

The bountiful Bellarine is the new backyard for mates and couples to hang out to drink cider and wine, devour fine food and admire the view, writes **BLANCHE CLARK**

THE tasting paddle slides onto the bar in front of us. Four ciders in a row, with an extra one on the side for good measure. The first, the Flying Brick Original Cider, is refreshing, the type you could drink all summer long.

But wait, this second one, the pear cider, I prefer this one. It's drier, more quenching. The draught is next. Definitely bolder, more sophisticated.

I'm torn now, especially when I try the "PAV" pear and apple varieties. It's earthy, and my palate is developing as I sip it (I'm trying not to gulp it down).

But No.5, this surely is the piece de resistance, the limited edition "PACHINGA" pear, chilli, ginger and lime. There's a subtle chilli and ginger hit, an unexpected zing that offsets the lime.

Who are the alchemists who have created this tingly take on the hipster brew? Wine maker Nyall Condon, from nearby Jack Rabbit Vineyard, and executive chef Dwayne Bourke, of Flying Brick Cider House (right), take the credit for this one.

Condon says cider can be as diverse as wine. "It has such an incredibly long history; there's over 4500 known varieties," he says. "There's new ones popping up every day. It's exciting to think what we could and will end up doing with that. It might become more like wine in the sense of becoming single varietal."

The PAV is made from a harvest of local wild apples in the English "scrumpy" tradition and all profits go to the Movember Foundation.

Condon says different yeast strains can make cider more complex.

"With some of the small speciality ciders, I've introduced oak maturation like wine making, barrel ageing. You can have skin contact to introduce more phenolic compounds; the sky is limitless. Of course, ciders can be still or carbonated, they can be sweet or dry, they can be filtered or unfiltered. It's a lot of fun."

The choices continue when you sit down to dinner at Flying Brick. There are numerous plates to share: the fried cauliflower, the moist duck empanadas shaped like wafers rather than pies, and the slow-cooked lamb shoulder are among my recommendations.

For years I've driven down the Princes Highway to Geelong and veered off to the right, following the Great Ocean Road, unaware of the Bellarine Peninsula's bounty. That's the reason the panoramic view of Geelong, the You Yangs and Melbourne from Jack Rabbit Vineyard seems all the more astounding to me.

Has this scenery been here all the time? Why didn't someone tell me?

The transformation from stressed-out city worker to holiday-maker is almost instantaneous as we sit down to lunch at Jack Rabbit's restaurant (right) earlier that day.

It's the first week of executive chef David Warmisham's spring menu and it's hard to go past the smoked local mussels. This entree is served with tomato five ways, pickled shallot, house-made ricotta and crispy vine leaves.

Mains range from eye fillet to a rack of wild clover lamb, potato gnocchi and poussin.

There is wine tasting and more casual meals in the adjacent House of Jack Rabbit cafe.

After a drive around Portarlington, and a walk along the foreshore, greeting friendly locals and patting dogs, we check in at Starhaven Retreat, featured on TV's *Grand Designs*, in Indented Head.

Robert and Ian's seven-bedroom home with



escape

CIDER house rules

THE DEAL

GETTING THERE

Bellarine Peninsula is a 90-minute drive from Melbourne.

STAYING THERE

Starhaven Retreat, Indented Head. starhaven.com.au

EATING & DRINKING THERE

Jack Rabbit Vineyard, Bellarine. jackrabbitvineyard.com.au
Flying Brick Cider House, Wallington. flyingbrickciderco.com.au
Leura Park Estate, Curlewis. leuraparkestate.com.au

DOING THERE

Segway Geelong. segwaygeelong.com

The 15th Annual Toast to the Coast, celebrating the best wine and produce from the Bellarine, Moorabool Valley and Surf Coast, is on October 29-30. toasttothecoast.com.au

15-seat cinema, bar, games room, large spa and rooftop garden has become a B&B, offering deluxe accommodation with a difference.

It's also wheelchair-accessible.

Robert gives us a guided tour, then a lesson on the Apple TV, so there's always the option of bunkering down after a spa and sauna.

In the morning, Ian's at the helm in the kitchen, delivering cooked breakfasts made with local ingredients to the guests gathered at the communal table. Conversation is free flowing and the view of the water helps maintain holiday mode.

While the other guests check out the community market in Portarlington, we head to Leura Park Estate.

We meet Tim, of Segway Geelong, behind the cellar door for a 20-minute Segway lesson before we wend our way across paddocks and around the vineyards.

After 15 minutes, Tim cranks up the power, and we race past the vines.

It takes a few minutes to readjust to terra firma, before wandering to the cellar door to enjoy a wine tasting before lunch.

The Grand Vintage sparkling blanc de blanc and Ms Flamingo &

Associates certainly qualify as Spring Carnival cache, while the sauvignon blanc, 25 d'Gris pinot gris and single vineyard viognier fight for a seat at the lunch table.

It is, however, the Block 1 hand picked reserve chardonnay that asserts itself.

Leura Estate dining is a laid-back affair of local gourmet produce and stone-cooked pizzas, though there's nothing blasé about The Vault dining hall with its impressive sculpted concrete roof.

It's the perfect place for groups to enjoy the grazing menu for \$30 a head.

This time the view is of the Curlewis Golf Club, where plans are afoot for a clubhouse redevelopment and new small-scale eco accommodation.

It's just one more reason to explore and adore the Bellarine.

The writer was a guest of Leura Park Estate and Starhaven Retreat

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Dromana	5987 0555	Scoresby	9763 5855
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Moorabbin	9557 9522	West Footscray	9396 1235

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