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slice of HEAVEN

On South Australia's Fleurieu Peninsula, Kendall Hill revels in old-fashioned hospitality, seriously charismatic places to stay, a growing food scene and a relaxed coastal vibe.

Photography **John Laurie**



On a misty McLaren Vale morning in late autumn,

Willunga's main street is crammed with cars and people who've come for the weekly shop. The Willunga Farmers' Market, South Australia's first farmers' market, was established in 2002 in the car park of the Alma Hotel. The highlight of that inaugural outing was the breakfast barbecue going up in flames, but from humble beginnings, historic Willunga's thriving enterprise is now one of the nation's finest produce fairs.

Dozens of stalls offer everything from Paul Polacco's wild scallops hand-harvested on the Yorke Peninsula to a dozen different potatoes in a paintbox of colours from pink fir-apple to purple sapphire. There is Mt Compass venison, Triple B biodynamic beef and Yankaponga lamb, pasture-fed on the Fleurieu. Loutish parrots hoon overhead as shoppers bundle up sulphur-free dried fruits, lavender lemonade, leek and Gorgonzola pies, persimmons and pomegranates.

Greengrocer Wes Hart of Hart's Vegetables, a market stalwart, first traded here 10 years ago with a ute and a trestle table fashioned from an old shed door. All he sold back then were white and red potatoes; today his elaborate stall bursts with a trove of freshly harvested vegetables. "It's huge now," Hart says of the weekly bazaar. "We never expected it to become anything like this."

Its success is not a complete surprise. Of all Australia's food-basket regions, the Fleurieu Peninsula, which juts out like a left foot directly below Adelaide (Yorke Peninsula is the right foot), is one of the most beautiful. It's blessed not only with exceptional produce and passionate growers but also with a pure Australian landscape that runs the gamut from rolling hills to roiling sea. From the spine of the Willunga Range, fields unfold in a patchwork of vines and olives, crops and livestock. This is not some wannabe corner of Provence or Tuscany, but a eucalypt-scented country of dry-stone walls, peach-coloured colonial piles, shrieking clouds of corellas and, ultimately, the shimmering blue fringes of the Southern Ocean.

Like so many others, I first fell for the place over a lunch with friends at the rickety Star of Greece café, dazzled by those superstar views across sparkling Gulf St Vincent. During a sun-drenched meal of squid and King George whiting, with more wine than was probably wise, one by one we succumbed to the charms of this seductive spot. And we're not the only ones so easily infatuated. Restaurateur-turned-author Gay Bilson recalls a similar lunchtime epiphany in 1998. "One day we came to Star of Greece and sat outside and had oysters and squid and cold white wine and bread and

Tasting place

Above, from left: The Boathouse on Birks Harbour; Aquacaf co-owner Ben McLeod; Star of Greece; Fino restaurant.



A good part of the appeal of this **SEASIDE PLAYGROUND** is the feeling of having discovered Adelaide's best-kept secret.

walked on the beach afterwards and I said to these friends of mine, 'I could live here', Bilson remembers. "It was that coastline..."

Despite regular holidays on the Fleurieu since my fateful lunch, I hadn't taken the time – until now – to get properly acquainted with the people who define this place. Those who, like Bilson, were drawn here by the Fleurieu's unique combination of majestic coastline, fine food and wine, Mediterranean climate and intriguing history. People who moved their lives here to realise dreams and, in the process, added immeasurably to its charms and attractions.

Ex-Queenslanders Greg and Dee Linton run Wine Diva Tours, introducing outsiders to some of the winemakers who make the peninsula tick. There are about 70 cellar doors in McLaren Vale, Linton says, but he tends to steer away from the major players in favour of small-batch producers. "Here you'll meet the guys who make the wine and grow the wine," he says. "I can pretty much fill a day with wines that people haven't tasted before."

In a region best known for its shiraz and grenache, Linton takes the road less travelled to visit Alpha Box & Dice, where winemaker Justin Lane experiments with gutsy red aglianico, and a dolcetto crafted from grapes grown on filmmaker Scott Hicks's vineyard. Lane's cellar

door is a converted stables tagged with typography and furnished with pinball machines, a stuffed armadillo and a ghetto-blaster circa 1984. "The look reflects the wines," he explains. "Very eclectic and a mishmash of ideas."

Next stop is a shed in a paddock reached by a dirt track at Sellicks, the southernmost part of McLaren Vale. In this unprepossessing setting, Paul Petagna turns out a feisty shiraz-cab blend named Diavolo, a heavenly grenache, shiraz and mourvèdre called Dio, an aniseedy Valletta grenache shiraz and a delicious Piombo, his single-vineyard shiraz.

