley should also factor in some time to visit Grandveve Cheeses, which offers sheep-milking demonstrations, tastings of Australia's only certified organic sheep's cheese and the opportunity to make your own alongside a family of champion cheese-makers.

While Diane Rae is regarded as the "big cheese" in the business, her children Nicole Gilliver and Ryan Hartshorn are hands-on in overseeing the process of cheese-making and maturing. "We want

a ruffled ribbon of the D'Entrecasteaux Channel, is a retirement village for the family's much-loved sheep, which Gilliver says is not just a token gesture.

"Our family's philosophy is that these sheep have made a significant contribution to our livelihood and we are therefore dedicated to looking after them for the rest of their lives," she says.

Visitors to Grandveve are encouraged to order a glass of local wine and a cheese platter, which showcases its premium product, Sapphire Blue. It was awarded ►



(clockwise from this image)
The Stackings; diners at The Red Velvet Lounge; salmon cutlets at The Red Velvet; Tas-Saff saffron.



the coveted Champion Cheese title in 2012 by the Royal Agricultural Society of NSW.

Those who want to enjoy the Huon Valley on a plate should nab a table at The Stackings, overlooking Peppermint Bay, or visit the delightful Home Hill Wines Restaurant, where the menus are compiled to feature a parade of fabulous local produce and smartly chosen Tasmanian wines. Also worth a look in the charming nearby town of Cygnet, in the heart of the Huon Valley, are The Lotus Eaters Cafe and The Red Velvet Lounge. Here, again, much of what is devoured from the menu is produced locally, including organic Miellerie Honey produced by Yves Ginat, using biodynamic beekeeping practices, as well as Tongola Goat's Cheese, made by Swiss-born artisan cheese-makers Hans Stutz and Esther Haeusermann.

The region is also home to Tas-Saff, a multi-award-winning saffron business which started out as an experiment by Sydney sea-changers Terry and Nicky Noonan more than two decades ago.

While Nicky agrees it's been a labour of love to establish Tas-Saff as Australia's most successful saffron producer, she says she adores the Zen-like process of hand-picking the delicate red threads, or stigmas, from the purple flowers.

"I love the complexity of saffron. It's so beautiful, it has so many wonderful medicinal properties and it is such a pleasure to work with. I'm proud of what we've achieved: we started off with three acres (1.2 hectares) and we now have 50 growers throughout Australia," she says.

"We produced 40,000 bottles two years ago, 86,000 bottles of saffron last year and I've pre-sold the entire 2013 crop of



160,000 bottles," states Nicky, who says the experience has led to a love affair with the world's most expensive spice.

If you time your visit to Cygnet to coincide with the farmers market, held on the first and third Sunday of each month, you will get the chance to meet many such passionate producers, who have all been active in reinventing the region as Tasmania's food bowl by diversifying into cheese, chocolate, olives and cherries. Here, in the town that curls along the Huon River, the stories of the farmers and artisan producers are every bit as inspired as the area's natural beauty. It's an authenticity that simply cannot be manufactured and, for that reason, it feels like the heart and soul of Tassie. 🍷

GETTING THERE To book your flight to Tasmania, visit www.virginaustralia.com or simply call 13 67 89 (in Australia).

TASTING TASSIE

Cygnet Market 14 Mary St, Cygnet;
www.cygnetmarket.com.au.

Grandvewe Cheeses 59 Devlyn's Rd, Birchs Bay; +61 3 6267 4099;
www.grandvewe.com.au.

Home Hill Wines 38 Nairn St, Ranelagh; +61 3 6246 1200;
www.homehillwines.com.au.

Pagan Cider
www.pagancider.com.au.

Puddleduck Vineyard and Lost Pippin 992 Richmond Rd, Richmond; +61 3 6260 2301;
www.puddleduckvineyard.com.au;
www.lostpippin.com.au.

Tas-Saff 155 Dillons Hill Rd, Glaziers Bay; +61 3 6295 1921;
www.tas-saff.com.au.

The Lotus Eaters Cafe 10 Mary St, Cygnet; +61 3 6295 1996.

The Red Velvet Lounge 24 Mary St, Cygnet; +61 3 6295 0466;
www.theredvelvetlounge.com.au.

The Stackings 3435 Channel Highway, Woodbridge; +61 3 6267 4088; www.peppermintbay.com.au.

Willie Smiths Organic Apple Cider 22 Lollara Rd, Grove; +61 3 6266 4339; www.williesmiths.com.au.