

Weekender

Go ahead, shake your grove thing

Winsor Dobbin discovers a great weekend escape.

THE WEEKEND did not get off to a good start. The television stubbornly refused to work; the telephone had no dial tone and despite the presence of a broadband box and wireless router there was nothing I could do to enable my laptop to talk to the outside world.

So far, so frustrating.

We are in the Wollombi Valley, which feels like the middle of nowhere. The hamlet of Laguna is a couple of kilometres down the road, Wollombi a few kilometres in the other direction. Mobile phone service? Forget it.

There's nothing to do, then, but switch off and relax – and Valleyfield Escape is the perfect spot for doing absolutely nothing.

A villa on a 100-plus-hectare property owned by restaurateur Armando Percuoco, who operates Paddington's revered Buon Ricordo, it is a little slice of paradise for two.

Set high on a hill, overlooking the main homestead and a quirky sculpture garden designed by Michael Cooke, Valleyfield Escape is designed for couples: and couples only. There's no room for kids.

As you'd expect, the kitchen is superbly equipped, not only with cooking utensils and a high-tech De'Longhi oven, but also with a pantry stocked with the likes of Tetsuya's truffle salt, homemade marmalades and jams, extra virgin olive oil, balsamic vinegar, a vino cotto from Fratelli Fresh and sangiovese grape verjus.

Guests just help themselves, as they do to Percuoco's homemade chilli oil and a decanter filled with a dark and delicious alcoholic beverage.

Breakfast is included in the tariff.

Dinner can be provided if you



CHILL OUT: (clockwise from above) Unwind on the deck at Valleyfield Escape, lounge indoors, or take a soothing bath.



order in advance from the Buon Ricordo kitchen (\$45 for a three-course feast). Choices include stinco d'agnello (slow-roasted lamb shanks with rosemary, garlic and wine) and delicious galletto alla diavola (char-grilled spatchcock with hot spices, lemon and extra virgin olive oil).

During the day, the pleasures here are simple ones; maybe a stroll around the olive grove (Percuoco uses the olives to produce the olive oil he uses in his restaurant), a walk to look at the beef cattle down by the dam, or maybe a seat in one of the many shady groves, ideal spots for enjoying the Sunday newspapers.

Most guests will opt to dine on site, although the nearby Laguna General Store and Wine Bar rocks on a Friday night, and the Wollombi

Tavern is just a short drive away. The closest vineyard of repute is probably Krinklewood, but it's a good 40-minute drive to the centre of the Hunter action in Pokolbin.

A day trip to the wineries is certainly worthwhile, but a visit to the property's cottage garden is equally rewarding.

In-house guests are free to pick rosemary, mint, lemongrass or thyme from the herb garden. Choose some spinach or lettuce to accompany your meal or, in season, pick some olives from the abundant olive groves and try your hand at pickling them.

The cottage is small, but no expense has been spared.

There are electronically operated blinds, a double bath tub that looks out onto the olive grove and a bed as good

as any you'd find at a five-star hotel.

The bathroom is beautiful. It has big fluffy towels, luxury toiletries, soaps and a terrific shower.

There's been a real attention to detail in the grounds, the kitchen and the bathroom, but if there's no TV signal that should be flagged in advance, the broadband should be explained and a good house book, with local maps and tips, is needed.

But you sit in front of the roaring log fire, open a bottle of wine you've picked up along the way, put on a DVD and it is suddenly hard to be disgruntled. This is a gorgeous place to relax.

The writer was a guest of Valleyfield Escape and Tourism New South Wales.

> TRIP NOTES

Address: Valleyfield Escape, 3471 Great North Road, Laguna 2325.

Bookings: (02) 4998 3312 or (02) 9360 6729, email info@valleyfieldescape.com.au, or see www.valleyfieldescape.com.au.

Rates: \$500 per couple per night including breakfasts (think smoked ocean trout and scrambled eggs) at weekends and \$350 per night midweek.

> VERDICT

A little slice of Italy on the edge of the Hunter Valley. A gracious, understated and elegant retreat for those who like to be pampered.

Why you'd stay: You want to spend some quality time with the one you love.

Why you wouldn't: You need cable TV, newspapers, takeaway food or you're on a tight budget.

> FIND TIME TO

■ Enjoy dinner at Rock, the Pooles Rock restaurant that recently earned a hat in *The Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide*.

■ Drop in to a few lesser-known cellar doors, such as Krinklewood, Tintilla, Kelman Vineyards or Scarborough.

■ Visit Laguna market on the third Sunday of every month. Try the Little Black Duck lemon cordial.

■ Discover Yengo National Park with its Aboriginal rock engravings.