

Food

Orange crush

Less than four hours' drive from Sydney is a surprising gourmet destination with a growing reputation. **Winsor Dobbin** enjoys some fine food and wine in the central west of NSW.

The restaurants are funky, the local produce stunning, the wine lists appealing. We could be in Surry Hills or Fitzroy but we are, in fact, in the heart of country NSW. The Orange region is not only home to a fast-growing cool-climate wine industry but is also notable for having more top-notch restaurants than any similarly sized town in the state. Selkirks, Lolli Redini, the School House, Belgravia @ Union Bank and Tonic in nearby Millthorpe are all lauded regularly by food critics and it can be hard to find a place to stay in Orange during one of its many culinary festivals.

Hereabouts, food and wine are important. "There is a real sense of community here," says Kim Currie, a human dynamo who is

executive officer of Brand Orange, which promotes the region and its gourmet goodies.

"Orange is cosmopolitan, with theatres and galleries, and young restaurateurs and winemakers are attracted to the region."

Orange has all the charm of a country town with the facilities of a city. With nearly 40,000 inhabitants, it boasts botanic gardens, museums, a civic theatre and galleries - but food and wine drag in the visitors.

Top of the list when it comes to fine dining is Selkirks in the centre of town.

When long-time chef Michael Manners, a key figure in Orange's emergence as a foodie destination, decided he'd had enough of full-time pan-handling he handed over the reins to former sous-chef Cameron MacPherson and his partner Tara Pentecost, who had been running Restaurant Pepper in Rozelle.

MacPherson had worked under Manners and Greg

Doyle at Pier, but he was only 26. Locals held their breath. Manners was a hard act to follow but the youngsters never skipped a beat.

The setting remains gracious, the food is excellent (think dishes like braised wild rabbit with sarladaise potatoes, eschalots and mushrooms, or pear tarte tatin with ginger beer sorbet). The excellent wine list features many local offerings.

"The food and the feel of the restaurant is more modern [than before]," MacPherson says. "We like to have the purity of flavour shine through." His brother Euan also works in the kitchen while Pentecost is an assured and knowledgeable sommelier.

Just down the road, Lolli Redini has long been a regional flagship - chef Simonn Hawke earns a hat in the *The Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide*.

The old Federation building has a lovely ambience and the menu features produce such as Mandagery Creek venison and Ross Hill farmed snails. The twice-baked two-cheese soufflé with shredded spinach and walnut vinaigrette is so good it's sinful.

A few kilometres out of town, the School House at Mayfield Vineyard is, like Selkirks, in the hands of an exciting young couple; chef Shaun Arantz - a protege of British chef Jean-Christophe Novelli - and his partner and charming maitre d' Willa McDuie.

Here you eat in a 100-year-old former schoolroom overlooking a lake teeming with geese and the Mayfield vines. A highlight of the French-inspired modern Australian menu is twice-cooked pork belly with potatoes boulangere, pickled cabbage and spinach.

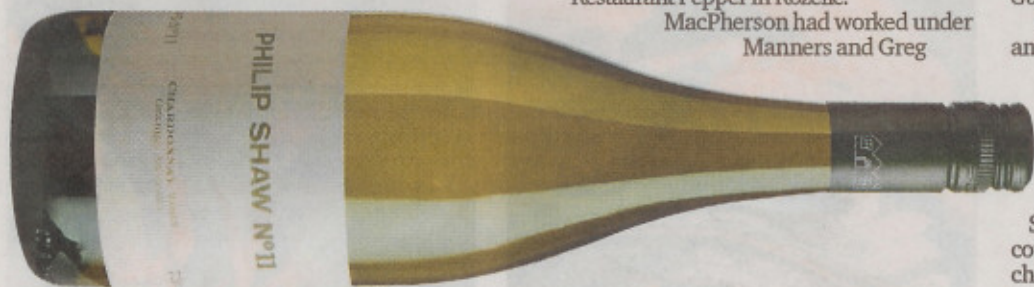
If you fancy something lighter, maybe a pasta or pizza at lunchtime, head back into town and sample the trendy but relaxed Belgravia @ Union Bank, the hangout for Orange winemakers and foodies.

This heritage-listed bank building serves as a cellar door, wine bar, cafe and live music venue. There's a lovely courtyard, a real buzz, and local produce is highlighted in such dishes as linguine and Bumbaldry rabbit ragout, outstanding risottos, or maybe Manners and Borg gourmet sausages with mash.

Wine educator Peter Bourne holds regular classes here but Sundays are for kicking back with a glass of wine in the courtyard while enjoying the entertainment. There's plenty of good wine advice available here, too. Manager Peta Swift is married to David Swift of Printhe Wines.

Other popular hangouts include Sister's Rock at Borrodell on the Mount, Fiorini's for Italian food, the French fare of La Colline and the vegetarian cuisine at Bodhi Garden.

The recently opened Bill's Beans brings Sydney-quality coffee to the country, while self-





caterers can pick up a range of gourmet ready-to-heat meals from Manners and Borg, the venture of former iconic chef Michael Manners. The small store also makes its own rillettes, terrines and desserts.

The pretty hamlet of Millthorpe, a 20-minute drive, is home not only to Tonic, one of the best restaurants in the state, but also an upmarket cafe and a hip local pub. All this in a town of just 600 (lucky) souls.

Tonic, which opened in 2003 in a late 1800s former department store, has a hat in the *Good Food Guide* for dishes like a lip-smackingly good oxtail pithivier, duck terrine with chunks

of pear, or melt-in-the-mouth pork loin with spinach. Chef Tony Worland, a protege of uber chef Matt Moran, promotes local produce and wines. If you love fine food, it is worth visiting on the second Saturday of the month, when the Orange Regional Farmers' Market is held. It's the perfect spot to sample some local cherries (the district has long been known for its fruit), local venison sausage or a range of obscure but delicious potatoes and other vegetables.

Then there are the wines. Over the past two decades, Orange has been building a formidable reputation for the quality of its cool-climate offerings; and the district really is cool-



> TRIP NOTES

■ **Getting there** Regional Express operates daily services between Sydney and Orange. Phone 131713 or see www.rex.com.au. Orange is a 3½-hour drive from Sydney via Lithgow and Bathurst.

Culinary delights ... (clockwise from left) Mayfield Vineyard; Orange Growers' Market quinces; terrine entre at Selkirks; the quail saltimbocca at Lollì Redini.

Photos: Robert Bruce, Steve Gosch, Pat Scala.



climate. In winter it can be downright chilly. With vineyards planted at a range of altitudes, Orange is also versatile with shiraz, cabernet sauvignon, merlot, pinot noir and several Italian grape varieties thriving alongside chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, riesling, pinot gris and gewurztraminer.

Canobolas-Smith, Bloodwood, Mayfield Vineyard, Patina and Word Of Mouth have impressive ranges while some of the cellar doors worth visiting include Cargo Road, Borrodell on the Mount, Printhe, Dindima, Angullong, Prince of Orange, Brangayne, Indigo Ridge and Millamolong – a beautiful

property well out of town. Philip Shaw, the former chief winemaker for Southcorp and a two-time international winemaker of the year, makes wines under the Philip Shaw Wines label from his own Koomooloo Vineyard, as well as for the fast-emerging big-production Rolling and Climbing labels for Cumulus Wines.

The Shaw family lounge room acts as a cellar door at weekends – a very different experience.

The locals have adopted the slogan "Taste Orange" and annual food and wine festivals include E.O.O.D Week each April, Taste Orange at Bondi (September 15-21) and Orange Wine Week (October 17-26).