

WINE TIM WHITE



On the pinot train

Victoria's Mornington Peninsula is emerging as a seriously attractive destination for wine lovers.

As a wine writer, I find it easy to forget that ordinary people — not just the wine obsessed — populate wine regions. It's easy to do as, normally, when I venture to wine country, I do so with other wine-minded types.

But on my most recent visit to the Mornington Peninsula I took the train — the M-Train — from Flinders Street Station in central Melbourne to Bittern. I didn't overhear a word about wine, not even after I'd caught the connection at Frankston for the two-carriage, cross-country diesel to wine country proper.

The two carriages were loaded with locals: workers on their way home; kids returning from a day in town, chatting and checking out each other's purchases; and every now and then weekend cyclists hopping on and off. The guard chatted with his regulars and checked the manual doors before the train moved on.

I wondered how many of these people paid any attention to the

local wine industry. Certainly, some of them would be touched by it, as it contributes substantially to regional employment, directly or indirectly. Across the country some 70,000 jobs depend on it.

The Mornington Peninsula has changed dramatically over the past five years though there's still only 750 hectares of land devoted to the vine, less than a fifth of that in the Yarra Valley. This is not surprising given the challenges of Mornington Peninsula viticulture and the high cost of suitable land.

But the place has become more professional. Where once the scene appeared dominated by top-end-of-town absentee landlords who might, if you were lucky, open their cellar door for the Queen's birthday weekend, there are now dozens of wineries open during the week, and even more at weekends. There's a comprehensive list of wineries and opening times on the Mornington Peninsula Vignerons website (www.mpva.com.au).

Wines are generally improving

too, although at a tasting of regional pinot noirs held at Lindenderry during my visit it was apparent that there is still a lot of work to be done by many wineries.

However, three wines selected for next year's Mornington Peninsula Pinot Celebration were excellent. The Willow Creek Tulum 2002 was tangy and fragrant, full of mouth-watering raspberry black cherry fruit. The Paringa Estate '02 was all about the wild strawberry fragrance and flavour that hallmark fine pinot noir. The '02 Scorpo was more savoury, tasting of black cherry and plum.

The quality of these wines is significant as 2002 was a difficult, cool year on the Mornington Peninsula. They show just how much things have improved although, as wine lovers will be aware, Paringa has developed an enviable reputation for the consistently high quality of its wine over the past decade. Willow Creek has improved beyond sight in just a couple of years since the arrival

of energetic and enthusiastic winemaker-manager, Phil Kerney.

Entry point prices for peninsula wines can appear high. But there's a reality check taking place as there's going to be a lot of extra fruit available from this vintage.

Kevin McCarthy of T'Gallant, now owned by industry giant Beringer-Blass, says the wine they are growing most rapidly is the \$20 a bottle Cape Schanck label. "It's a great way to introduce wine drinkers to Mornington Peninsula wine," McCarthy says.

At Montalto, arguably the dining destination on the peninsula, they offer a \$23 pinot noir under the Pennon label. As owner John Mitchell puts it, "People have their heads in the sand if they think the Mornington Peninsula has only \$45 wines." Wines under the Pennon label are grown and made in exactly the same way as for the top Montalto label. The selections are made at blending after the wine is finished.

Winemaker Sandro Mosele of Kooyong says he too is thinking of releasing an entry level (\$25) pinot noir to complement Kooyong's tiny production of regular (\$40) and single block (\$55) wines. This despite the fact that Kooyong sells out of its chardonnay and pinot noir almost on release.

A wider range of prices can only help spread the Mornington Peninsula word. The region offers a concentration and variety of food and wine destinations which are the match of many more famous wine regions in other states.

They can be as grand as the Yarra, as historic as the Barossa or Hunter, but it's got heaps to offer. And there's the train ride.

More on Mornington, L11

PENINSULA EATING & SLEEPING

Montalto Vineyard and Olive Grove Red Hill South (03) 5989 8412

This is probably the most elegant cellar door and restaurant structure on the peninsula and it is certainly regarded as the place for a high quality dining experience.

Melburnians travel up from town just to eat here, so make sure you book well ahead if you're planning a weekend away.

Willow Creek Vineyard Merricks North (03) 5989 7448

Willow Creek wines have improved dramatically since winemaker-manager Phil Kerney arrived. The winery's restaurant, Salix, is one of the best spots in the region to enjoy first-rate food with your wine.

Marinda Park Vineyard Balnarring (03) 5989 7613

You might prefer to order

lunch from the changing blackboard menu inside Marinda Park's barrel-filled café, but when it's warm and sunny life's even better outside on the terrace overlooking the vineyard, eating modestly-priced snacky things at any time of the day.

Lindenderry at Red Hill Red Hill (03) 5989 2933

Deluxe accommodation, now with seriously eatable food, and the perfect place

for a full-facility corporate retreat.

Moorooduc Estate Moorooduc (03) 5971 8506

The estate offers stylish, secluded accommodation in its rammed earth restaurant and guesthouse with proprietor-cook Jill McIntyre matching the food to the bucolic surroundings. At vintage time you're in the thick of the action.