

A taste for the top spot



Fruits of labour ... vineyards of Orange, first planted commercially in the 1980s.

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In Orange, the Hunter Valley has a rival that aims to knock it from its lofty perch, writes Winsor Dobbin.

The Hunter Valley is the undisputed heavyweight champion of NSW regions. It's where you find the big-name cellar doors, restaurants and top-notch hotels.

There's a challenger on the scene, however. Orange, in the central west of NSW, is younger, keen and packing a real promotional punch.

In contrast to the Hunter's vinous history which stretches back several generations it was not until the early 1980s that wine grapes were planted commercially in Orange by regional pioneers Bloodwood and Cargo Road.

Over the past two decades, as cool-climate wines have become increasingly fashionable, Orange a 3½-hour drive west of Sydney has developed into a gourmet destination that is closing in on its better-known rival.

And the winemakers and food producers of the Orange region born from an 1851 gold rush are not backward in coming forward about the merits of their district and host a series of festivals throughout the year.

Slow Summer is held every February, the annual F.O.O.D Week is held each April, Frost Fest is held in August and Orange Wine Week each October.

The Orange Region Farmers' Market is held on the second Saturday of each month and is the ideal spot to pick up local produce from Mandagery Creek venison to obscure potatoes and stone fruits while Orange hits the city once a year with Taste Orange at Bondi, scheduled for August 24-30 this year, and featuring a large program of tastings and dinners.

No fewer than a dozen Orange-based establishments are highlighted in the Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide 2009 more than any other town of a similar size.

The restaurant options are numerous. In addition to long-time local favourites Lolli Redini, Selkirks, Tonic at nearby Millthorpe and the Union Bank Wine Bar and Wine Store (its courtyard is a great place to kick back in), there have also been some exciting changes.

Star local chef Shaun Arantz and his partner, Willa McDuié, moved recently from their one-hat School House restaurant at Mayfield Vineyard to set up their own restaurant, Racine, at La Colline vineyard.

The newcomer is on the site of the former La Colline Restaurant on Lake Canobolas Road and has been refurbished to create a French bistro ambience.

Arantz and McDuié are following their ambition of creating their own "dream country restaurant".

"We live in such a great area for produce and I am a passionate believer in supporting local businesses and making an area prosperous," Arantz says.

"This move has really shown us just what a wonderful and supportive area Orange is. Although we will feature wines from all over Australia and the world, we will make a conscious effort to represent all local drops."

Meanwhile, the School House has reduced its hours to just Saturday and Sunday lunches with Simonn Hawke taking over the management in addition to running Lolli Redini.

Hawke has instituted Trust the Chef menus featuring classic country food, both seasonal and regional, in the century-old building.

With grapes being grown at elevations varying from 600 metres to 1100 metres, Orange is one of Australia's most versatile wine regions with shiraz, cabernet sauvignon, merlot, pinot noir and several Italian grape varieties thriving alongside chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, riesling, pinot gris and gewurztraminer.

In the Hunter, by way of contrast, the climate means only shiraz, semillon and chardonnay (and sometimes verdelho) are reliable varieties.

"The region's real strength is in its diversity," says Kim Currie, executive officer of Brand Orange, which promotes the region's gourmet activities. "There is a real sense of community here, with people working together.

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

Names to look for include Printhie, where winery tours are available, Canobolas-Smith, Cargo Road, Mayfield Vineyard, Word of Mouth, Belgravia, Ross Hill, Dindima and Angullong. Cumulus, the largest producer in the region, makes wines under the Climbing and Rolling labels.

At Philip Shaw and Patina, the cellar doors are the winemakers' lounge rooms adding to the "authentic" country experience.

As a young region, Orange has not yet definitely decided on a flagship variety but it could be sauvignon blanc. Logan and Angullong both won trophies at the Sydney Wine Show for their 2008 sauvignons, while Brangayne and Word of Mouth have also enjoyed immense success.

Angullong owner Ben Crossing believes wines from Orange continue to improve.

"The quality of fruit grown in the region is steadily increasing as the vineyards mature," he says. "The altitude and cool climate help us to consistently grow some of the best sauvignon blanc and aromatic whites."

For those keen on some wine tasting over a weekend, there are plenty of accommodation options in town, with the de Russie Suites the most upmarket option and Cotehele a very popular B&B.

Other favourites include the serviced accommodation at Moulder Mews, the Old Convent, Arancia, Greentrees, Cloudgap and the Black Sheep Inn but beware, Orange is now so popular at weekends that it pays to book well in advance.

For those wishing to take a few bottles home, the Union Bank Wine Store has an excellent range from all the major local wine producers.