Petagna learned the wine trade from his Italian father-in-law and has toiled in this shed since 1998, a one-man show with seven hectares of vines who produces 15 tonnes of grapes each year and exports remarkable reds to the US, Canada and Shanghai. He started with nothing, is entirely self-financed and remains totally committed to his vocation. "I see it as a lifelong study. I feel like a racehorse trainer – constantly chasing that great horse and that big win."

Petagna is a descendant of the horde of Italian and Greek migrants who emigrated to South Australia after the war and found the promised land. "I'm sure when they first landed they noticed a lot of similarities in the climate and in the land," he says. "They can grow stuff like they did over there. They're garden mad.">



Lunch, the first of many great regional meals, is at d'Arry's Verandah, fourth-generation winemaker Chester Osborn's acclaimed vineyard restaurant. Chefs Peter Reschke and Nigel Rich combine local harvest and global insight to create standout dishes such as an amuse-bouche of duck broth with parmesan foam and porcini dust, and scallop ceviche served with glassy green flying-fish roe and peach salad.

Linton collects us after the meal and informs us he's just had duck confit salad for lunch. The Fleurieu is that kind of place, where grown Aussie men admit to duck-confit moments as if it's the most natural thing in the world. Which in their world it probably is.

Our winery tour continues to Samuel's Gorge where Justin McNamee ferments elegant tempranillo, shiraz and grenache in antique French oak and slate vats at a bucolic location with views over the rippled Onkaparinga gorge. And then to meet Jason Berlingieri at Settlement Wines to savour the liquid-fruitcake flavours of his liqueur Tinta Negra Mole.

Bed that evening is at Goolwa, the Murray River port straddling the peninsula's eastern edge, about an hour's drive south of Adelaide. The Australasian hotel dates from 1858 when one Oliver Willcock was granted a licence to "provide accommodation, stabling for horses, take in dead bodies and keep a light burning outside the door all night". The corpse-minding ceased in 1883 when the mortuary opened and the pub closed for good in 1934. It had been a private residence for decades before Juliet Michell and Deborah Smalley transformed its cramped 19th-century spaces into an

eclectic, stylish inn of five rooms, each with a distinct oriental bent. The décor embraces framed silks, temple altar tables disguised as bathroom vanities, shimmering Danish lampshades in the dining room, and a sideboard salvaged from the OPSM in North Terrace, Adelaide. Their restaurant opens to the public on Saturday nights when locals congregate over crisp agedashi tofu in a kombu and shiitake broth and juicy duck marinated in orange and miso.

The Fleurieu has always been light-on for decent accommodation but The Australasian evens the balance, and up the road, Birks River House is a grand old waterfront home with river views in one direction and pool views in the other. Furnishings in the River House and neighbouring sister property the Boathouse are fittingly nautical, featuring curios such as lighthouse lamps and brass ashtrays snaffled from the *Queen Mary*.

