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ESCAPE



FRUITS OF THE GODS



The Granite Belt now offers a world tour of wine varieties in a single destination

DES HOUGHTON

I was rolling down the New England Highway towards Stanthorpe on the Granite Belt in search of strange birds when I was blindsided by the dazzling pink and white camellia blooms. The camellia shrubs ran the length of a little white church where vintners Bryce and Paddy Kassulke worshipped in the '80s and '90s.

These days, Our Lady Help of Christians at Thulimbah, on the edge of Stanthorpe, attracts a more secular crowd. However, they still come in search of the fruits of the gods – and double-shot espressos.

The Kassulkes and their winemaking son John Handy from Heritage Estate bought the church from the Catholic parish and turned it into a wine cellar serving light meals. Handy's chardonnay has won national acclaim and his fiano is a gold medal winner. Fiano is one of the strange

birds, or alternative grape varieties, for which this region is renowned. There is even a strange bird tourist trail with a map and a pronunciation guide.

Fiano is an ancient variety from southern Italy ranging in style from taut and minerally to rich and nutty. Handy has delivered a version with tropical fruit flavours and spice, and a savoury finish.

There is a purple patch of 50 or more wineries on the Granite Belt offering traditional varieties such as shiraz and chardonnay, and 27 strange birds. The whole area has suddenly become a world tour of wine regions rolled into one. It offers varieties such as nebbiolo from Italy, malbec from France, tempranillo from Spain, verdello from Portugal, Pinotage from South Africa and saperavi, all the way from the ancient Russian state of Georgia.

Across the road from the church a huge apple sits atop a pole to signal the entrance to Vincenzo's at the Big Apple, a fine delicatessen and cafe featuring local wines, fruit and vegetables and locally made charcuterie and cheese, and imported Italian products. Where else can you buy smoked venison ham from wild deer culled just 30 clicks down the highway?

A trip to the Granite Belt is a journey into Queensland's culinary heartland, to a chunk of oddball terrain where

fruit and vegetables, wine grapes, and fat lambs and goats jostle for space beside the biggest granite boulders you have ever seen. There are a million apple trees and probably a similar number of grapevines. It is a stone fruit nirvana, and the figs are also heavenly. A surprise awaits around every corner. Jamworks Gourmet Foods at Glen Aplin, for example, makes 100 jams, preserves and sauces using local produce and offers Devonshire teas.

And now the Granite Belt is emerging as the strawberry capital, with grapevines ruthlessly pulled for strawberry runners. The Barrel Room Restaurant and Larder at Ballandean Estate winery offers local pork and goat dishes. Chefs forage for wild fennel seeds and wild asparagus that mysteriously sprout in the vineyards.

In Stanthorpe, grey nomads throw down a picnic blanket on the banks of Quart Pot Creek, which has been beautifully landscaped by the council. Across town, the Queensland College of Wine Tourism runs tastings of reds and whites made by students under the Banca Ridge label. The college has a huge training kitchen and an excellent restaurant called Varias, which offers a mini-degustation dubbed a "medley of mains" with matching wines.

The college also runs "meet the maker" tours to farms, and winemaking and cooking classes. It can arrange "nose to toes" experiences where tourists are taught to disassemble a whole pig to make sausages and salami, perhaps finishing with slow-roasted pork belly back at the college.

And there is much more to do than feed your face and plug wine. There is a golf course. There are cycling and horseriding trails. Fish for Murray cod and yellowbelly at Storm King Dam and the Severn River. Or you could head south to Girraween National Park, a 250 million-year-old rock show formed from volcanic magma. It is eerily beautiful, almost spooky, big boulder country.

The more adventurous may attempt a six-hour, 20km trek past formations known as the Pyramid or the Sphinx.

Or you could go to Granite Arch, as I did, for a gentler 1.6km hike past a botanical bonanza of bottlebrush, orchids, native bluebells and rock roses. Birdlife abounds.



(Above) Angelo Puglisi of Ballandean; Savina Lane graciانو; the Barrel Room. (Opposite, clockwise) Shiraz grapes; Granite Belt cheeses; Twisted Gum's Tim & Michelle Coelli; Brad & Cheryl Hutchings, of Savina Lane.

