

DESTINATION MCLAREN VALE



STARING out from Dandelion's glass-walled pavilion on the northern rim of McLaren Vale, it's easy to see how this "Wonder Room" got its name. Two hills striped with arrow-straight rows of green contrast pleasantly with the curved lines of a third vineyard that wraps tightly around a gentle slope like the contours on a topographic map. Luxuriant bush sprouts from the folds between the hills and there's no traffic whatsoever on the few gravel paths crossing this private valley. In the distance, the golden cliffs of the Fleurieu Peninsula plunge dramatically towards the ocean.

"I call this our amphitheatre," says Dandelion winemaker Elena Brooks. "When you sit on the stairs out front, you can take it all in and it's like the Spanish Steps and the Colosseum rolled into one." Pitched somewhere between a cellar door and a restaurant, the venue offers three tasting options pairing elegant Dandelion wines with exquisitely presented snacks that include a crispy cured ocean trout cannoli and a tempura zucchini flower filled with sweet prawn and crab meat that rises from a bed of vine leaves.

Because it opens at 10, the Wonder Room is a natural place to begin a tour of McLaren Vale, but the 90 cellar doors scattered throughout the region mean there are plenty of options for my next stop. And just about every one of them continues the theme of delicious food, sweeping views and wine that goes down just a little too easily.

Rather than looking out over the entire valley, the light-filled Angove cellar door opens onto a biodynamic vineyard shaded by a single hill covered in gums. Several tall specimens sprouting from the middle of the vines reflect the easy co-existence of viticulture and native bushland that characterises the region, and there's plenty of time to take it all in over a prix fixe lunch featuring zingy taro and shiitake dumplings, charred zucchini with sheep's milk ricotta and an outrageously soft 24-hour braised short rib with chilli caramel. Somehow the bill comes to just \$49 with a glass of wine, which leaves room in the budget for an affogato accom-

panied by Angove's dangerously smooth 15-year-old brandy.

At Wirra Wirra, a short "jetty" leads to a platform overlooking the biodynamic vineyards and a single glance is enough to tell me that autumn is arriving early on the valley floor. The flecks of gold and red woven through a carpet of dark green cabernet vines act as the perfect appetiser for the refined comfort food on offer at Harry's Deli. Simple but lovingly made fare is the order of the day in this handsome low-slung building of red ironstone and slate, including a signature pie of lamb, tomato, olives and rosemary that's braised in Church Block overnight then encased in a thick tower of sour cream pastry.

"Don't get any ideas, these aren't for you," Jodie Armstrong warns me as she hands me several carrots, the Journey Home winemaker evidently unaware of just how well I've been fed over the last few days. These treats are earmarked for Winsome and Agatha, though it seems nobody informed our companions that there would be snacks. Taking Winsome's lead, I quickly discover that this gentle five-year-old donkey will

stop to graze at every possible opportunity but is happy to nuzzle me tenderly whenever a piece of carrot is proffered. Together we follow a winding path between grass trees and narrow pines before climbing a hill that looks like a sand dune covered in lime green vines then stop for a tasting that shows off the intricacy and purity typical of reds grown in the ancient sands of Blewitt Springs.

The colour has begun to drain from the sky by the time I reach Silver Sands Beach

Club in nearby Aldinga, but there's still enough light to see the waves pounding into the shoreline just metres from the deck. One of the co-owners of this former Surf Life Saving Club is renowned wine

writer Nick Stock, so it's no surprise to find a drinks list that runs the gamut from pizza wines to grand crus. The seafood-heavy menu is equally diverse, making room for schnitzels, prawn cocktail rolls and bowls of housemade pasta and by the time I finish dinner the sky outside is as dark as the squid ink tagliolini.

It means there are no views to greet me when I finally make it to my digs, so I take the opportunity to lay back and admire

Reds, whites and views

Set between hills and sea, this wine region looks good from every angle. By Alexis Buxton-Collins

Clockwise from main: Dandelion's Wonder Room; Wirra Wirra winery; glamping at Divine Domes; Silver Sands Beach. Pictures: SATC

the surprisingly roomy Divine Domes. The seven-metre radius accommodates a bed, coffee table and chairs, wood heater, kitchenette and large en suite with room to spare, making this dome tent feel more like a boutique hotel room than a glamping experience. That impression is enhanced by folds of fabric that hang off the frame and hide the structure entirely. One of the few reminders that I'm in a tent is the transparent wall that looks eastwards and allows me to rise with the sun the following morning.

I watch from bed as the ridgetops in front of me are illuminated one by one, the gentle hills undulating like the peaks and troughs of a giant sea as they rise in vast waves towards the forest-covered Mount Lofty Ranges. The distinctive D'arenberg Cube is just visible above a line of trees and a stand of gums closer at hand is filled with flocks of lorikeets and rosellas that serenade me as I step onto the deck to fill the outdoor bathtub. This might just be the best view in McLaren Vale. Though of course, there are plenty of contenders for that crown.

The writer was a guest of the McLaren Vale Grape, Wine & Tourism Association

TRIP NOTES

Getting there: It's a 45-minute drive from Adelaide Airport to McLaren Vale, and the easiest way to get around is with a hire car. If you'd prefer to let someone else do the driving, book a private tour with My McLaren Vale. mymclarenvale.com

Staying there: Though they look identical from the outside, the four tents at Divine Domes are each decorated in a unique style (examples include Southwestern USA and Morocco), and their central location puts you within striking distance of most spots in the Vale. From \$377 a night.

Explore more: mclarenvale.info/explore