

Johnny Wilson
PROTECTING GOTHAM CITY
SINCE LUNCHTIME

Taste *of* relaxation

Every sense is indulged in a trip to the Hunter Valley, writes *Pamela Wilson*.

Reaching bone-breaking speeds and feeling the wind whip at my hair, it's as if I am on an amusement ride at Dreamworld. But I'm not.

This rush comes courtesy of my Norco Bigfoot mountain bike and the monumentally steep Mount View Road in the Hunter Valley, 150 km north of Sydney. I am experiencing wine country on a pushbike.

Wine tour weekends are, to me, sensory adventures. When I visit wineries, I want to give my sense of smell and taste an education in maturity, rolling the tannins and grape blends over my tongue.

But it doesn't end there. Wine country is the perfect destination to heighten all of one's senses, and leisurely riding a pushbike up and down dirt roads, past patchwork fields and beside trees literally humming with bird-song, affords just that experience.

On a bike, the roads are quiet and serene, and the sun and the breeze heighten the warm glow you feel when leaving a wine-tasting session. From the confines of a car, however, the roads seem bumpy, the radio obnoxious and the air-conditioning too hot or cold.

The Hunter Valley region extends

more than 12,000 km² and takes in about 120 wineries, so a little planning and forethought are mandatory for those touring around on bikes.

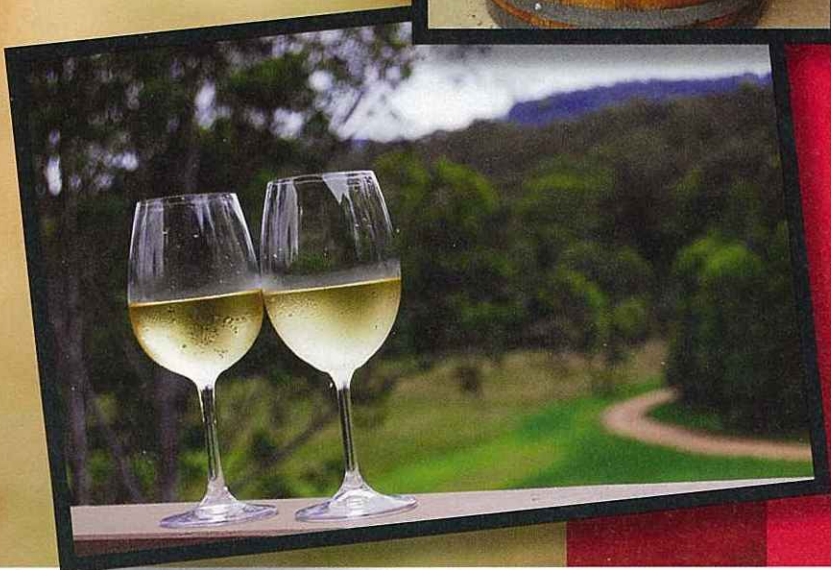
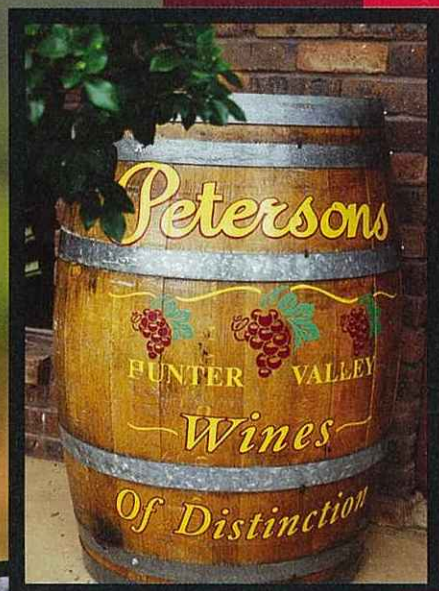
So, armed with a courtesy map from the Hunter Valley Wine Country tourism office, a pencil and a thirst for chardonnay, I begin ticking off wineries as if marking items on a shopping list.

When my husband points out the distances we will have to travel under our own steam, albeit aided by 24 gears and hopefully a tailwind, I narrow the field to include just those wineries along the Mount View wine trail.

Main photo by James Pipino; Tourism NSW. All other photos by Pam Wilson.



Sights to savour: main image, flowering vines in the Hunter Valley; above, dinner at Bistro Molines is alchemy for foodies; below, Petersons Wines is worth the 500 m climb; bottom, Cedars Mount View has jaw-dropping vistas.