TRAVEL MATE

CELLAR DOORS

Tobin Wines 34 Ricca Rd Ballandean. The delightfully idiosyncratic Adrian Tobin offers tastings beside his barrel room. His wines are hidden gems. Tobin's semillon has been compared to the very best from the Hunter Valley and his reds also dazzle. Phone 4684 1235

Savina Lane Wines 90 Savina Lane, Severnlea. Has a French-style cellar and tasting room created by Sunshine Coast treechangers Brad and Cheryl Hutchings. Gold medal shiraz from 50-year-old vines. Try their tempranillo, graciانو, fiano, viognier. Reopens in June. Ph 4683 5377

Robert Channon Wines 32 Bradley Lane, Stanthorpe. Cafe overlooks lake. Open 10am-5pm weekends and Friday, Monday and Tuesday, 11am-4pm. Must try: Robert Channon Granite Belt Verdelho 2015, Champion White Wine and a gold medal winner at the Queensland Wine Awards: robertchannonwines.com

Ballandean Estate 354 Sundown Rd, Ballandean. Angelo and Mary Puglisi and family offer more than two dozen varieties to sip, including an outstanding shiraz. Open 9am-5pm daily. For the sweet tooth, 2014 Ballandean Estate Late Harvest Sylvaner: ballandeanestate.com

Twisted Gum Winery 2253 Eukey Rd, Ballandean. Open from 10am on weekends or by appointment (ph 0404 007494). Owners Tim and Michelle Coelli invite you to try their unwooded chardonnay, pink moscato and cabernet: twistedgum.com.au

Kominos Wines 27145 New England Hwy, Glen Aplin. Sample Tony and Mary Comino's award-winning merlot, cabernet sauvignon and sauvignon blanc: kominos-wines.com/wine.htm

Boireann Winery Cellar Door, 26 Donnellys Castle Rd, The Summit. Open 10am-4pm Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday and school holidays. Winemaker Peter Stark offers an exciting round of red blends. Try also the 2014 Boireann Cabernet Sauvignon: boireannwinery.com.au

FOOD TRAIL

Mt Sterling Olives Collins Rd, Glen Aplin. Owners Jim Miller and Vivienne Quinn: ph 4683 4270

Mallow Lamb (Organic) 1929 Stanthorpe-Texas Rd. Owners Andrew and Helen Ferrier: ph 46836236

Symara Organic Farm 45 Dunns Rd, The Summit. Owners Ray and Samantha Palmer. Vegetables, herbs and fruit. Load up the car: ph 4683 2332

Suttons Farm 10 Halloran Dr, Thulimbah. Owners David and Roslyn Sutton. Set in an apple orchard. Offers cider, juice and syrups. Try David's apple brandy distilled on-site: ph 4685 2464

Stanthorpe Cheese 4 Duncan Lane, Thulimbah. Farmhouse cheeses by Rosco and Karen Deeth: ph 4685 2277

The Bramble Patch 381 Townsend Rd, Glen Aplin. Owner Don Stirling. Jams, jellies, savoury sauces, chutneys: ph 4683 4205

STAYING THERE

Ridgemill Estate Donges Rd, Severnlea. Hip studio-style cabins set in the vineyard from \$155 a night a couple. Free bottle of wine and cheese platter on arrival: ridgemill-estate.com

Cedar Lodge 108 Sugarloaf Rd, Stanthorpe. Comfortable, affordable. Stroll to main street, parks and restaurant. Mid-week specials; three nights for \$330. Weekends \$145 per night for two, \$30 a head for extras: ph 4681 2253

Twisted Gum 2253 Eukey Rd, Ballandean. Renovated 1920s farmhouse in vineyard. Sleeps six. Rates: \$330 for four per night, \$30 per person extra: ph 4684 1282

Apple & Grape Motel Traditional motel in the heart of Stanthorpe, rooms from \$130: appleandgrape.com.au

Alure Stanthorpe Upscale. Dog-friendly. Also offers "glamping" in luxury tents. Heated outdoor spa for stargazing at night. Midweek from \$360 per couple. Weekend rates from \$460: alurestanthorpe.com.au

31 The Rocks Charming, private studio, two- and three-bedroom villas from \$150-180 a night for two. Wheelchair ramps: 31therocks.com