

There's gold in them there hills

Once this area was thick with men seeking their fortune. During the 1850s and 60s, the area to the northwest of Melbourne was the centre of Australia's golden fever. People inspired by the stories of great wealth gained during the Californian gold rush came from across the world to dig. Many of them struck it rich – at the peak of the rush, two tonnes of gold was sent back to Melbourne each week – although, no doubt, many more would have moved on after months of searching for little reward.

Pietro D'Orsa, a French-speaking Swiss-Italian immigrant, was just one of the men who arrived imagining riches beyond his wildest dreams. He also arrived with grapevines. No one really knows how many, but his legacy lives on today.

"He settled in Maldon and was producing his own wine while searching for gold," says his great-great

granddaughter, Jodi Marsh. "His ancestors still own the property. The old vineyards had gone but they had some cuttings at the back of the house."

Jodi and her brother, winemaker Mark Hunter, run Sanguine Estate, a vineyard in Heathcote growing Chardonnay, Tempranillo, Cabernet Franc and, of course, Shiraz, among other varieties. They only found out about Pietro and their familial ties after they'd produced their first vintage and, naturally, their curiosity was peaked.

"We had the vines DNA tested and there was one grape no one could pick," says Mark. "It's a pink grape that is so pungent. It smells like pineapple and boiled lollies."

They've had some cuttings grafted on to a row of vines and are now waiting to see what evolves. "It could be that it's just a table grape," says Mark with a smile.

GOLD WAS ONCE THE LUSTRE OF THE REGION JUST NORTHWEST OF MELBOURNE, NOW THE ATTRACTION IS LIQUID GOLD.

Words **Carrie Hutchinson**

Top left: The colonial majesty of the main street of Bendigo. **Above:** the Cellar and Store in Heathcote.



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HEATHCOTE

In some ways, it's slightly misguided to refer to the Goldfields, which encompasses Ballarat and Bendigo, as well as Heathcote, as a single wine-growing region. Within Heathcote – and Mark will tell you, even on the 24 hectares he has under vine – there are vast differences in both the climate and soil. The soil ranges from granitic in the south, to a mix of Cambrian and yellow clay, right through to pure Cambrian in its north. "From the south to the north of Heathcote, you'll also get a temperature difference of a degree," he explains.

In Heathcote alone, there are more than 50 wineries. Many of them, like Flynn's Wines, are owned and run by the winemaker. In this case, Greg Flynn and his wife Natalia. They've got just 10 acres of vines and Greg built the bistro, cellar door and winery from the ground up. As well as Shiraz, he has a few alternative varieties, including Vermentino, Verdelho, Fiano and Sangiovese. "The Sangiovese is a good lifestyle wine," says Greg. "It's good with food, especially during summer."

The size of the Flynn's operation means Greg not only makes the wine, but also does his fair share of 'front of house', so to speak. "Working in the cellar door on the weekend is like doing your own market research," he says.

There's also an Italian feel at Galli Estate, the vision of Tuscan born Lorenzo Galli, who came to Australia in the 1950s.

He established a vineyard and winery at Sunbury, and in 2000 commenced planting the Camelback vineyard on the famous Cambrian soils of Heathcote. The vineyard now comprises some 110 hectares, and along with Shiraz, features smaller plantings of Sangiovese, Tempranillo, Montepulciano and Nebbiolo. After his death in 2004, Lorenzo's wife Pam established the Lorenzo Galli Wine Scholarship, which encourages application by wine professionals and educated enthusiasts to celebrate and explore the diversity and richness of Italy's wine and history, while showcasing the latest trends in Australia with its interpretations of Italian varietals.

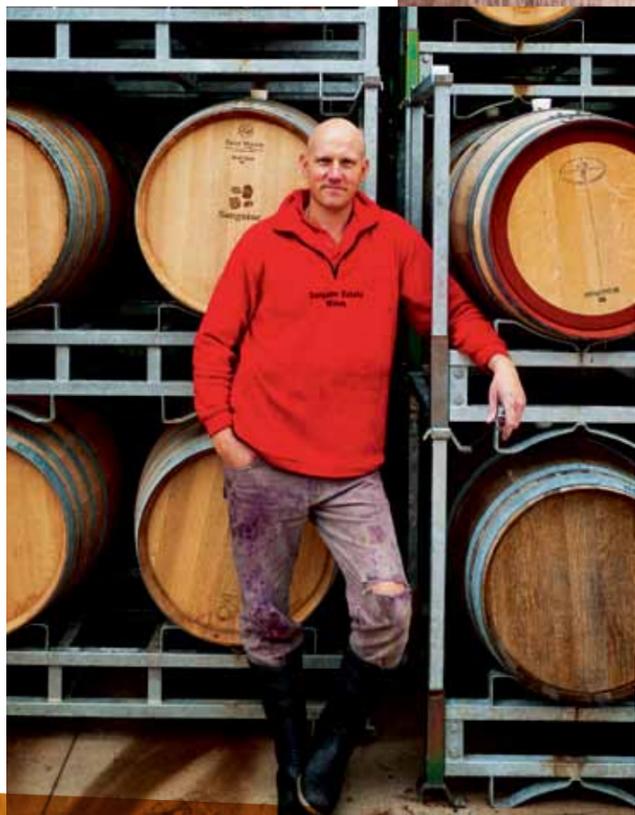
VILLAGE FEEL

Heathcote itself is a village of weatherboard cottages spread along the main drag. It's seen something of a revival in recent years as more city folk have picked it as the rest stop on the way through to Bendigo.