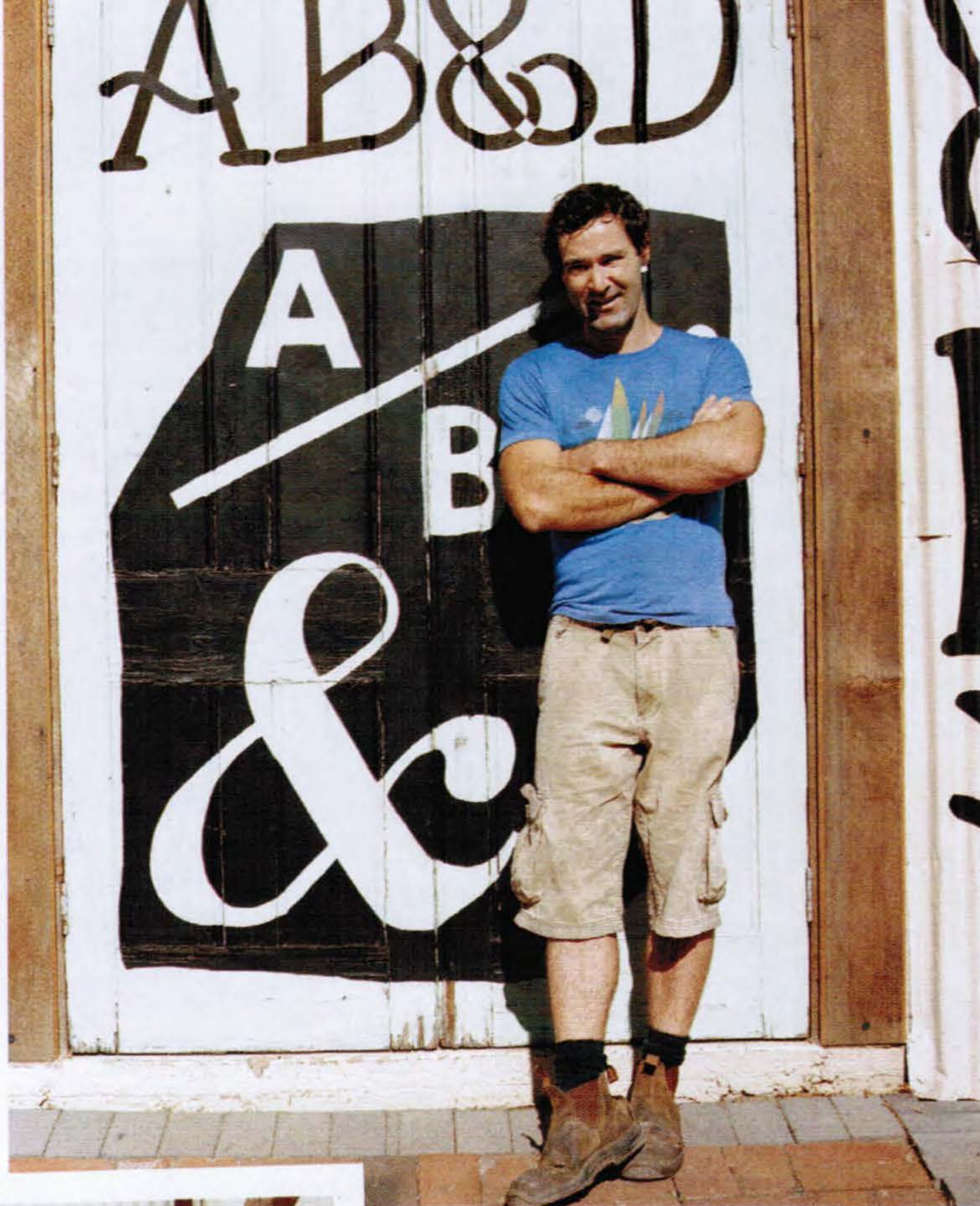
Michell's food at The Australasian is one of the region's souvenir pleasures but she's not the only one who knows how to cook. The Fleurieu has an unfair advantage when it comes to great restaurants – possibly the result of so many chefs trying to prepare food that befits McLaren Vale's sometimes legendary wines. Aside from d'Arry's and Star of Greece, there's The Salopian Inn, a slice of Shropshire on the outskirts of Willunga where chef Jamie Laing heads up the kitchen.

Down the road from The Australasian, Jordan Theodoros and Ben McLeod channel the good life at Aquacaf, a waterfront shack where casual seafood made smart (mulloway pasty, king prawn roll, fennel, prawn and chorizo salad) is the order of the day.>

New wave

Surfers at Port Willunga. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Willunga's main street includes charming shopfronts such as Minko Wines; Rose Kentish from Ulithorne wines and The Mill at Middleton; Gulf St Vincent prawns and ravioli at Salopian Inn; Paul Petagna from Petagna Wines; outside The Salopian Inn; fisherman Darren Hoad with locally caught mulloway.





In downtown Willunga, diners can choose from rustic pizza and reds around open fires at Russell's – if they can get a booking – or more sophisticated eating at Fino. The town's terrific fine-diner, jointly run by chef David Swain and Sharon Romeo, serves a very reasonable five-course shared menu that might feature a tortilla laced with mushrooms picked by Swain, and Hay Valley lamb cutlets with olives grown in the suburban backyard of Romeo's dad, Rocco. A newish wine room showcases purely regional vintages because, round these parts, a meal without wine is a missed opportunity.

At the other end of the food chain is sleepy Normanville, midway along the coast between Port Willunga and Cape Jervis, and home of the Jetty Food Store. The Jetty is

housed in a century-old former general store and showcases produce from micro-growers whom owner Peta Dougherty-Allanson and partner Stephen Schmitz have been cultivating for five years. Customers can buy Mandy and Dave's organic garlic, grown 7km away, and vegetables from Lorna who lives up the road. On Saturdays, Schmitz does a lap of the peninsula to load up with breads, cheeses, organic cakes, handmade pasta and honey, among other local delicacies, and then transforms the store into a farmers' market.

Unlike rival food regions such as the Mornington Peninsula, which are already firmly on tourist maps, "this area is a big sleeper," Schmitz says. "You have shining lights like Russell Jeavons [of pizza fame], David at Fino, and there are obviously great winemakers. But perhaps we need some specialists to come in and lend some focus to the development here."

It's a fraught argument, whether to flaunt the Fleurieu's charms to the wider world or keep things manageable and local. A good part of the appeal of this seaside playground is the feeling of having discovered Adelaide's best-kept secret.