The reasons for this choice are three-fold. Firstly, I am of the firm opinion this is by far the most picturesque and serene of all the regions in the Hunter Valley.

Secondly, as Kevin from Savannah Estate Wines so eloquently informs us: "Not everyone makes it down here, but those folk who know about good-tasting, quality wine do."

Sure, he may be biased, but I tend to agree with him. Every visit I make to the Hunter Valley – famed for its semillon and shiraz – includes a trip to the Mount View wineries, and they never fail to impress.

This trip is no exception. Coasting casually along the driveway to Savannah's cottage-style cellar door (which is owned by Petersons Wines), we see Kevin swamped by no less than 40 tourists, all jostling for a spot at the counter.

With a smile and a relaxed attitude that belies the chaos around him, Kevin promises he won't be long.

True to his word, within 10 minutes he waves to the last of the tour buses and tends to us for the next 90 minutes as we badger him for information on the latest crops and drops.

This brings me to the third reason I



Road to somewhere: the writer prepares to pedal down the track outside Briar Ridge.

often choose the Mount View region. The service is always personal, genuine and unhurried in this neck of the woods.

Whether you choose this region to tour or another in the Hunter Valley, if you are cycling, there are a couple of things you need to be bear in mind.

Firstly, you are bound to the same blood alcohol regulations as if at the wheel of a motorised vehicle. That means a blood alcohol limit of 0.05. I have a motto that I follow when tasting wines: If in doubt, spit out.

Secondly, those hills that one may happily skate down at breakneck speed will, of course, have to be navigated on the ascent.

So, my tip is to shift into low gear, take it slow, chug two glasses of water at the top and rest your racing heart for about 20 minutes before tasting the new batch of wines so that they go down smoothly.

The one vineyard where I strongly recommend this advice is at Petersons Wines. With the cellar door perched at the top of a 500 m steep incline, not only is it a heartbreaker of a hill, everyone can see you coming (so you don't want to tire too easily and have to walk).

Standing behind the counter with a welcoming grin, Kathryn lines up two glasses of iced water and personally hands them to us as we walk in.

Some 15 minutes later, with our heart rates normalising, the chatter flowing and a complimentary bowl of cheese and biscuits in front of us, we relax, swirl, swill and take the time to discover the passionfruit, vanilla and buttery undertones hidden in the wines.

An hour later, feeling more like we are farewelling long-time friends than acquaintances, we are presented with a personalised, laminated certificate of distinction for making it up the hill.

Back on the bikes, it's time to sample the wines at Briar Ridge while sitting on the deck watching the sun begin its descent towards the end of the day.

As if serving us at a restaurant, a staff member brings bottle after bottle for tasting, and with a smile each time no less.

Truth be told, though, the two highlights of our weekend away come in the

form of culinary experiences.

Lunch at Briar Grillade (located at Briar Ridge) and dinner at Bistro Molines (at Tallavera Grove Estate), both owned by Robert Molines, literally have our tastebuds somersaulting.

At lunch young, up-and-coming chef Samuel Alexander takes the melt-in-the-mouth compliment to a whole new level with his duck in brown butter sauce with creamy polenta and crispy sage.

He even relishes the notion of passing on some trade secrets when we corner him at his barbecue begging for the recipe.

At dinner at Bistro Molines, meanwhile, we are presented with rich, French-inspired dishes such as baked figs wrapped in prosciutto; baby calamari stuffed with chorizo and parsley and served with a

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sauce made with gorgonzola cheese; and twice-roasted Hunter duckling with a braised cabbage and peach glaze.

Calling it a day before the dessert menu tempts us, my husband and I slowly wind our way – this time in the car – back up the hill, over the other side and down into our secluded honeymoon-style hideaway at Cedars Mount View.

Staring into the shadows cast by the moonlight through the branches of the tall trees near our veranda, my senses are in for a treat once more: this time from the cacophony of croaks and creaks from the frogs and crickets that inhabit the dam below.

Finally, easing my weary body chest-deep into the spa on the raised level of our timber cottage, I am ready to let my over-excited senses settle for the evening.

Blissfully, there is no telephone or Internet access in our cottage, there is no hum from nearby traffic, there is just the melodic disco from the local fauna to lull me even further into a state of deep relaxation.