Heathcote Estate, which has its vineyard near Sanguine, opened a cellar door in the old bakery at the end of 2010. You can pop in here and taste what is being produced – at the moment the 2010 Heathcote Shiraz Single Vineyard and the 2009 Block F Shiraz are top of the tasting pops. Visitors might take a glass with something off the small café menu, a charcuterie plate, a slice of quiche, or the chunky beef and Heathcote Shiraz pie.



Top: Captain's Creek vineyard in Ballarat. **Bottom:** Lunch at Heathcote Estate's cellar door cafe in the old bakery in the village of Heathcote.



Across the road, in the old saddlery, is the Cellar & Store, a new venture from Brett and Jodi Marsh (the same Jodi from Sanguine Estate, although this business is completely separate).

“We’ve got about 200 wines here,” says Brett. But the unique selling point of this store is the enomatic machine (a wine server). “We’ve got 24 tasting wines from places that don’t have their own cellar door. The intention is that you get to taste the region by going to a few cellar doors then come in here and taste the rest.”

GO GO TO BENDIGO

Bendigo is a far cry from Heathcote. Now Victoria’s second largest inland city, its streets are lined with majestic sandstone buildings – many of them former banks – that were erected during the gold rush. These days, the modern Bendigo Bank building hovers over the town and its predecessors have been transformed into cool eateries, galleries and stores. The Bendigo Art Gallery, which has hosted blockbuster shows including *Grace Kelly: Style Icon* and *The White Wedding Dress*, is the envy of regional galleries across Australia. Tiny laneways, like Chancery Lane, have become hubs for cafés, tapas bars and indie boutiques.

Directly opposite the art gallery you’ll find Pondalowie Wines cellar door and the fantastic Wine Bank, housed, unsurprisingly, in an old bank built in 1876. This bar and store stocks a huge number of local, domestic and international wines that can either be drunk on one of its sofas or out on the verandah.

Just outside of town at Balgownie Estate, winemaker Tony Winspear and viticulture manager Sam Bowman are continuing the traditions of one of Bendigo’s much-loved characters. Stuart Anderson was the town’s pharmacist when he decided to try his hand at winemaking back in 1968. He planted the vines, some of which he smuggled back from a vintage in France, himself.

On the beautiful rolling property, there are two treasured plantings: 1983 Chardonnay and 1978 Shiraz vines, their trunks as thick and gnarled as a mature tree’s. “They’re the oldest vines in Bendigo,” says Sam. “We’re taking cuttings and having them propagated. No one has any idea what the clone is.”

“It’s about youth versus experience,” says Tony when asked the difference between these old vines and younger ones. “The older vines don’t bear as much fruit, but the complexities are much greater.



Top left: Sanguine Estate winemaker and owner Mark Hunter. **Top right:** Flynn’s cellar door and bistro. **Bottom:** Old vines at Balgownie Estate.



Top: Bendigo night street scene. **Bottom:** Balgownie vineyards.

They produce elegant, full-flavoured wines rather than full-bodied versions. They’re not at all jammy.”

As for many vineyards in the Goldfields, the past couple of years have been tough at Balgownie. “It rained from July to May,” says Tony of the 2011 vintage. They managed to get a small but good crop, keeping bunches of fruit clear of leaves to stop mould and disease. “Many didn’t pick a grape that vintage.”

The past 12 months have been the complete opposite, with barely a drop of rain falling and viticulturalists relying on irrigation to keep vines alive.

NATURAL FUN

It’s much the same story over at Harcourt, 30km from Bendigo, where Adam Marks watches over his vines, orchards, veggies and chickens at Bress. “I always wanted a mixed farm,” he says. “Wine is just one slice of the conviviality pie.” Simple food is served at the cellar door made from fruit and veg grown in the kitchen garden.

When he arrived at the property nine years ago, there were 17 different grape varieties planted, but Adam decided to pare back the vines to just four: Riesling, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Shiraz. The land had long been subjected to pesticides, herbicides and super-phosphates, but the crops here are now grown biodynamically and in addition to his French-inspired wines, Adam also produces a range of ciders.

“I like to think that our primary business is fun – knowledgeable fun,” he says, watching over the chickens and guinea fowls. “We want people to relax. We give the kids some chalk to draw on

the concrete instead of...” He motions playing a Game Boy. There’s also a barrel full of bats and balls for visitors to use out on the cricket pitch.

BALLARAT

Which, of course, leaves the largest city in inland Victoria, Ballarat. At the height of the gold rush, 20,000 miners were working on the Ballarat fields. More than 640,000kg of recorded gold was extracted here (who knows how much was smuggled out), the majority of it during a two-decade period. Playing on its past, Ballarat is now one of the state’s most popular tourist destinations, offering the re-creation of a goldmining town at Sovereign Hill, which includes the Gold Museum and Blood On the Southern Cross, a night-time spectacular that tells the story of the Eureka Stockade.

Ballarat’s wine region is cooler than its neighbours and renowned for quality Sparkling wines, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. At Myrning, 30 minutes’ drive from the city, is St Anne’s Winery, a family-owned company that continues to expand into new markets. Its site is high, dry and cool (four to six degrees cooler than Melbourne) and situated on volcanic rock. “Riesling thrives on it,” says manager Alastair McLean. But with only eight acres of vines, it really is a showcase. “It sells out as quickly as its released.”

What St Anne’s is well known for has visitors dropping in constantly. The cellar door is lined with casks of tawny port, aged in different types of oak, all blended on site. Guests are encouraged to purchase them in small casks and, once finished, to bring the cask back and have it refilled. As the cask ages it imparts different characteristics to the port it houses. Which just gives another good reason for visitors to the Goldfields region to return time and again.

For more information on the Goldfields region, www.visitvictoria.com.au