"This is a place that not a lot of people know about," agrees Rose Kentish, who moved here with artist husband Sam Harrison and their four children in 2006 and two years later was crowned Bushing Queen, aka McLaren Vale's winemaker of the year. "A lot of people have chosen to come here and follow their passions because it's affordable and it's beautiful. But no one who lives here wants it to be too busy – even though they want their business to be busy."

Kentish and Harrison own The Mill at Middleton, an 1855 four-storey brick flour mill handy to the sea and surf. Artists have lived here since the 1950s; the previous owner was David Bromley. At weekends, the building serves as cellar door for Kentish's Ulithorne wines and a gallery space for Harrison's paintings and a selection of Australian, Danish and French antique furniture, but the rest of the time it is the ultimate family home with two acres of gardens, a pizza oven, surfboards and art spaces.

Initially, Kentish was worried her family would feel too isolated in Middleton but she says she now has a real sense of change afoot on the Fleurieu. There is such a strong collective force among locals, "a real sense of shared energy and information", and the region is evolving by playing to its strengths. "We have an amazing food and wine and lifestyle culture. The beaches are extraordinary. The water's clear, the air's clean, the food is sensational."

Change has also come to the fabled Star of Greece, where long-time owner Zanny Twopeny has recently sold up to Doug Govan. Govan runs the Victory Hotel up on Sellicks Hill, and if the Victory's anything to go by, the Star is in very safe hands.

Since Govan took over the Victory in 1989 it has been a beacon of good taste for food and wine lovers. Meals here are great – Goolwa cockles with chorizo, garlic, chilli and tomato reads like a checklist of my favourite flavours – but the wine collection is phenomenal. Govan has been collecting bottles since the 1970s and he's recently renovated the pub cellars into stylish stone-lined caves, the largest capable of hosting private dinners for 32 at its rich-hued red-gum tables. There's a separate cellar for his collection of Burgundies – "my superannuation," he quips.

At the Star, he has given the wine list a strongly regional bent and intends to keep the food fresh, Australian and seafood-focused – the shallow-fried Port Willunga squid and King George whiting won't be going anywhere. Govan first started coming here four decades ago for summer surfing holidays and is well aware he's now the custodian of the Fleurieu's pin-up property.

"I think it is, without doubt, one of the most stunning locations of any restaurants in Australia," says Govan, whose partner Nikki Seymour-Smith is running the front of house. "And the beach has got to be one of the best in the state." Of course, he would say that. But then so would many others, including me.*

In art and life

Above: Alpha Box & Dice winemaker Justin Lane (top); inside The Mill at Middleton (inset). Opposite: Birks Harbour marina.

THE FINE PRINT

Getting there

Qantas has daily connections between Adelaide and the major capitals. qantas.com.au

Stay

The Australasian Open Wed-Sun only. Doubles from \$295. 1 Porter St, Goolwa, (08) 8555 1088, australasian1858.com

Birks River House
Doubles from \$295; from \$275 for Birks Boathouse. 138 Liverpool Rd, Goolwa, (08) 8555 5440, birksharbour.com.au

Drink

Alpha Box & Dice Cellar door Fri-Sun. Lot 50, Oliver's Rd, McLaren Vale, (08) 8323 7750, alphaboxdice.com.au

The Mill at Middleton
Fri-Sun only. 29 Mill Tce, Middleton, (08) 8554 2441, themillatmiddleton.com.au

Petagna Wines 0439 861 969, petagnawines.com

Samuel's Gorge
Lot 10, Chaffeys Rd, McLaren Vale, (08) 8323 8651, gorge.com.au

Settlement Wines Lot 101, Seaview Rd, McLaren Vale, (08) 8323-7344, settlementwines.com.au

Eat

Aquacaf Thu-Mon only (seven days during school holidays). Barrage Rd, South Goolwa, (08) 8555 1235, aquacaf.com.au

D'Arry's Verandah
D'Arenberg winery, Osborn Rd, McLaren Vale, (08) 8329 4848, darrysverandah.com.au

Fino 8 Hill St, Willunga, (08) 8556 4488, fino.net.au

Jetty Food Store 48 Main Rd, Normanville, (08) 8558 2537, jettyfoodstore.com

Russell's Pizza Fri-Sat dinner only (bookings essential). 13 High St, Willunga, (08) 8556 2571

The Salopian Inn Thu-Mon only. Cnr McMurtrie & Main rds, McLaren Vale, (08) 8323 8769, mvbeer.com

Star of Greece
1 Esplanade, Port Willunga, (08) 8557 7420, starofgreececafe.com.au

Victory Hotel
Main South Rd, Sellicks Beach, (08) 8556 3083, victoryhotel.com.au

Do

Willunga Farmers' Market
Every Saturday morning in Willunga Town Square. willungafarmersmarket.com

Wine Diva Tours
(08) 8323 9806, winedivatours.com.au

