

# AUSTRALIA: ON TOP OF THE WORLD, DOWN UNDER

For any wine lover, a trip down under to visit the vineyards and wineries of Australia is almost certainly the experience of a lifetime. It's worth taking your time exploring the wine routes of this vast country—you'll be rewarded with magnificent vistas, fascinating flora and fauna, vibrant cities, fantastic fine dining, and of course a whole new world's worth of delicious and diverse wines. Two road trips in the southeast of the country take in everything from century-old vines to cutting-edge, new-wave winemaking

**H**ave you noticed that Australia is in the middle of a revolution? It's got nothing to do with politics (which makes a pleasant change); instead, the recent upheavals have seen a fundamental shift in terms of the styles of wines being made in the country. Although you can still find plenty of fruit-driven, alcohol-rich, sunshine-in-a-glass bottles in Australia, there's a growing interest in elegance, balance, and perfume.

The best way to gain an understanding of what's going on down under is by setting off on that most Australian of experiences—a road trip. Choosing one or both of two itineraries should give you plenty of insight. The first takes you on an inland journey from Sydney to Melbourne, while the second is focused on South Australia, the heartland of the Australian wine industry.

## Sydney to Melbourne

The first couple of hours of the trip south from Sydney follows an unexciting stretch of the Hume Highway. Once you're done admiring the gum forests that line the road, as well as the vast expanse of blue sky, there's little to catch the eye. Bear with it, though, because the first winery of the trip is worth a bit of tedium. Clonakilla pioneered the trend toward peppery, smoky, cool-climate styles of Shiraz in Australia, and its Shiraz/Viognier has become a classic of the style.

From Clonakilla you've got a chance to contemplate the vastness of the Australian countryside once again as you head south to Beechworth, which should become your base for at least a couple of days spent exploring Victoria's rich viticultural

diversity. This charming little town is home to some of Australia's most iconic wineries, including Castagna and Giaconda ([www.castagna.com.au](http://www.castagna.com.au); [www.giaconda.com.au](http://www.giaconda.com.au)—both open by appointment only), and also offers a number of good places to eat and drink.

It's an easy drive from Beechworth to Rutherglen, source of Australia's best fortified Muscats and Topaques, as well as the King and Alpine Valleys, whose hilly vineyards are planted with an extraordinary diversity of grape varieties. From this point onward you have a choice of itinerary. If time is short, push on to the Yarra Valley, but if you have time, it's worth meandering south via the Goulburn Valley, Nagambie Lakes, Heathcote, and the Macedon Ranges, all areas known for their boutique wineries. If you decided to explore these regions, make sure you check out Wine X Sam ([www.winebysam.com.au](http://www.winebysam.com.au)), Fowles Wine ([www.fowleswine.com](http://www.fowleswine.com)), Jasper Hill ([www.jasperhill.com.au](http://www.jasperhill.com.au)), Bindi ([www.bindiwines.com.au](http://www.bindiwines.com.au)), and Curly Flat ([www.curlyflat.com](http://www.curlyflat.com)) on your way through. These are all fairly small wineries, so it's best to make an appointment before dropping in.

As you near Melbourne, diversity of styles and grapes gives way to a tighter focus on Pinot Noir and Chardonnay (with a few notable exceptions). The most famous region in the Melbourne Dress Circle (the wine-growing areas located in a tight ring around Melbourne) is the Yarra Valley, epicenter of Australia's trend for leaner, tauter Chardonnays. The best place to base yourself for an exploration of the valley is Healesville. Kids will love the zoo, with its opportunities to get up close and personal

Above: View of Lake Hume and Murray Valley Highway near Tallangatta, Victoria.  
Next page: Shiraz harvest amid some of the venerable vines of Barossa Valley.



with kangaroos and koalas, while adults may prefer the huge diversity of wineries, many of which have terrific restaurants.

Once you're done with the Yarra, allow yourself a couple of days to explore Melbourne before traveling on to the Mornington Peninsula, a spit of land that curves around Port Philip Bay. Here, vineyards benefit from the cool air that blows in from the Antarctic, tempering the warm summer days and creating the ideal conditions for making elegant, aromatic wines. And if you fancy a bit of time on the beach after your tasting, the Peninsula is the place to do it—as weekenders Melburnians are well aware.

## South Australia's heartland

Get to grips with the lay of the Barossan land by switchbacking your way across the folds and ridges that contribute so much to the area's terroir. Many of the wineries nestled among the hills and plains of the Barossa and Eden Valleys—and, just to the north, the Clare Valley—are among the most iconic in the whole of Australia.

Some of the vineyards you'll pass on the way are home to a fair proportion of the oldest commercially grown vines in the world. The Barossa Old Vine Charter has a tiered classification system that celebrates these illustrious vines; at its apex are the 100-plus-year-old Centenarian Vines and the venerable Ancestor Vines (of which there are around 240ha/600 acres), which clock in at a minimum of 125 years old. No wonder producers enforce rigorous anti-phylloxera measures for all vineyard visitors.

The majority of these grandfather vines are Shiraz, planted to create the fortified wines that built the local viticultural

economy and now used to make the area's hallmark rich, dry reds, but many other grapes also thrive in these vineyards. The veneration of arrow-straight, lime-tinged Riesling in the region creates a direct link to the German immigrants who settled here in the 19th century, bringing with them not only a love for the grape but also the hearty, Teutonic-style charcuterie still beloved by their descendants.

As both the Adelaide Hills and McLaren Vale are a short commute by car away from Adelaide, it makes sense to base yourself in the city for daily excursions to the wineries. On your way out to the Hills, stop off at the lookout point at Mount Lofty (a name that makes most Europeans laugh, given that its summit reaches a mere 2,385ft/727m). On a clear day you'll get a great idea of the lay of the viticultural land. The Hills are home not only to a range of cooler-climate styles—from sparkling wines, to fresh whites and lush reds—but also to a good number of South Australia's trendier wineries, including Vinteloper, BK Wines, and Ochota Barrels ([www.vinteloper.com.au](http://www.vinteloper.com.au); [www.bkwines.com.au](http://www.bkwines.com.au); [www.ochotabarrels.com](http://www.ochotabarrels.com)). McLaren Vale, which runs oceanward along the Fleurieu Peninsula, is perhaps more conservative in winemaking terms, but locals have, nonetheless, been experimenting with a greater diversity of grapes: d'Arenberg may be renowned for its eclectic range, but it is far from alone in exploring the potential for wines based on Italian and Iberian varieties ([www.darenberg.com.au](http://www.darenberg.com.au)).

Of course, if you've got a bit more time to spend in Oz—and you're not too wine-d out after your two road trips—you could always hop on a plane to Perth, a handy jumping-off point for a weekend in Margaret River, or Hobart, from where you can explore the region's up-and-coming wineries. ■